Each of us has his own meditative practices, his own path to what Bataille called 'inner experience'; but among them the most widespread, the most well-trodden, are the comedies we construct to reach erotic effusion. Subject as these are to interdictions in a more or less direct correspondence to their proximity to the heart of our being, the conjuring up of the god of eroticism constitutes our fundamental, and perhaps our only remaining religious activity. The image of this god, to whom we sacrifice ourselves in the expenditure of the petite mort, is our earliest intimation of that unreality onto which death (that absolute expenditure) opens. Man is never so alone as when he comes: when the universe, under a terrible muscular contraction, shrinks to the borders of his own body, from whose limits, at the sovereign moment, he dissolves into ecstasy . . . at which point he loses himself — is lost in his orgasm. This point of ecstasy marks the limit of human experience: when consciousness, no longer able to distinguish itself from the universe that bore it, is lost in the night. It is the dreadful plenitude of this moment that tears itself away from and confounds the unfathomable movements of the heart we call love, which never fails to take almost all our breath away, but in whose violent consummation, it need hardly be added, resides our only hope of communication.
For my angel
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But where do the waves of everything that is great and sublime in man finally flow out? Is there no ocean for these torrents? Be that ocean: there will be one.

— Friedrich Nietzsche (1881-82)
This study began, nearly a year into its research, when I came across Maurice Blanchot's advice to the would-be commentator on Georges Bataille. If we content ourselves with reproducing the very forceful expressions that are permitted to Bataille, Blanchot warns us, and which retain their measure under his authority, we can only experience our own awkwardness, and even more, our lies and falsification. 'From this perspective', Blanchot writes, 'I think the work of an accompanying discourse — a work that should lean toward modesty — might limit itself to proposing a point from which one would better hear what only a reading can bring forth'.¹ Blanchot was right: anyone who has tried to write on Bataille comes to know this awkwardness, and one of the aims of this study has been to establish the precise measure of Bataille's words. But in my own attempt to write towards something like a point from which they might better be heard, I was confronted by the full implications of what Blanchot had been the first to recognise. Although Bataille's thought is inseparable from his profound engagement with the philosophical, sociological and psychological discourse of his time, its authority rests on his own experience, which is the contestation of all authority. In this respect, Blanchot's perspective is in line with Bataille's own concern to establish the limits of discursive investigation. 'Any commentary which does not limit itself to saying that all commentaries are useless and impossible', Bataille wrote, 'distances itself from the truth even as it approaches it within itself'.² If my own commentary was to propose a point, therefore, from this side of discourse, it had to be one that stood at its limits.


Here again, however, I came up against another of Blanchot's warnings, which he takes up in another text, also written on the occasion of Bataille's death. Observing that in his books Bataille seems to speak of himself with a freedom that should free us, in turn, from all discretion, Blanchot nevertheless argues that this does not give us the right to put ourselves in his place. Moreover, he asks, although the books themselves refer us to an existence, who is the subject of the experiences they recount? Certainly not the Bataille he knew, or would like to evoke in the light of memory. I take Blanchot's point, to an extent. Certainly it would be foolish to identify the biographical Bataille with the protagonists of his pseudonymous fiction. At the same time, however, Blanchot's evident discomfort at the prospect of such transparency, no less than his attempt to conceal Bataille behind the veil of memory, cannot be entirely divorced from his own almost total disappearance into writing. Their positions, moreover, are not as inseparable as Blanchot might wish. Bataille insisted that the only books worth lingering over, including his own, are those that the author has written out of necessity, or as Nietzsche said, 'with his blood'. This, of course, is a necessary, not a sufficient, condition; but it is Bataille's willingness to take up Nietzsche's call that gives his writings their tone of authenticity. If there is a measure to Bataille's words, then, it is that of his life; and it is in the shadow of this experience, rather than the undisclosed recollections of Blanchot's memory, that I have chosen to read them. This doesn't mean that I regard Bataille as the referent of his works; but neither is it my way of reiterating the old chestnut that they must be situated in their historical context (although they should, such contextualisation is generally missing from my study). Rather, what I have attempted to identify in Bataille's writings, and which has guided me through them, are the specific events and encounters in relation to which he articulated his thought.

From this perspective, the point I propose listening to Bataille's writings from, and whose place in his thought I have sought to establish, is that occupied by the image. This, however, is a deeply ambiguous place. It is no coincidence that the thinking about Bataille and the image in recent years has focused almost exclusively on the texts he wrote when he was embroiled in the polemics of Surrealism. Contemporary cultural debate labours in the failure of that movement, and the rise of functionalist theories of art keeps step with our increasing deference to the world of utility. That in doing so we should draw on the authority of Bataille is perhaps as little cause for surprise as the readings of his work; but this does not give us the right to present these theories as his own, not when they stray so far from the principles of his thought. From the first Bataille's thinking about the image was formulated in relation to the question of sacrifice and the experience of the sacred, both of which confront us with the limits of the

useful. But in order to understand what was a lifelong engagement, it is hardly necessary to insist that all Bataille’s work must be addressed, and above all his war writings, which have been almost entirely ignored in art history. I take these to be not only Bataille’s true legacy, but the place where his thinking about the image is at its most profound. Because I have pursued this thinking in relation to Bataille’s experience, however, my primary concern has not been to use his ideas to offer new readings of the works of his contemporaries, but to trace the role of the image in his thought. Although I look at works by Masson and Picasso, therefore, equally important to my study are those images that appear in Bataille’s own work, and in confrontation with which he discovered the limits of his thought. By examining the conditions of these encounters, I hope to demonstrate how Bataille’s writing is entwined in the question of representation in general and of the image in particular. Hence the ambiguity of my title. The topic of this study is not only Bataille’s image of sacrifice, or how images of sacrifice informed his thought, but above all how he viewed the image as itself a form of sacrifice. And if Bataille’s thought, as I argue, is ultimately an attempt to think beyond sacrifice, it is here, nevertheless, at the limits of representation, that the image finds its true place in his thought.

This study has taken six long years to complete, during which time I have accumulated as many debts as grievances. For financial support in the first three years of research I would like to acknowledge a Postgraduate Award from the Humanities Research Board of the British Academy, and a Graduate School Research Scholarship from University College London. To my supervisor, Briony Per, I am indebted not only for her close reading of the various stages of the manuscript, but above all for the freedom I needed to produce the kind of dissertation I wanted to write. I would also like to thank David Lomas for his support during my year at Manchester University, and for many fruitful conversations on Surrealism. To those friends who over the past decade and more have accompanied me through the various rituals of expenditure, I owe a debt of a very different kind, and one that may not always be apparent. In their very different ways, Shaun Elstob, Mark Sladen, Andrew Lindenmayer, Mark Poole, Rob Elder, and Daniel Godfrey have all contributed to my thinking about Bataille. Finally, however, my greatest thanks, and indeed all my thanks, go to Farzana Dhami, whose love and support have guided me through this dissertation, which I dedicate to her, and to whom, in truth, it is written.

4. The images missing from this list are the photographs of Hans Bellmer. Because of restrictions on the dimensions of this study, I have been obliged to leave out what was its third chapter, titled ‘The Work of Death’, in which I looked at Bellmer’s work in the context of Bataille’s reading of Hegel. For this reason, my final chapter sometimes assumes propositions I developed in this chapter, and which are the basis to the conclusions I reach. Indeed, my entire thesis is based on Bataille’s relation to Hegel, which I take to be fundamental to his thought. While I intend to publish this chapter elsewhere, I hope its omission here is not too disruptive to the argument of my thesis.
The Colour of the Sacred
Being burns in the night from being to being, and it burns all the brighter if love has collapsed the prison walls enclosing each of us: but what can be greater than the breach through which two beings recognise one another, free of the vulgarity and platitudes introduced by the infinite? The one who at least loves beyond the grave (in doing so he has also escaped the vulgarity proper to daily relations, but never were those too constricting bonds more surely broken than by Laure: pain, horror, tears, delirium, orgy, fever, and then death were the daily bread Laure shared with me, and this bread leaves me the memory of a tenderness, fearful but immense; it was the form assumed by a love eager to exceed the limits of things, and yet, how many times together did we attain moments of unrealisable happiness, starry nights, flowing streams: in the forest of Lyons at nightfall, she walked beside me in silence, I looking at her without being seen; have I ever known greater certainty of what life holds in response to the most unfathomable movements of the heart? I watched my destiny moving forward beside me in the dark; no words can express how clearly I recognised her: nor can I express how beautiful Laure was; her imperfect beauty the moving image of an ardent and uncertain destiny. The brilliant transparency of such nights is equally inexpressible). But at the very least, he who loves beyond the grave has the right to deliver the love within him from its human limits and, without hesitation, give to it a meaning apparently inconceivable for anything else.

— Bataille (September 1939)
The Death of God

I will never be where you think you find me, where you think you’ve finally caught me in a chokehold that makes you come.

— Laure, letter to Bataille (1938)

According to one of those precious anecdotes to which Blanchot still turns whenever, despite his reservations, he finds himself speaking of his old friend, Bataille would at times claim that apart from his novel Histoire de l’œil (1928), and the article ‘La Notion de dépense’ (1933), everything he had written before the Second World War was nothing more, as Blanchot recalls, ‘than the aborted prelude to the exigency of writing’.¹ If this was indeed the case, and Blanchot’s memory has not betrayed him, then it was Bataille who had forgotten his own reflections, recorded in his war journal, on the demands to which an article of his, published in the shadow of that war, had responded. Among the numerous writings Bataille had submitted to reviews in the period between the two wars, this article, titled ‘Le Sacré’ (1939), was, he recalls, the only one where the ‘resoluteness’ that had driven him through the inter-war period — and, despite everything, would continue to drive him through the war — appeared, as he says, ‘with a certain clarity’ (OC V, 505).² As Bataille himself expresses it — which is to say, with the obduracy characterising the writing of this period — this article had touched those he was ‘really addressing’ — and touched them with what it was he had been trying to communicate: the colour of those ‘privileged instants’, as Bataille calls them in his article, in which the elusive ‘grail’ for which modern art and poetry had searched, had been glimpsed. If, as Bataille — deploying a recognisably Surrealist vocabulary — insists, such instants can never be fixed but only ‘encountered [rencontré]’, and then only ‘by chance [au hasard]’ and at the prompting of unsatisfied desire, it is because what is glimpsed cannot be made ‘substantial’, he says, but only ‘evoked’ in the wake of its disappearance (OC I, 560). It is in this ‘obscure and uncertain quest’ for what is, Bataille says in his article, ‘most elusive between men’, that he sees the movement of what had acquired the name of the ‘modern spirit’, toward a grail he does not hesitate to call ‘the sacred’ (OC I, 561).

That Bataille regarded this quest, whose pursuit he sees extending far beyond the narrow domain of artistic or literary invention, as having ended


2. Georges Bataille, ‘Le Sacré’, Cahiers d’art, 14e année, no. 1-4 (1939); collected in OC I, 559-563. Bataille’s comments on this article are from his (unpublished) diary entries between the 30th of September and the 2nd of October, 1939 (OC V, 505-509).
largely if not entirely in failure — diverted as it was by what Bataille calls ‘the elusive phantoms of dreams’ — is not, however, merely the occasion for an indictment which, expressed in these terms, falls squarely on the shoulders of the Surrealist movement and its retreat into the arms of the art dealers. On the contrary, the failure of the modern spirit, Bataille argues, opens the possibility of wrestling the misplaced grail of its quest not only from what he contemptuously calls ‘the judgements of salesmen’, but more importantly for Bataille — and it is here that the clarity of his text appears — from the identification of the sacred with the personal and transcendental ‘being or beings’ of organised religion. The immediate result of this failure, therefore, is the challenge, which Bataille’s article takes up, to relocate the object of this search once more within the domain of what he calls an ‘impersonal reality’, and which is, moreover, ‘the very object of religion’ (OC I, 562). This is what Bataille had been trying to communicate in his article: it only found its full expression, however, in the words that had haunted him since he lost his faith nearly two decades before, and with which he brings this article to a conclusion. This is the blinding recognition, first proclaimed by Nietzsche’s madman, that ‘God is dead’ (OC I, 563).3 Freed from this limit to human thought — freed from God — the disjunction between, on the one hand, the transcendental substance of Christianity and, on the other, the fleeting experience of the sacred, ‘suddenly opens a new field’, Bataille writes — ‘a field perhaps of violence, perhaps even of death, but a field into which it is possible to enter — to the agitation which has taken hold of the living human spirit’ (OC I, 563).

Looking back on this article in September 1939, nearly a year after its completion and several months since its publication in Cahiers d’art — at a time, moreover, when Bataille found himself, following the outbreak of the war, alone and distanced from his friends — the distinction he accords this short text among his pre-war writings is not earned, he writes, by a facility of expression no less ‘difficult’ nor ‘awkwardly remote’ (the adjectives are his) than in his other published writings. If the privileged instant of which he speaks was briefly ignited here, Bataille is adamant about why: it should not be attributed to the movement of writing, but, he insists, to the particular experience which found its distant but still desperate expression in this article. ‘If sentences have a meaning’, Bataille writes, ‘they are only reuniting that which was being sought. Those which cry freely die of their own brilliance. What is necessary is to efface a piece of writing by placing it in the shadow of the reality it expresses’ (OC V, 506).

These forgotten reflections of Bataille’s — forgotten, if they were ever known, by Blanchot (whom Bataille would not meet for another year), and perhaps by himself — open up a space, if nothing else, for commentary: at the

very least on how Bataille, at the end of the inter-war period, and following the demise of the Surrealist adventure, viewed the resources art and poetry could still ‘dispose’ of in attaining, however briefly, the ‘sacred instant’ (OC I, 561). And perhaps more: because if the relation Bataille puts in play here between ‘reality’ and its ‘expression’ — terms we have grown accustomed to treating with gentle scepticism — arrives at something of a tangent not only to Blanchot’s own reflections on the space of experience in Bataille’s writing, but on the space a commentary should itself seek to occupy in order better to hear, as Blanchot said, what only a reading of those writings can bring forth, it is, nevertheless, in this relation that Bataille sees the emergence of his article from the aborted prelude — difficult and awkwardly remote — to the demands of writing. These are the demands of what Bataille, for the first time in this article, called ‘communication’, which are linked to those of art and literature, and which are inextricably bound to the dizzying void left by the ‘death of God’. For if the distant reality this article expresses casts a particularly deep shadow on the movement of its writing, it is in the experience of this reality — at once intoxicating and impersonal — that Bataille, without claiming to illuminate its darkest recesses, locates the exigency to which his writing and his thought respond — not only here, but throughout the war writings.

Sacred Sociology

In 1923, the better to prepare an unsuspecting world for the movement he would soon release upon it, a young André Breton, displaying the divinatory powers on which his fame would soon be founded, captured its dreams with his famously coined phrase: ‘Freedom colour of man’.4 Two years later, at work on what the now leader of Surrealism had recently hailed as his ‘dream paintings’, Joan Miró began a canvas from the idea of a photograph whose image he would later forget, and whose only remaining trace, painted in large letters in the top left hand corner, was the word ‘Photo’; in the opposite corner, beneath a small smudge of blue paint on an otherwise blank canvas, he writes what will become the title of the painting: 
*Ceci est la couleur de mes rêves* (1925). Within a few short years, however, for the newly politicized Louis Aragon, furiously penning his inflammatory *Traité du style* (1928), the colour of Surrealist reverie was already less clear: ‘An evening newspaper’, he thunders, ‘recently asked: what colour are your dreams? A fool’s question. . . . There was even a woman who answered that

her dreams were blue.\textsuperscript{5} Time passes, allegiances shift, and a decade later, on a grey winter’s evening of January 1938, in the dusty back room of a Catholic bookshop in the rue Gay-Lussac, Michel Leiris, having distanced himself from the ailing Surrealist movement for several years, opens the fourth meeting of what would find clandestine fame as the ‘strange and mysterious’ Collège de sociologie by announcing the intrusion of a new term into the dreamscape of Surrealism. His father’s military revolver, the ‘no-man’s-land’ between the old fortifications surrounding Paris and the race-course at Auteuil he visited as a child, or night visits to the brothels in the quartier Saint-Denis in the company of one of the most celebrated of ‘Paris peasants’ — it is, Leiris says, in the mixture of attraction and fear awoken in him by such objects, places or moments, in the combination of respect, terror and desire which they evoke, that he recognises what, he insists, it is necessary above all other things to recognise if man is to come to an understanding of himself: the psychological sign of the sacred. This he calls its colour: ‘What colour for me’, Leiris asks, ‘has the very notion of the sacred?’\textsuperscript{6}

It was during the existence of the Collège de sociologie, which convened between November 1937 and July 1939, that the notion of the sacred came to dominate Bataille’s thought; but the term itself had first entered his vocabulary during his final articles for Documents, the review he edited, in contention with Breton’s Surrealist group, between 1929 and 1930. Beginning with his article on ‘L’Art primitif’, Bataille first refers to the sacred with reference to Rudolf Otto, the protestant theologian and author of Das Heilige (1917), a work which Bataille had read in its recent translation as Le Sacré.\textsuperscript{7} It was from this text that he took his first definition of the sacred as, in Otto’s phrase, the ‘completely other [tout autre]’ (OC I, 252n). By the ‘completely other’, Otto said, he meant ‘that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the "canny [Heimlich]"’, and is contrasted


\textsuperscript{6} Under the title ‘Le Sacré dans la vie quotidienne’, Leiris gave his talk to the Collège on Saturday, January 8, 1938. With some deletions (specifically, the reference to brothel visits with Aragon — the ‘Paris Peasant’), this was later published, together with texts by Bataille and Roger Caillois, in ‘Pour un Collège de sociologie’ — the formal declaration by the Collège of its existence and aims, which appeared in the Nouvelle revue française, no. 298 (July 1938), pp. 26-38. Leiris’ article is collected in Denis Hollier, ed., Le Collège de Sociologie, 1937-1938, deuxième édition, Collection Folio/Essais (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1995), pp. 94-118; translated by Betsy Wing from the first edition as The College of Sociology (1937-38), Theory and History of Literature, vol. 41, series edited by Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 24-31.

\textsuperscript{7} See Georges Bataille, ‘L’Art primitif’, Documents, no. 7 (1930); collected in OC I, 247-254.
with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment. In extending the idea of the sacred to encompass the subjective experience of what he called the 'numinous', it is significant, perhaps, that Otto used this latter term, which enjoyed a certain popularity in German thought at the time. The year before, Heidegger, in Was ist Metaphysik? (1929), had spoken of the 'uncanny [Unheimlich]' as an effect of the anguish man experiences before the nothingness into which, he says, his 'determinate-being [Da-sein]' is held out. And Freud, ten years before that, had used this term to designate the unsettling effects, within the psychic reality of the subject, of a drive he located 'beyond the pleasure principle'. Although it is doubtful that Bataille, despite reading German fluently, had read either of these texts at the time, this idea of a 'beyond' which, while resisting the slide into transcendence, falls outside the sphere of the intelligible, is one that he would pursue over the next few years in his interest in a fundamental dualism irreducible to a homogeneous representation of the world. In 'La Valeur d’usage de D. A. F. de Sade', the unpublished text in which he first announced what he called a theory of 'heterology', Bataille defined it, in terms similar to Otto’s, as ‘the science of what is completely other [tout


11 It was at Bataille's instigation that in 1929, Henri Corbin proposed to Jean Paulhan a translation of Was ist Metaphysik?, which was to appear in the Nouvelle Revue française (see OC VIII, 666). Corbin's translation was refused, but appeared later, introduced by Alexandre Koyré, in Bjurf, no. 9 (June 1931). This text, however, is noticeably different from the one that was finally published as Qu'est-ce que c'est la métaphysique?, suivi d'extraits sur l'être et le temps (Paris: Gallimard, 1937). It is unclear whether Bataille — who claimed never to have set eyes on the manuscript — read the earlier translation. It seems highly unlikely that he would not have. In any case, he borrowed the later version from the Bibliothèque Nationale in August 1941. See the 'Emprunts de Georges Bataille à la Bibliothèque Nationale (1922-1950)' (OC XII, 616). Freud's text was only translated into French in 1933 as 'L'Inquiétantétrangeté', as part of the collection Essais de psychanalyse appliquée.
Perhaps more important than this definition, however — to which, nevertheless, Bataille would refer all his life — is the fact that Otto’s book seems to have precipitated his already latent interest in the notion of the sacred. Far from discarding the sacred, as has been suggested, for lending itself to ‘confusion’, Bataille, in his article on ‘La Structure psychologique du fascisme’ (1933), made it clear that the sacred is, as he wrote, ‘a restricted form of the heterogeneous’, the category of which, moreover, it largely comprises, and whose forms, by and large, provoke a comparable reaction (OC I, 345). It was in the pursuit of determining what was still, perhaps, this form, and not yet its colour, that Bataille, from around 1930 on, immersed himself in the works of both the British school of anthropology — restricted, essentially, to William Robertson Smith and James Frazer — and above all the French school of sociology. This included its founding father, Émile Durkheim, his nephew Marcel Mauss, with whom he had founded the *Année sociologique*, and his disciples Henri Hubert, Robert Hertz and Sylvain Lévi. It was the pioneering works of these authors, and the largely undiscovered advances they had made in sociology, that Bataille took as the point of departure for the articles he published over the next few years in *La Critique sociale*. It was in this periodical that he developed his notion of heterology in some of the most important of his pre-war texts, including the article on ‘La Notion de dépense’. As the 1930s progressed, however, the increasingly desperate political situation in a Europe facing the rise of fascism gave to the notion of the sacred a currency extending beyond the bounds of sociological discourse, not least in the alarming developments across the Rhein. It was in order to galvanise this sudden resurgence in interest in the sacred as an

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12. See Georges Bataille, ‘La Valeur d’usage de D. A. F. de Sade (Lettre ouverte à mes camarades actuels)’ (1930); collected in OC II, 54-69. Bataille is a good etymologist: to speak of that which, by definition, is always seeking to escape containment within discourse — excrement, menstrual blood, bodily sweat, industrial waste, etc — he uses the terminology of the heterogeneous, from the Greek *heteros* (the other of two), and *genos* (kind). His own project, however, isn’t to delimit a heterogenealogy (a family of others), but a heterology (from the Greek *logos*). Although at the concrete level the heterogeneous is the other of the homogeneous in kind, its abstract *logos* within a discourse has no elementary structure of kinship, and cannot be assembled according to a scientific taxonomy: its forms, therefore, can only ever be spoken of in their diffuse abstract relation to the same of which they are the other. In the formulation of what at this stage he calls this ‘paradoxical philosophy’, Bataille insists on this point: ‘Objective heterogeneity’, he writes, ‘has a flaw in that it can only be envisaged in an abstract form, whereas the subjective heterogeneity of particular elements is, in practice, alone concrete’ (OC II, 63).

13. See Georges Bataille, ‘La Structure psychologique du fascisme’, *La Critique sociale*, no. 10 (November 1933); collected in OC I, 339-371. On the question of this relation between the sacred and the heterogeneous, see the discussion in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *L’Informe: mode d’emploi* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996); translated as *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 52. In their reading of Bataille, Bois and Krauss privilege the term heterology to the almost total exclusion of the sacred. No doubt this better serves the appropriation of Bataille’s thought to their own project; whether it is faithful to the terms of that thought is a question I will take up later on.
aspect of contemporary society that, in March 1937, Bataille, Leiris, and a young Roger Caillois — the latter two having studied under Mauss at the Institut d'Ethnologie — announced the formation of the Collège de sociologie. Over the next two years of its existence, the Collège was to bring into its orbit thinkers as diverse as Georges Ambrosino, Walter Benjamin, Georges Duthuit, René Guastalla, Pierre Klossowski, Alexandre Kojève, Anatole Lewitsky, Jules Monnerot, Jean Paulhan, Denis de Rougemont, Jean Wahl, and Patrick Waldberg, not to mention its founders. From within this community, which was born from the failure of the dominant narratives of the day (and above all of the Popular Front) to respond to and shape current events, it was hoped that the activities of its members would yield not only an analysis but a collective response to those events. It was the meetings of the Collège, moreover, that provided the public forum Bataille needed in order to express and develop his ideas about the sacred in the years leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The Collège — whose aims Bataille published in what was, effectively, the last issue of Acéphale — was formed in order to undertake a study of contemporary social structures, employing and in the process making public the generally unknown advances of French sociology. However, since previous research in this realm had limited itself to the study of primitive societies, and because the discoveries it had made had failed to modify the premises from which that research had been undertaken, the Collège intended, in addition, to form itself into a ‘moral community’, one whose bonds went beyond those ordinarily linking scholars, and which would respond to the virulent character of the representations it would bring to light. Above all, the Collège sought to make the object of its studies a much needed analysis of those aspects of contemporary social existence in which the sacred was seen to actively manifest itself. To designate this object Bataille coined the term ‘sacred sociology’, the aim of which, he wrote, was to establish the points of coincidence between, on the one hand, the fundamental tendencies of individual psychology, and, on the other, the principle structures governing social organisation (OC I, 492). It was the belief in this coincidence that signalled the point at which the Collège diverged from the doctrine of Durkheim, who always maintained a strict division between individual psychology and the object of sociology. ‘Every time a social phenomenon is directly

14. See the collectively signed ‘Note sur la fondation d’un Collège de sociologie’, Acéphale, no. 3-4 (July 1937); collected in OC I, 491-492. A final issue of Acéphale was published by Bataille in June 1939, but by then he was its only contributor. Moreover, although the Acéphale group, which Bataille had formed in June 1936, continued to meet in secret up until October 1939, the public expression of its activities was effectively transferred to the Collège at its inauguration.

15. In a letter to Leiris dated July 5, 1939, Bataille makes it clear that he was responsible for this term — which dates back, moreover, to the article on ‘La Structure psychologique du fascisme’ — but which was not, as will be seen, entirely accepted by the other members of the Collège. See Georges Bataille Choix de lettres, 1917-1962, édition établie présentée et annotée par Michel Surya (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1997), p. 163.
explained by a psychological phenomenon', Durkheim had written, 'we may be sure that the explanation is false.'\textsuperscript{16} This did not mean, however, that the Collège did not retain what Bataille later identified as the ‘essential lessons’ of Durkheim’s doctrine (OC VII, 358). In his post-war article on ‘Le sens moral de la sociologie’ (1946), in which he looked back on the years of the Collège, Bataille made it clear that these were essentially twofold: first, that society is completely different from the sum of its parts; and second, that the sacred is the bond, the constitutive element of everything that is society.\textsuperscript{17} In adopting these premises as his own, however, Bataille insisted that they do not imply, as Durkheim maintained, that society is determined exclusively by sociological factors, and that psychological causes are inadmissible as contributing factors. In order to realise the connection between the two, however, the Collège took its point of departure from the notion which Durkheim had announced at the conclusion of his final and most important work, and which Bataille endeavoured to place at the heart of his analysis of social structure.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{The Ambiguity of the Sacred}

In \textit{Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse} (1912), the authority of which the Collège continuously drew on, Durkheim began from the premise that all known religious beliefs presuppose a classification of the real or ideal world into two opposed classes, which he called the sacred and the profane.\textsuperscript{19} The heterogeneity between these two categories, which Durkheim argued has no equal in the history of human thought, is, he says, ‘absolute’. The traditional opposition between good

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} See Georges Bataille, ‘Le sens moral de la sociologie’, \textit{Critique}, no. 1 (June 1946); collected in OC XI, 56-66. This was a review of Jules Monnerot’s \textit{Les faits sociaux ne sont pas des choses} (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1946).
\end{itemize}
and evil is as nothing compared to it, insofar as good and evil are two opposed species of the same genus, namely morality; the sacred and the profane, by contrast, are conceived of, everywhere and in all circumstances, as two worlds with nothing in common. They are, therefore, Durkheim writes, ‘of another nature [d’une autre nature].’ Indeed, the very definition of the sacred is that it is opposed to the profane, as Durkheim says, as the irrational is opposed to the rational, the mysterious to the intelligible, the unknowable to the known. Because of this radical heterogeneity, the opposition between the two is not merely one of separation, but also of hostility: the sacred is that which the profane must not and cannot touch with impunity, to the extent that the mind, on contemplating any form of contact between them, experiences a feeling of deep repulsion. This is not to say, however, that there is no communication between the two realms, without which, moreover, the sacred would cease to exist; but when this passage occurs, it does so in a manner that demonstrates their fundamental duality. In order to communicate with the sacred, therefore, the profane must, to some degree and in some measure, become sacred. This is not, however, a development in kind between what remain mutually exclusive genera, but a transformation as radical as death itself. Indeed, Durkheim argues that the only way to fully escape the profane world is in death, which remains, therefore, as Bataille himself wrote, ‘the privileged sign of the sacred’ (OC XII, 54).

Because of this possibility of passage between them, the division between the sacred and the profane must be constantly regulated by social rites. These fall into two categories: those which have a negative function — that is to say, rites which place an interdiction which applies to the profane, and which protects it from the sacred; and those which have a positive function — that is, rites which oversee the consecration or expiation of something (an object, person, spirit or even a word) into or from the realm of the sacred. This transformation does not entail a change in the intrinsic properties of that thing; the sacred, Durkheim says, is a quality ‘added on’ to it in the minds of the community to which it belongs. The sacred, in other words, can only assume the quality of reality within the domain of the ‘collective consciousness [conscience collective]’. As deployed by Durkheim, the collective consciousness consists of, on the one hand, the cognitive, and, on the other, the moral and religious beliefs and sentiments shared by the members of a particular society. The sacred, therefore, is above all what Durkheim called a ‘collective representation [représentation collective]’; which is to say, both a collective mode of thinking, conceiving or perceiving, as well as that which is collectively thought, conceived or perceived. As such, although it can only ever exist in the mind, the sacred cannot exist in only one mind. What changes in the thing undergoing a rite of consecration or expiation, therefore, is not its material aspect, but the perspective from which it is viewed by the

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20. For an analysis of these concepts, see the discussion in Steven Lukes, Émile Durkheim, His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study (London: The Penguin Press, 1973), pp. 4-8.
community to which it belongs.

The origin of the interdiction that separates the sacred from the profane lies in what Durkheim, following Robertson Smith and Frazer, calls the 'contagiousness' of the sacred. 'By a sort of contradiction', Durkheim writes, 'the sacred world is as though inclined by its very nature to spread into the same profane world that it otherwise excludes. While repelling the profane world, the sacred world tends at the same time to flow into the profane world whenever that latter world comes near it'. Movement between sacred and the profane, therefore, is one of both attraction and repulsion, which is governed by the principle of either the physical contiguity or similarity between the two worlds. The contagiousness of the sacred, however, not only explains the rigour of the interdictions protecting the profane; it is also the principle upon which rites of consecration are founded. 'Every profanation', Durkheim writes, 'implies a consecration'. Consequently, the profane cannot undergo consecration without in some way violating or transgressing the interdiction protecting it from the religious force by which, through that transgression, it is contaminated. However — and this is a point that Bataille would later develop and place at the centre of his thought — although every transgression implies a consecration, that consecration, at the same time, sanctions the interdiction that is transgressed.

At the heart of Durkheim's notion of the sacred, however, and the subject with which he concludes his study, is what he calls its ambiguity. Beyond the interdiction separating the sacred from the profane, the sacred, he says, is itself divided into two poles: at one end a right-hand, or pure sacred, aligned with power and order, and which inspires respect, reverence, and feelings of attraction; and at the other a left-hand, impure, and virulent sacred, associated with death and malevolent forces, and which gives rise to fear, horror, and repulsion. 'All religious life', Durkheim writes, 'gravitates around two contrasting poles, between which there is the same opposition as that between the pure and the impure, the saint and the sacrilegious, the divine and the diabolical'. Between these two poles of the sacred there exists the sharpest opposition imaginable. 'All contact between them', Durkheim wrote (somewhat confusingly, it is true), 'is considered the worst of profanations [profanations]'. Whereas the gulf separating the sacred and the profane might be said to occupy a horizontal plane, the movement between them being one of profanity, this division is as nothing compared to the

23. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p. 413. Bataille would quote these lines in 'Du rapport entre le divin et le mal', *Critique*, no. 10, (March 1947); collected in OC XI, 198-207. This was his review of Simone Pétrement's *Le Dualisme dans l'histoire de la philosophie et des religions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946).
split within the sacred itself between its exalted, imperious forms, and its lower, impoverished forms: a division which Bataille saw as a vertical space constituting the poles of an irreducible division between the high and the low.

And yet, despite this opposition, unlike the fundamental difference between the sacred and the profane, the two poles of the sacred have a common origin. Not only is the profane as prohibited from contact with the impure sacred as it is with the pure, but the feelings they provoke, Durkheim writes, have ‘a close kinship [une étroite parenté]’. There is a certain horror, Durkheim says, in our awe, a certain reverence in our fear: the reason for which, he argues, is that the sacred is never fixed to a substance — either to the object of awe or disgust, or to its noble or base forms. On the contrary, the distinction between its right and left poles is a fluid, unstable one. In certain tribes a woman’s menstrual blood, while otherwise considered taboo, is used as a remedy against sickness: the pure is therefore made from the impure, the left sacred is transformed into the right. However, because it is bound to the transgression of the prohibition, the sacred always takes on the violent character of that violation. It is only following a period of expiation, therefore, that the sacred can be transformed from its left to its right pole, from being accursed to being sanctified. The decaying corpse, an almost universal object of horror, is transformed, after a period of mourning (typically the time it takes for the rotting flesh to fall off the bones) into a holy relic; and the victim of sacrifice, on whose head the sins of a community have fallen, becomes, following his immolation, the means of its salvation. It is the possibility of such transformations, writes Durkheim, and the polarity at the origin of that possibility, that constitutes the ambiguity of the sacred.

According to Durkheim, the recognition of this ambiguity should be attributed to Robertson Smith, who drew attention to it in his lecture series on The Religion of the Semites (1889). Without explicitly accounting for its origin, Robertson Smith recognised that the Semitic doctrine of holiness originated from a system of taboo which also governed the interdiction on uncleanness. Frazer, however, several years before, had already attributed considerable importance to the fact that the words for the sacred in various languages — in Latin sacer, in Greek agios, in Hebrew kadesh, and in Polynesian taboo — all mean both holy and accursed, pure and impure. Moreover, in his article on ‘Taboo’ from the Encyclopedia Britannica (which Robertson Smith, its editor, had invited him to contribute), Frazer argued that while taboos might seem to fall into two classes, the one rendering things sacred or holy, the other unclean or accursed, ‘that no such distinction ought to be drawn’, he writes, ‘is clear from the fact that the rules to be observed in the one case and in the other were identical’. The opposition of the sacred and the accursed, the clean and the unclean, ‘did in fact

arise’, Frazer writes, ‘by differentiation from the single root idea of taboo, which includes and reconciles them both and by reference to which alone their history and mutual relation are intelligible’.  

Later still Freud, in his article on ‘The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words’ (1910), recognised this opposition as an expression of the regressive, archaic character of the unconscious, and specifically of the dreamwork, in which the category of contraries is disregarded by the mechanism of condensation: either through their combination into a unity, by the representation of the one by its opposite, or through their representation as one and the same thing.  

Three years later Freud would return to this ambiguity in Totem and Taboo (1913), where, in the chapter on ‘Taboo and Emotional Ambivalence’, he wrote that the meaning of the word taboo diverges in two directions: on the one hand designating that which is sacred, and on the other, he writes, that which is ‘uncanny’.  

This antithesis never ceased to amaze Bataille, who recalled the fact on numerous occasions: in the text on de Sade, where he refers to it in his first definition of heterology; in his analysis of the psychological structure of fascism; and in his article on ‘Le Sacré’. Frazer, in particular, saw in it the explanation of the identity between the taboos observed toward both the pure and the impure. It was one of Durkheim’s disciples, however, Robert Hertz, who was the first to draw attention to the importance of this duality, assigning to it, in the process, its formal division into left and right poles. In doing so, however, he displaced the site of this division. In his famous essay on ‘La Prééminence de la main droite: étude sur la polarité religieuse’ (1909), Hertz identified the pure right hand with the sacred, and the impure left hand with the profane. The ambiguity, for...
Hertz, did not lie within the sacred itself, but between the impure sacred and the profane, between which, he writes, there is a 'natural affinity' and even an 'equivalence'. Despite this slippage, Hertz, as Bataille said, 'anticipated' the questions raised by the ambiguity of the sacred (OC X, 124). It was Durkheim, however, who was the first to clearly formulate this internal duality, seeing in it the origin of the ambiguity of the sacred, although again without, as Bataille points out, understanding its 'consequences' (OC XI, 205). The interdictions separating the impure from the pure sacred, Durkheim wrote, 'are not essential to the idea of the sacred'. There remains, moreover, the ambiguity, much commented upon, between the impure pole of the sacred and the profane. Despite his insight, Durkheim notably failed to make the distinction between a profanation of the sacred by the profane and what — when he could have spoken of 'transgression' — he very deliberately called a 'profanation' of the pure sacred by the impure.

Otto would later take up this polarity when he spoke of the sacred as both *fascinans* and *tremendum* — which is to say, expressing both a Dionysian ecstasy and a divine wrath. But it was to Caillois, however, that Bataille, many years later, in the manuscript of *La Souveraineté* (1954), somewhat over-generously accorded the distinction of having been the first to attribute to this ambiguity a hitherto unrecognised importance (OC VIII, 250-251). Certainly it was Caillois who, in November 1938, had opened the Collège's second year with a paper on 'L'ambiguïté du sacré'. Drawing on the work of Robertson Smith, Durkheim, Hertz and Otto, Caillois argued that the pure, the impure and the profane are the three elements that make up the religious universe, between which, he says, there exists a dialectic in which two of these elements, in opposing the third, confront it with a kind of 'néant actif' that constitutes the profane. However, the fact that Bataille eventually crossed this note out suggests that on this point he was led to reconsider the origins of the importance he always accorded this ambiguity, which undoubtedly predates his meeting with Caillois. Bataille, in any case, would come to see in it something quite distinct from the notion of the sacred Caillois arrived at. Leiris had alluded to something like it in the remarks which he made during his presentation to the Collège about the colour of the sacred comprising a mixture of attraction and fear. More important for Bataille, however, was the small volume Leiris would publish later that year under the title *Miroir de la tauromachie* (1938), where he spoke of the apprehension of this ambiguity as an

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31. See Steven Lukes, *Émile Durkheim*, p. 27.

32. See Roger Caillois, 'L'ambiguïté du sacré' (15 November, 1938); collected in Denis Hollier, ed., *Le Collège de sociologie, 1937-1939*, pp. 364-402. Caillois had originally written this study for *Histoire générale des religions* (Paris: Quillet, 1948), in which it eventually appeared as one of the chapters for the introduction to volume one. In the meantime he published his text in *Mesures*, no. 2 (April 1939).
awareness of what he calls ‘our future communion with the world of death’. It was this text, moreover, that Bataille cited in the preface to L’Érotisme (1957) — a work he dedicated to Leiris — not only as the reason for this dedication, but as the forerunner of his own enquiries into eroticism. Indeed, it was the ambiguity expressed in eroticism that would continue to dictate Bataille’s understanding of all the problems to which the sacred is the key.

This is the subject that Bataille addressed, in January and February of 1938 — which is to say, nearly a year before Caillois — in his two presentations to the Collège on ‘Attraction et répulsion’, which were, in many respects, a commentary on and extrapolation from Hertz’s article. Human interaction, Bataille says, unlike the immediacy governing animal appetite, is mediated through a middle term, a central nucleus around which a community forms, and which is comprised of the objects, places, beliefs, persons, and practices that have a sacred character for that community. However, because of its profoundly ambiguous character, this sacred nucleus is also the object of a fundamental repulsion. ‘Everything leads us to believe’, Bataille says, ‘that early human beings were brought together by disgust and by common terror, by an insurmountable horror focused precisely on what originally was the central attraction of their union’ (OC II, 311). Taking his point of departure, therefore, from a tentative rapprochement between French sociology and psychoanalysis, and the radical heterogeneity they have established between, respectively, the sacred and the profane, and the unconscious and the conscious, Bataille proposed that there is an intimate connection between this repulsion and what psychoanalysis calls repression. The ambiguity of the sacred, he argues, originates from the identity, within the unconscious mind, between the responses provoked by its two poles. Because of which, every time there is production by and of the unconscious — in other words, every time the left sacred is transformed into the right — the forces of repulsion are driven from consciousness, and the object of repulsion is transformed, through the sacred nucleus, into an object of attraction. This is nowhere more apparent than in the repulsion focused on the sexual organs, which introduces between a man and a woman what Bataille calls a region of ‘violent silence’ (OC II, 319). If the meaning of the sacred can be regarded as lost, therefore, it is to the extent that our consciousness of the secret horrors at the origin of religions has been repressed and sublimated, not only in the individual psyche, but in our collective representations. This is what Bataille’s article on ‘Le Sacré’ was meant to

33. Michel Leiris, Miroir de la tauromachie, collection Acéphale, series L’Érotisme (Paris: Guy Lévis Mano, 1938); reprinted by Fata Morgana, 1981; and translated by Ann Smock as The Bullfight as Mirror, in October, no. 63 (Winter 1993), p. 40. Leiris wrote this text between October and November 1937, a few months before his presentation to the Collège the following January.

34. See Georges Bataille, ‘Attraction et répulsion I: Tropismes, sexualité, rire et larmes’ (22 January, 1938), and ‘Attraction et répulsion II: La structure sociale’ (5 February, 1938); collected in OC II, 307-318, and 319-333. Hertz, undoubtedly, is one of the sources for Bataille’s terminology of high and low, noble and base, attraction and repulsion.
demonstrate.

For Bataille, the impulse to expel base constitutive elements represents something like a basic mechanism in the constitution of the self. What he would later call the ‘accursed share’ of the sacred is not what is suppressed, therefore, but what is repressed: it is the heterogeneous element that bears the brunt of anciently formulated taboos, the interdictions which survive in the extant fragments of ancient beliefs and rites, in the ritual ablutions of the unassimilable waste products of social formation. The psychic resonance these taboos retain, the sudden horror, the creeping nausea, the dizzying vertigo of disgust we experience upon their transgression is all the stronger in that it is displaced and fixated onto the concrete forms of excess. It is only to the extent that the mind recognises the fundamental identity between the interdictions marking both the purest and the most impure forms of the sacred, therefore, that it is able to become conscious of the repulsion that is at the heart of the forces of attraction emanating from the sacred nucleus. This is the aim that Bataille, echoing Leiris, set for both himself and the Collège. ‘Nothing is more important for man’, he declares, ‘than to recognise that we are bound and sworn to that which horrifies us most, to that which provokes our most intense disgust’ (OC II, 320). It is on this point of distinction, which is not merely one of tone, but a call to recognise the virulent negativity at the heart of human interactions, that Bataille departs from the sociological conception of the sacred. It was a departure, moreover, that the Collège, at least in his eyes, was created to facilitate, even as it would account for what he would greet in July 1939, at the final meeting of the Collège, as the ‘inevitable’ collapse of its project. Between these two dates, however, Bataille had written his article for the Cahiers d'art, in which the origins of this collapse were not only given, but anticipated by several months. No doubt Bataille was led to interrogate the sociological sphinx with more than usual subtlety, but in the meantime he had heard the answer to his call — not from within the Collège, and not even from Leiris, but from the convulsive movement of his own experience.

**The Gift**

Bataille finished writing ‘Le Sacré’ on the 2nd of November 1938, in the small apartment he had purchased in Saint-Germain-en-Laye where he had been living since March of that year with Laure, his lover and companion in horror of the last few years. Bataille had first met Laure — the name Colette Peignot had chosen for herself — in 1931, when, as a contributor to the Marxist journal La Critique sociale — which Laure largely financed from her considerable inheritance — he came to know its industrious and slightly ludicrous editor, Boris Souvarine.35

35. Laure’s full name was Colette Laure Lucienne Peignot. Laure, however, was how she signed her writings, and the name Bataille used to speak of her. See Michel Surya, Georges Bataille, la mort à l’oeuvre (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992), p. 310.
Souvarine was one of the founders of the French Communist Party and, since his expulsion in 1926, of the recently renamed Cercle Communiste Démocratique, an organisation whose members included Pierre Kaan, Karl Korsch, Pierre Pascal, Simone Weil, and, since Bataille had joined, Jacques Baron, Raymond Queneau, and Leiris.36 At the time, Laure was sharing with Souvarine what she had not quite come to accept as her life; but by 1934, Bataille — who had rapidly come to regard Souvarine as more of a father to Laure than her lover — had stolen her away from his attempts to incarcerate her in various and distant sanatoria.37 Over the next four years of their tortured involvement the two lovers lived the dissolute and savage existence described by Bataille in *Le Bleu du ciel* (1935), a novel which, although only published in 1957, was read in manuscript form by friends of the couple — among them Leiris — who immediately recognised it as a thinly disguised narrative of Bataille’s life with Laure, who appeared here in the guise of the aristocratic and decadent ‘Dirty’. Early on in the narrative, Troppmann, Bataille’s protagonist and narrator, whom he named after a German murderer, speaking to the militant Lazare, a character he based on Simone Weil, tells her: ‘Dirty is the one person in the world who has ever compelled my admiration (in a sense I was lying: she may not have been the only one, but in a deeper sense it was true)’ (OC III, 406). But now she lay, as she had for many months, in the back room of the apartment at Saint-Germain, in the last stages of the tuberculosis Laure had carried in her body since she was a child. Five days later Laure died, but in a brief moment of respite from her final delirium, her urgent demands for some unlocatable thing it was absolutely necessary to find led Bataille to discover, among her personal papers, a small, white, paper folder bearing the title *Le Sacré*.

Because, as Bataille himself admitted, his contempt for ‘intellectual’ conversations had always prevented him from discussing seriously with Laure the serious things in which his life was immersed, Laure, who mistook the object of this contempt, responded by never showing Bataille the writings he nevertheless

36. Originally called the ‘Cercle Communiste Marx et Lénine’, it’s name was changed in 1930 to distance the group from the cult of personality surrounding Stalin.

had always vaguely been aware of. These included, as Bataille would later discover, reminiscences of her stifling bourgeois childhood, about which he already knew; transcriptions of her erotic fantasies of humiliation and profanity, in whose formulation he had played a decisive part; autobiographical sketches of a life in whose dark purity, when he came to share it, Bataille found the sovereign existence he had always yearned for; and, interspersed with the most intransigent verses on her own death, and as might be expected of a personality who, according to Leiris, had been the inspiration for the Acéphale group, Laure’s reflections on the sacred. These last, above all, written in the last summer of her life, testify to Laure’s passionate engagement in the life she shared with Bataille. When, therefore, following her death, Bataille and Leiris decided to publish selections from these writings in a limited, privately distributed underground edition, they began with these last pages — those Bataille had first discovered — which they published that spring under the title *Le Sacré* (1939). This slim volume opens by posing the question with which Leiris, less than a year before Laure’s death, had concluded his address to the Collège: ‘What colour for me’, Laure asks, ‘has the very notion of the sacred?’ — to which she immediately responds: ‘It is that for which I would have given my life’.

In the final chapter of *L’Homme et le sacré* (1939), the book he wrote during his participation in the Collège, and which was essentially a collection of the presentations he gave there, Caillois addressed the internalisation of the sacred

38. In his journal entry of October 1, 1939, Bataille writes: ‘Moreover, we almost never had "intellectual conversations" (she even reproached me for it at times; she was inclined to see this as contempt: in reality, I had contempt only for the inevitable insolence of "intellectual conversations")’ (OC V, 507). In his ‘Vie de Laure’, however, Bataille writes: ‘We liked to meet with each other to talk seriously about serious issues’ (OC VI, 278). Although serious, it is hard to imagine Laure and Bataille reducing ‘communication’ to ‘intellectual conversations’.

39. In 1926, while she was living in Paris, Laure was embroiled in a brief affair with Jean Bernier, the editor of *Clarté*, who would later write rhapsodically about her in *L’Amour de Laure* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978). It was Bernier who introduced Laure to the Surrealists, by whom, according to Bataille, after a brief infatuation, she was repelled — deducing from the publication of the ‘Recherches sur la sexualité’, the ‘insignificance’, he writes, of the personalities involved. Having broken with Bernier, and following a failed attempt at suicide, Laure moved to Berlin in 1928, where she lived with Eduard Trautner, a German doctor and sadist who kept her in silk dresses, dog collars and, occasionally, a diet of excrement. Two years later, having learnt Russian at the prestigious École des Langues Orientales, Laure left for the Soviet Union, where she insisted on being taken, in the middle of a Russian winter, to live with a family of peasants in an isolated village — an ordeal which led to her hospitalisation and near death in Moscow. On her return to Paris, Laure’s subsequent convalescence was punctuated, before she fell into Souvarine’s paternal embrace, by random and pleasureless seductions. See Bataille’s ‘Vie de Laure’ (OC VI, 275-278).

40. Laure’s ‘response’ appears in the first pages of *Le Sacré* (1939), which is collected, with a preface by Jérôme Peignot, in her *Écrits* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1977), pp. 81-137. That this was a response to Leiris’ question is attested to by Bataille and Leiris in the notes they wrote to accompany this publication. Indeed, although he never received these writings, Laure’s reflections on the sacred, as these notes confirm, were not written for Bataille, but for Leiris (the passages I will quote from these notes are collected in OC V, 508).
in the contemporary world — a world, that is, which tends to consider everything as profane, and where, as a consequence, the sacred has withdrawn from its collective manifestations, he says, into an attitude of consciousness.\textsuperscript{41} 'It is with reason under these conditions', Caillois writes, 'that the word "sacred" is used outside the properly religious domain to designate that to which each devotes the better part of himself, that which is of utmost value and is venerated, that for which he sacrificed his life'.\textsuperscript{42} Bataille, however, who after the war quoted this passage in his article on 'La Guerre et la philosophie du sacré' — his review of the re-edition of Caillois's book — is critical of this expression of the question, which led Caillois, he writes, to 'profane examples' (OC XII, 52).\textsuperscript{43} Although Caillois, in evoking a spirit of sacrifice, links the sacred to the transgression of the interdiction, and therefore to a movement at odds with the restricted expenditure on which the cycle of capitalist productivity is based, his description fails to capture either the violence of this violation, or its communication to others. The sacred, as Bataille would constantly reaffirm, cannot be experienced in isolation, like the miser with his gold: it must, even in contemporary life, be a collective representation, and one, moreover, in which there is expressed what Bataille had previously identified, against appearances, as the principle of loss at the heart of the movement of social formation, the clearest expression of which is the gift of the self.

Although this idea can be traced back to his early articles for \textit{Documents}, the principle of loss was first outlined by Bataille in his article on 'La Notion de dépense', the text he published in \textit{La Critique sociale} — not altogether coincidentally — in the same year he and Laure began to live together.\textsuperscript{44} In this article Bataille begins by clarifying the distinction between, on the one hand, the principle of classical utility, which he deems insufficient as an explanatory model, and, on the other, what he proposes as the principle of loss that governed archaic forms of exchange, and which remains, he says, the key to the questions touching on the life of human societies. The principle of utility, which underpins the observation of social prohibitions, and whose basis, Bataille writes, is revealed in the negative character of the pleasure principle, has the effect of reducing all forms of social activity, from industrial labour to sexual union, to the necessities of production and conservation. According to this principle, any behaviour not

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{42} Roger Caillois, \textit{Man and the Sacred}, p. 132.
  \item \textsuperscript{43} See Georges Bataille, 'La Guerre et la philosophie du sacré', \textit{Critique}, no. 45 (February 1951); collected in OC XII, 47-57.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} See Georges Bataille, 'La Notion de dépense', \textit{La Critique sociale}, no. 7 (January 1933); collected in OC I, 302-320.
\end{itemize}
directed toward these ends — from the squandering of material resources to perverse sexual activity (i.e. not confined to reproduction) — is regarded as pathological. This restricted economy, moreover, is the basis to the rationalist conceptions developed by the bourgeoisie from the seventeenth century on, which Bataille sees, following Marx, as the ideological form of the rise of capitalist social formations. In the cycle of production on which these formations are based, consumption is merely a moment in the closed circle of exchange, the revolutions of which are dictated by the demands of production. In contrast to this principle of utility, however, and surviving, still, in its interstices, are those unproductive forms of consumption which break from the cycle of production, which have no end other than themselves, and which constitute, therefore, an irrecoverable loss. In order to designate this form of consumption, Bataille writes, it is necessary to reserve the use of the word 'expenditure', the basis of which, he implies — although without saying as much — is the death drive, and whose principle is that of loss. ‘Man does not live by bread alone’, as Bataille was fond of quoting, and human poverty, he argues, even at its most dreadful, has never been sufficient to dominate the need for unproductive expenditure, for excess, and for the ostentatious squandering of surplus. Exchange, moreover, in its archaic form, was never the means of acquisition that classical economics would have us believe, but a means of free expenditure over which a process of acquisition has only relatively recently developed. In this radically revised model of social determination, expenditure, in the various forms of unproductive consumption, far from being subordinated to the cycle of production, becomes its driving force and its ultimate end, answering, thereby, what Bataille identifies as the human need to lose and be lost.

In formulating these propositions, Bataille had drawn heavily on Marcel Mauss's famous 'Essai sur le don' (1925), a text he refers to in his article, and which informed so much of his thinking about this notion of expenditure. In


46. Among the examples he gives of this type of consumption — which he would later distinguish with the neologism 'consumation' (a consumption that consumes its object) — jewels, Bataille writes, produced at the cost of endless hours of labour, and purchased at enormous expense, possess a significance irreducible to the principle of utility. However, although he relates this heterogeneity to their symbolic meaning in psychoanalysis as excrement — both being, he writes, 'cursed matter that flows from a wound' — this example is problematic. The 'profane example' Bataille would later accuse Caillolois of using was his description of gold as sacred for the miser. Although undoubtedly heterogeneous to a world of utility, gold and jewels — whose social value, at least in the modern world, is dependent on the vast expenditure of material forces they represent — lack the violent character which the sacred only acquires through the movement of transgression.

47. See Marcel Mauss, 'Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques', L'Année sociologique, nouvelle série, vol. 1 (1925), pp. 30-186; translated by W. D. Halls as The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies, with a foreword by Mary
this study, Mauss had identified this archaic form of exchange under the name of *potlatch*, a word taken from the Northwest Coast American Indians, but which he uses to designate an institution found widely and in various forms. As elaborated by Mauss, the *potlatch* is a festival in which gifts of great wealth are exchanged between rival tribes with the intention of defying, humiliating, and challenging each other. What is gained in this exchange is not the gift itself, but a prestige that can only be acquired through the loss rather than the possession of material wealth. The receiver of the gift, therefore, comes under what Mauss calls ‘the obligation to reciprocate’, which constitutes, he says, the essence of the *potlatch*. Provoked, moreover, by the extravagance of his rival’s generosity, the receiver must return the gift ‘with interest’ — a phrase all too familiar from present day commerce, but whose original sense has been lost, Bataille says, to the demands of acquisition. In its archaic form, however, to return with interest meant an escalation in expenditure, in which the rivals compete to see who was the most madly extravagant.

The exchange of gifts, however, is not the only form of *potlatch*. It is also possible to defy a rival through the spectacular destruction of one’s own wealth: slaves are slaughtered before a rival chief, copper ingots thrown into the sea, even whole villages are burnt to the ground in an orgy of destruction. In this form, Bataille says, in which there can be no question of the gift being reciprocated, the rite of *potlatch* is united with religious sacrifice, a similarly extravagant form of social consumption which not only conforms, as we will see, to this notion of expenditure, but in the etymological sense of the word, as he points out, means ‘to make sacred’ (*sacer facere*). The conclusions Bataille draws from this are fundamental not only to his notion of the sacred, but to his theory of sacrifice. ‘From the very first’, he writes, ‘it appears that sacred things are constituted by an operation of loss’ (OC I, 306). Several years later, when he took up this notion of expenditure in *La Limite de l’utile* — the manuscript he began to write in the months following Laure’s death — Bataille refers to this dimension of the sacred under the title ‘Le don de la vie’ (OC VII, 235-242). It is this gift of the self, he writes, ‘in a glorious halo of death’, that is the ultimate expression of a principle of loss which is expressed in the rite of sacrifice, and which, because of this, Bataille places at the heart of his notion of the sacred.

Having himself received this gift from Laure — the acceptance of which, Bataille later wrote, left him ‘lacerated [déchiré]’ (OC VII, 462) — the experience of reading her writings provoked in him what he describes as one of the most violent emotions of his life. But nothing struck him, Bataille says, nothing ‘tore him apart’, as much as the passage with which Laure brought her text on the sacred to a conclusion. Here, speaking of the relation between the work of art and the sacred, Laure writes: ‘Poetic work is sacred in that it is the creation of a topical event, “communication” experienced as *nakedness*. It is a violation of Douglas (London: Routledge, 1990).
oneself, stripping naked, the communication to others of a reason for living, yet this reason for living "shifts".48

This notion of the sacred — in whose uncompromising tones, Bataille makes it clear, he could not fail to hear a voice that spoke to him ‘from beyond death’ (OC V, 507) — is one that he had long nurtured within himself, he says, but had only given expression to, in his own article on ‘Le Sacré’, on the very day on which Laure had entered her final death throes. Following this death, when Bataille read Laure’s text for the first time, he found himself faced with what, upon reflection, he was at pains to affirm — as if drawing from this observation a thread linking him to his lover’s grave — was an identical expression of this notion in both Laure’s text and his own article — and in particular its penultimate paragraph. This concludes with Bataille’s assertion that, given the recent developments in the knowledge of the history of religions, and in the wake of the failure of the modern spirit to find its grail, the object of this quest must now be recognised not so much within the framework of Leiris’s project of self-realisation, still less as the transcendental god of organised religion, but, as it had been by Laure, as a moment of unity which binds individual beings together. The terms of this communication, however, are bound in a relation of convulsiveness which Bataille, while implicitly acknowledging its genealogy in Breton’s celebrated notion of ‘convulsive beauty’, nevertheless sought to distinguish from the orientation of the Surrealist term by opening the space of this movement to what he understood to be its essentially religious dimension:

Christianity has substantialized the sacred, but the nature of the sacred, in which we recognise today the burning existence of religion, is perhaps the most elusive of what has been produced between men, the sacred being only a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of convulsive communication of what ordinarily is stifled. (OC I, 562)

The Union of Lovers

In order to clarify, if only to himself, what he meant by these last lines, Bataille recalls that he immediately added — as he often did, in the margin of the page — the words: ‘identity with love’ (OC V, 506). These are heavy words, when death is revealing itself in the features of the beloved; but love was a word much on Bataille’s mind at the time, and its marginal presence here is all the more elusive for that. Bataille, needless to say, had been far from ‘faithful’ to Laure, even during her final days, and when the word ‘love’ appears in the writings of these years, it designates a point where the opposition between other, more virulent terms — like desire and anguish, ecstasy and horror, tenderness and delirium — collapses into a tentative union, only to be immediately torn apart.

48. Laure, Écrits, p. 89; quoted in OC V, 507-08.
again by the very demand for their stabilisation. Although he never incorporated the words about love in the published text, this was a point Bataille would return to, many years later, in the notes he was compiling for a re-edition of *La Part maudite*. In these notes, Bataille, reaffirming the 'capital' place the article on 'Le Sacré' occupied in his writings, spoke of taking it as the basis to a book on the sacred which, published under the name of Lord Auch (the pseudonym he had used for *Histoire de l’œil*), he conceived of as a series of 'explications' on this novel. In addition to 'Le Sacré' itself, this book was to have comprised an explanation of the circumstances under which the article was written, the notes Bataille and Leiris had written to accompany the published collection of Laure's writings, citations from these writings, and, Bataille adds, everything that he had expounded on in his final address to the Collège de sociologie. This unrealised book, in which Bataille sought to assemble what were clearly the key texts for his understanding of the sacred, was to have taken its point of departure, however, from the demands of love as they had been posed by Leiris in a passage from *L'Âge d'homme* (1939) which, Bataille wrote, this book was intended to address:

Love — the only possibility of a coincidence between subject and object, the only means of acceding to the sacred as represented by the coveted object insofar as for us it is an exterior and strange world — implies its own negation by the fact that to possess the sacred is at the same time to profane and finally to destroy it by stripping it little by little of its strange character. A lasting love is a sacred that it takes a long time to exhaust. In raw eroticism everything is more direct and clearer: for desire to remain aroused, it need only change its object. Unhappiness begins from the moment man no longer wants to change objects, or when he wants the sacred at home, permanently within reach of his hands; when it is no longer enough to worship a sacred, when he wants — having become a god himself — to be in his turn for the other a sacred that the other will worship permanently. For, between these two sacred beings, sacred to each other and worshipped reciprocally, there is no longer any possibility of movement save in the sense of profanation, of decadence. The only practical chance of salvation is in love avowed for a creature self-possessed enough that, despite an incessant *rapprochement*, one never attains the limit of the knowledge that one can have of her, or sufficiently endowed with an instinctive coquetry that, however profoundly she loves you, it

In his diary entry of 28th September, 1939, Bataille, looking back on Laure's death, wrote: 'I fled Laure (I fled her morally terrorised; often I faced her; I helped her until the end, and it would have been inconceivable for me not to do so, as far as my strength would allow, but as she approached the agony of death, I took refuge in a sickly torpor; sometimes I drank ... sometimes, too, I was absent)' (OC V, 504-505).

50. See the extracts from the dossier 'Notes en rapport avec *La Part maudite*'; collected in OC I, 683-684. Bataille’s reference to his presentation is limited in these notes to the 'exposé of July 4', the date of the final meeting.
seems that at each instant she is about to escape you.\textsuperscript{51}

In his paper 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love' (1912), Freud had approached a related question in the course of treating psychical impotence in men.\textsuperscript{52} This disorder, which tends to affect strongly libidinous natures — and from which Leiris, and perhaps Bataille too, suffered — has its origin, according to Freud, in an incestuous fixation that inhibits the developmental history of the libido. As a result of this inhibition, the libido is split between what he calls its ‘affectionate’ and ‘sensual’ currents. Although the former, which emerges in earliest childhood, is formed on the basis of the self-preservation instincts, it carries with it the first sexual instincts; the first object-choice of the sexual instincts, therefore, is attached to the valuations made by the ego-instincts. As a result of diverting the sexual instincts from their aim, these affectionate fixations, Freud intimates, are the seed-bed from which eroticism springs and which diverts human sexuality from a purely reproductive end. At puberty, when the affectionate current is joined by the powerful sensual current, the original objects of infantile choice are cathexed with the latter’s greatly increased quota of libido. Here, however, it runs up against the obstacles that have been raised by the interdiction on incest. As a consequence, the sensual current must pass on to other objects — according to them, in the process, the high psychical valuation it held for the original object-choice. If the opportunities to encounter a suitable object are frustrated in reality, or if the amount of attraction exerted by the original object is too strong, the mechanism by which the neuroses are formed comes into operation: the libido turns away from reality, its direction is taken over by imaginative activity, and it serves instead to strengthen the images of the first sexual objects — which, as a consequence, it becomes fixated on. By the same token, the interdiction on incest compels the libido that has turned to these objects to remain in the unconscious. This is only strengthened if the sensual current, which is now part of the unconscious, completes its passage in phantasy-situations. Because of this substitution, although the phantasies become admissible to consciousness, the libido remains withdrawn from reality, and the sensual current becomes fixated on unconscious incestuous phantasies. The result is total psychical impotence. In most cases, however, the


sensual current is sufficiently strong or uninhibited to secure a partial outlet in reality, although without the whole force of the sexual instinct behind it. As Leiris said, it is capricious, easily disturbed, often unaccompanied by pleasure. But above all, the sensual current which has been thus diverted must avoid association with the affectionate current. The result is a restriction on the its object-choice: that is to say, it must only seek objects which do not recall the incestuous figures forbidden to it. Conversely, if an object is held in high psychic estimation, this does not find an outlet in sensual excitation, but in affection without erotic effect. Where there is love there is no desire, and where there is desire there is no love. ‘The whole sphere of love in such people’, Freud writes, ‘remains divided in the two directions personified in art as sacred and profane (or animal) love’. In accordance with the law of the return of the repressed, the failures of psychic impotence occur whenever these two poles are brought into conjunction. Against this threat, therefore, a protective measure is introduced in the form of what Freud calls the psychical ‘debasement [Erniedrigung]’ of the sexual object. This is what Leiris meant by the possibilities between lovers being limited to profanation and decadence. Only when this debasement has occurred, moreover, can the sensual current freely express itself, often in perverse sexual aims, which, for this reason, says Freud, characterises the love of civilised man.

The dilemma, as it was posed by Leiris, of a permanent love, of what Freud called a ‘sacred love’ — the terms of which are inseparable from the altogether desperate character of the demands it makes on two beings — is a problem with which Bataille had been preoccupied throughout his involvement with the Collège de sociologie. Although L’Âge d’homme would not appear until 1939, Leiris had finished the manuscript by 1935, and it is more than likely that Bataille — to whom Leiris dedicated the book — had not only read it but had this passage in mind when, in July 1939, at the final meeting of the Collège, he turned to formulating his own answer to the problem. In this final address, delivered in the shadow of the approaching war, and what was, for Bataille, the even deeper shadow of Laure’s death — when his preoccupation with the sacred, moreover, had distanced him from Leiris, and his burgeoning mysticism had all but alienated Caillois — Bataille brought his meditations on the sacred to a conclusion by returning to this dilemma, which he expresses in the most suffocating of terms, and from which he concedes only the most definitive of escapes:

53. Freud’s paper had been translated into French in 1936 as ‘Contribution à la psychologie de la vie amoureuse II: Considération sur le plus commun des ravalements de la vie amoureuse’, and could have contributed, therefore, to Bataille’s thinking on the subject. Bataille would later note that he read Freud ‘fairly persistently’ (OC VIII, 562).

The union of lovers finds itself facing this infinite interrogation: supposing that the unified being that they form counts more for them than love, they find themselves condemned to a slow stabilisation of their relations. The empty horror of regular conjugality already encloses them. But if the need to love and be lost is stronger in them than the concern with finding themselves, there is no other outcome than the lacerations and perversities of tumultuous passion, drama, and — if it is of a complete character — death. I should add that eroticism constitutes a sort of flight before the rigour of this dilemma. (OC II, 372)

If the dilemma from which eroticism flees — a dilemma before which Bataille (and in this he is not alone) found himself confronted everyday — is that posed by a love which seeks to stabilise its terms in the closed unity of a happy conjugality — condemning itself, thereby, to a more or less reluctant decay — the flight by which eroticism hopes to escape its rigour is not that undertaken on the already melting wings of 'l'amour fou' — of desire realised in the pursuit of its object, as it was conceived by Surrealism, and on which Leiris seems, in spite of himself, to have flown only halfway to the sun. As with the sacred, Bataille argues, love relies for its existence on a constantly renewed transgression. But whereas Leiris, like Freud, characterised this in terms of profanation (suggesting, thereby, an irreconcilable split between the real and the ideal), the movement Bataille has in mind is that between the two poles of the sacred: on the one hand a violent eroticism, and on the other the tenderness of a lover’s tears. The flight of eroticism Bataille evokes, therefore, pursues the ‘lacerations [déchirements]’ of passion not only to profanity, decadence, and sexual perversity (areas already explored by Surrealism), but ultimately — as it was by Laure — to the promise of death itself.

But if Bataille framed this ‘union of lovers’ in such violent terms, this should not be seen — as it was, by and large, by the members of the Collège — simply as the expression of what was perceived, with some justification, to be his overly lugubrious character. No doubt it was this too; but Bataille’s perspective here is above all the expression of his own blinding realisation — intimated earlier, but only recognised following Laure’s death — that communication between two people — the ‘coincidence between subject and object’ Leiris had spoken of — can only occur (and here it becomes necessary to use Bataille’s more metaphysical language) when the enclosed unity of their individual beings loses itself — loses its ‘substance’, as Bataille phrases it — through what he characterises, here as elsewhere, as the ‘lacerations [déchirures] or wounds [blessures]’ that the moment of erotic fusion opens in the integrity of being (OC II, 370). If this is a flight, therefore, it is that of Icarus, toward a love that burns, from person to person, through the wound its burning opens in the closed sphere of individual being. Certainly it was under the sign of this myth — no longer the image, as it had once been for Bataille, of an emasculating flight from the world, but of a love ‘eager to exceed the limits of things’ — that Laure had sought her
own death. In his brief 'Vie de Laure', a text he begun in 1942 but never finished, Bataille wrote of his dead lover:

Greedy for affection and for disaster, oscillating between extreme audacity and the most dreadful anguish, as inconceivable by the measure of real beings as a being of legend, she tore herself \([\text{se déchirait}]\) on the thorns she surrounded herself with until she became only a wound, never allowing herself to be confined by anything or anyone. (OC VI, 475)

The particular flavour of this love was one Bataille had tasted, perhaps for the first time, in the bread he broke daily with Laure, but would only come to recognise in that portion he would continue to share with her beyond the grave. The conviction with which he would insist on the link between her writings and his own is the clearest indication of this is. When, therefore, in his final address to the Collège, Bataille, speaking of the dilemma by which the union of lovers is confronted, decisively stated: 'I am now ready to say of the "sacred" that it is communication between beings' (OC II, 371) — it is possible to hear in this 'now' a veiled tribute to the role Laure had played in leading Bataille to what, in the notes to her writings, he calls the 'representation' of the sacred they express.

It is this representation, moreover, that had led him, in these notes, to a definition of the sacred which, he says, had never been expressed before — either by Laure or himself, and still less by the French school of sociology from which the Collège claimed to take its principles of method — and whose terms he would take up and elaborate on in his final address to the Collège:

This definition would link the sacred to moments in which the isolation of life in the individual sphere is suddenly broken, moments of communication not only between men but of men with the universe in which ordinarily they are strangers: communication should be understood here in the sense of a fusion, of a loss of oneself, the integrity of which is achieved only in death and of which erotic fusion is an image. (OC V, 508)

55. The character of this love was clearly expressed by Laure in a letter she wrote to Bataille around 1934, at a time when, having flown too close to the sun, they were facing the prospect of its fall. 'My darling', she writes, 'I do not know what colour you are in, but I think that we will find each other again... in the rainbow' (Laure, Écrits, p. 257). It is not surprising that Laure concludes her letter by evoking this Icarian trajectory: Bataille had already written about the ambiguity of this 'rotten sun' in the myth of Icarus. See his 'Soleil pourri', Documents, no. 3 (1930); collected in OC I, 231-232.

56. It is unclear exactly when Laure's book on Le Sacré appeared. Surya notes that it left the printers in Spring 1939. Hollier, however, writes that Bataille and Leiris were still 'finishing up' their notes when Bataille addressed the final meeting of the Collège in July 1939. To my ears, Bataille's 'now' (the phrase is 'J'en arrive ainsi à dire . . .') suggests that the notes in which this definition of the sacred appears had already been written when he delivered his final presentation, which reads, moreover, as an expansion on and clarification of its terms. The letters that passed between Bataille and Charles Peignot, who tried to have the volume suppressed, make it clear, in any case, that Le Sacré was in circulation before May 1939. See Georges Bataille, Choix de lettres, p. 157.
Leiris and Caillois were both absent from the final meeting of the Collège, but in a letter which Bataille only received the previous day, Leiris, who had promised to deliver a summary of the Collège's activities over the past two years, outlined, instead, his objections to the path he saw the Collège taking under Bataille's leadership, which strayed, he argued, from the premises they had defined at its foundation two years before. These were, briefly, as follows. In deploying the principles of sociology to study the structures of contemporary society, the Collège, Leiris felt, had committed serious offenses against the rules of sociological method established by Durkheim and Mauss. He was concerned, moreover, that in attempting to form themselves into a moral community the Collège was in danger of becoming, as the Surrealist movement had before it, an intellectual clique. Finally — and this was the charge most clearly directed at Bataille — Leiris felt that in their studies so far, the undue emphasis placed on the sacred as an explanatory principle was deployed at the expense of Mauss's concept of the 'total social phenomenon [fait sociale totale]' in which, as he defined it in the 'Essai sur le don', religious, juridical, political and economic institutions are simultaneously expressed. This above all, Leiris concluded, disqualified them from calling themselves sociologists.

Since Leiris had contributed to both publishing and writing the notes to Laure's writings, and was himself partly responsible for foregrounding the subjective dimension of the sacred, Bataille was as confused by his vacillations as he was impatient with the lateness of their communication. The following day, however, having informed his audience of these objections, Bataille expressed the view that they arose from both the unorthodox nature of the venture the Collège had undertaken, and the virulent character of the object of their study — and could, therefore, be overcome when the aims and premises of that study had been further modified and defined. To the objections of Caillois, on the other hand — whose letter, expressing his irritation at the role Bataille assigned 'to mysticism, to drama, to madness and death', he read at the end of his presentation — Bataille accorded a fundamental difference more difficult to reconcile, touching as they did on the 'profound reality' this debate called into question (OC I, 366). It was


58. See Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, 'De quelques formes primitives de classification: contribution à l'étude des représentations collectives', *L'Année sociologique*, vol. 6 (1903); translated, edited, and with an introduction by Rodney Needham as *Primitive Classification* (London: Cohen and West; and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

in an effort to address these differences that Bataille, at the final meeting, raised the ‘metaphysical questions’ implicit, he says, in the definition of the sacred he proposed there. In doing so, however, he did not turn to the methodological principles of French sociology, but to the authority of what, speaking of the representation of the sacred in Laure’s writings, he called the ‘lived experience [expérience vécue]’ they attest to (OC V, 508).

This appeal to experience was one of the methodological principles on which the Collège de sociologie had originally been based. In the introduction to the three texts Bataille, Leiris, and Caillois published under the title ‘Pour un collège de sociologie’, and which had appeared, in the July 1938 issue of the Nouvelle Revue française, as a kind of manifesto of intent, Caillois had written: ‘There are certain rare, fleeting, and violent moments of his intimate experience on which man places extreme value. From this given the Collège de sociologie takes its departure, striving to reveal equivalent processes at the very heart of social existence’. Although it appeared here under Caillois’s signature, this introduction was based on and concluded with the earlier, jointly signed, ‘Note sur la fondation d’un Collège de sociologie’; this passage, however, which is taken from an additional, concluding paragraph, is stamped with the mark of concerns peculiar to Bataille at the time, and not necessarily accepted by Caillois. Several months earlier, in the second of his presentations on ‘Attraction et répulsion’, Bataille had stressed that his aim was not to create a science of society but a phenomenology — in the Hegelian sense of the word: which is to say, a science of the experience of consciousness. Unlike Hegel, however — who retained, Bataille says, an essentially homogenous conception of the mind — he wished to reveal what is essentially heterogeneous to the conscious mind. In expressing the question in these terms, Bataille signalled the paradox, which is at the heart of the study of the sacred, of speaking of what, by definition, eludes assimilation into any discourse that attempts to seize the convulsions of experience as an object of knowledge. In this context Bataille recalled that the experience of psychoanalysis — which both he and Leiris had undergone — is conditional to its practice. But he also refers to Leiris’s personal experience, several years earlier, during his participation in the Mission Dakar-Djibouti, of the intensity of the sacrifice of a bull which he had witnessed in Gondar, Ethiopia. Drawing on Leiris’s account of this sacrifice in Minotaure,
as well as on his own experience, Bataille concluded that because of its elusive
and virulent character, the ultimately unknowable reality of the sacred only yields
its secrets to an experience which apprehends the totality of existence, rather than
the isolated object of knowledge. Only then, moreover, would it be it possible to
speak of a ‘total social phenomenon’. Bataille’s article on ‘Le Sacré’ might have
led him to a discursive formulation of the sacred, but it is a definition which, like
Laure’s text, attests to the intoxicating reality in whose shadow it must be placed
if its meaning is to be fully apprehended.

This is a key point, which Bataille, in ‘L’Apprenti sorcier’ — his own
contribution to ‘Pour un collège de sociologie’ — had placed at the forefront of
the Collège’s aims. If the social phenomenon alone, he wrote, ‘represents the
totality of existence — science being no more than a fragmentary activity — then
the science that envisages the social phenomenon cannot attain its object if, to the
extent that it attains it, that object becomes the negation of its principles’. From
which Bataille concluded: ‘The results of French sociology risk remaining non­
existent if the question of totality is not first posed in all its magnitude’ (OC I,
523). It was Bataille’s posing of this question that precipitated his break with
Caillois, and to which he would return, many years later, as if to set the record
straight, in his review of Caillois’s L’Homme et le sacré.

Drawing not only on Mauss, but on Hegel as well, Bataille argued that
scientific knowledge — sociological or otherwise — necessarily abstracts the
object it studies from the totality of the real. The sacred, however, far from being
subject to separation into an object of knowledge — to what Hegel called ‘the
labour of the understanding’ — can only be apprehended, Bataille argues, as the
indivisible totality from which that object is abstracted. In relation to the profane,
therefore, the sacred is what the concrete reality is in relation to the object
considered in its isolation. Given this separation, however, the following question
arises. If the sacred can only be thought of in its opposition to the profane,
doesn’t this duality preclude identifying the sacred with a totality that must,
therefore, include the profane? To which Bataille gives the following answer.
‘What is the profane’, he writes, ‘if not the sum of objects abstracted from the

1933), pp. 75-82. Leiris had joined the mission at the invitation of Griaule, a former contributor to
Documents who would become one of the most important figures in establishing French ethnography.
Leiris’ recollections of the expedition, which crossed the sub-Sahara rim between 1931 and 1933, were
published in his L’Afrique fantôme (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1934). To the stupefaction of Griaule,
however, this work was composed entirely of Leiris’ diary entries, in which his ambivalence to the
principles of ethnographic objectivity were more than apparent.

française, no. 298 (July 1938); collected in OC I, 523-537.

64. On July 20, 1939 — several weeks, that is, after the final meeting of the Collège — Bataille,
referring to ‘L’Apprenti sorcier’, wrote to Caillois: ‘You are perfectly aware that I am insistent upon
totality, and at the time, you let pass everything I said about this in the Nouvelle Revue française’
(Georges Bataille, Choix de lettres, p. 168).
totality?" (OC XII, 48). It is in the brilliant light of this answer that Bataille’s definition of the sacred as communication must be approached, and why, as he says, this definition is distinct from the principles of a science which, as in Caillois’s book, studies the sacred as an object of knowledge. It is also why the notion of the sacred is at the heart of Bataille’s thought, the element binding the totality together. The sacred, Bataille argues, cannot be left to the attentions of the scientist; but neither can it be limited to the experience of either primitive man or the religious — to a character, in other words, of nostalgia: not when the sacred continues to permeate the world in which we live, and above all in our attitudes when faced with death, which remain the same as and therefore bind us to the experience of earliest man. What is necessary, therefore, is to transform the objective knowledge of science into the convulsions of subjective experience, without which, Bataille writes, ‘the plenitude of being escapes man’ (OC XII, 57). Because of this, and without reducing the admiration in which he would continue to hold Caillois’s book, Bataille nevertheless concluded his review by calling it ‘the work of a sociologist’ (OC XII, 51).

Caillois, needless to say, and almost from the very foundation of the Collège, had become increasingly dismayed by the turn Bataille’s thought took in identifying what this experience of totality might be. The final straw, however, was the meeting on June 6th, at which Bataille spoke on the subject of ‘La Joie devant la mort’. At this meeting, Bataille, the ‘obstinate peasant’, finally laying his cards on the table, introduced, or rather reaffirmed, what he understood to be the mystical dimension at the heart of the experience of the sacred. On the one hand, and most importantly, this shift to mysticism must be seen as the expression of Bataille’s attempt to find a language with which to express his own lacerating experience of the death of Laure — during which, according to Jean Bruno, he was initiated into a true ‘mystical training’. On the other, however, it should also be seen as the final declaration of his break with Caillois, whom he knew would find these propositions, as he duly told Bataille, ‘hard to reconcile with our original principles’ (OC II, 366). Although the text that Bataille read at this meeting has not been found, in the same month, in the final issue of Acéphale, Bataille published a related text titled ‘La Pratique de la joie devant la mort’, and it was here that he first introduced the word ‘mysticism’ into his vocabulary — in order to designate what he calls an attitude of ‘joy in the face of death’. For Bataille, however — and this was not the last time his vocabulary would be the cause of a fundamental misunderstanding — this was a mysticism that had no


66. See Georges Bataille, ‘La Pratique de la joie devant la mort’, Acéphale, no. 5 (June 1939); collected in OC I, 552-558. On the morning of the day of this meeting, Bataille forewarned Caillois of the contents of his paper in a letter in which he concludes: ‘the problem of death is the essential problem for men’ (Georges Bataille, Choix de lettres, p. 159).
other object than 'immediate life', and could only be experienced, he says, by the
person for whom there is 'no beyond' — 'either a God', he writes, 'or what
resembles one' (OC I, 554). On the other hand, however, and as he would affirm
a month later, at the final meeting of the Collège, that there is a beyond — by
which he means, he says, 'a terrestrial beyond accessible to contemporary man'
— 'is a truth', he declared, 'difficult to contest' (OC II, 366).

Somewhere between these apparently contradictory propositions lies what
Bataille had come to understand by the imperative thrown down by Nietzsche's
proclamation of the 'death of God': — the words that had dominated the
existence of the Acéphale group, whose secret activities, although coextensive
with those of the Collège, both Caillois and Leiris had resolutely refused to join
in. For Bataille, so recently brought face to face with the horror of death, the
sacred could only ever be experienced as a dimension of human existence — the
dimension of immanence — in the moments of fleeting union in which the
absence of this beyond is communicated between the discontinuous because finite
particularities of our individual beings. This is an absence, however, that is
experienced by those who survive it as the continuity of being — as a beyond
from which death separates us, which it opens onto, and into which we are
submerged, as Bataille was fond of saying, 'like waves in an ocean'. What
Bataille proposes by this, and which he and Leiris would state in the notes with
which they brought Laure's writings to a conclusion, is that the sacred exists in
and as a moment of communication not only between separate and discontinuous
beings, but between man and a totality which surpasses being, which is only
accessible to the convulsions of experience, and in which we apprehend, as Leiris
had said, 'our future communion with the world of death'. Following his
definition of the sacred as communication, Bataille wrote:

Such a conception is different from that held by the French school of sociology,
which only considers the communication of men with each other; it tends to
identify what is apprehended in mystical experience with what is put in play by the
rites and myths of the community. (OC V, 508)

67. In a letter to Caillois dated July 20, 1939, Bataille wrote that his insistence on taking Nietzsche
as his sole reference indicated the direction he was taking with this mysticism. See Georges Bataille,
*Choix de lettres*, p. 167. On the subject of Caillois's links with Acéphale, in private, according to
Surya, he admitted to a limited involvement. Bataille's recently published text of the 9th of February,
1937, on the 'Constitution du journal intérieur', has made clear that Caillois did in fact attend at least
one meeting. See Georges Bataille, *L'Apprenti sorcier: Du Cercle Communiste Démocratique à
Acéphale*, textes, lettres et documents (1932-1939), rassemblés, présentés et annotés par Marina
Galletti; préface et notes traduites de l'italien par Natália Vital; collection Les Éssais (Paris: Édition
de la Différence, 1999), p. 341.

68. This is what Bataille meant when, in 'Le Sacré', he spoke of the importance of the 'encounter'
in attaining the sacred, and why this notion, while indebted to the Surrealist emphasis on objective
chance, is distinct from it.
Communication

Although Bataille, at the final meeting of the Collège, did not directly answer the accusations Caillois had made against his mysticism, he addresses the question by appealing to what he had previously identified, in the notes to Laure’s book, as the ‘common experience’ from which, he argues, the existence of the sacred first emerged in the consciousness of man. He approaches this experience, however, obliquely, through the statement on which, in many respects, his argument turns, and with which, in any case, he sought finally to justify what to the other members of the Collège had often seemed his morbid fascination with the link between eroticism and death. ‘Love’, Bataille declared to his no doubt still sceptical audience, ‘expresses a need for sacrifice’ (OC II, 369). From the very first, Bataille’s understanding of the sacred was bound to what he called ‘the enigma of sacrifice’, since it is this enigma, he tells his audience, that poses ‘the ultimate question of being’ (OC II, 371). It is clear that he saw in sacrifice the total social phenomenon par excellence. To address the question it poses, however — and by which, he says, the union of lovers is unceasingly confronted — Bataille takes up the proposition he had made in the notes to Laure’s writings, that erotic fusion is the image of a moment of loss whose integrity is only achieved in death, and whose counterpart, in the social realm, is the theatre of sacrifice. To substantiate this equivalence, however, Bataille was forced, somewhat reluctantly, to address what he calls the ‘the central problem of metaphysics’, which he approaches through what he had previously formulated as the theory of ‘compound being [être composé]’.

This particular expression of Bataille’s engagement with ontology goes back to the article he had published, two years before, under the title ‘Le Labyrinthe’ (1935-36). Here he had announced what he called ‘the principle of insufficiency’ at the heart of being (OC I, 434): a phrase with which he sought to formalise the Heraclitean challenge to the Parmenidean unity of identity and being. At the first meeting of the Collège, however, Bataille had returned to these questions from a different angle when he declared their resolution preliminary to any speculations about social formations. Offering a genealogy that begins with the atom, and leads via the molecule, the cell and the organism to human society, Bataille had proposed that the term ‘compound being’ should be used to express a unity that is different from the sum of the parts that compose it. Without it being necessary, he says, to argue for the existence of a collective consciousness from which Mauss’s concept of the total social phenomenon had freed him,


Bataille argued that what defines human society as such, and which distinguishes it from the life of insect or even animal colonies, is the existence of the sacred nucleus around which the collective congregates, and through which human relations, if they are to retain their human character, must pass.

Bataille's position at this meeting, however, was far from clear. He himself admitted that he was straying into 'the most obscure domain of knowledge' (OC II, 300), and the following January, in his presentation to the Société de psychologie collective, he would argue for the recognition of a 'collective psychology' which, insofar as it is expressed in man's attitude to death, transcended Durkheim's opposition between the individual and the collective. Caillois, nevertheless, seems to have accepted these propositions. In the letter he sent to Bataille on the eve of the final meeting of the Collège he even proposed founding an 'official doctrine' on the basis not only of his theory of compound being, but also, he writes, 'of the opposition of the sacred to the profane with relation to the gift of the self [don de soi] to the benefit of a greater being'.

The next day, therefore, when Bataille went on to develop these propositions, he did so in relation to the gift of the self, whose movement of loss, he proposed, is the determinant principle in social formation.

Every unity, Bataille argues, loses itself in some other that exceeds it. The very reproduction of the cell entails a loss of its substance to another. He proposes as a law, therefore, that human beings are never united with each other except through the lacerations or wounds through which they communicate. This does not mean, however, that the loss incurred in communication is merely an effect of their fusion, or even a condition of their resulting unity. To formulate what the meaning of this loss is, however, Bataille appeals to an experience familiar to all his listeners, and through which, he proposes, the sacred first entered the human condition. It is not easy to know, he says, whether a man and a woman make love because they find each other desirable, or whether their desire arises from the need to lose themselves in erotic union (but the more beautiful the woman is, he adds, the more her laceration becomes desirable to the man). By the same token, although an individual who participates in sacrifice is aware that his loss engenders the community that sustains him, it is unclear whether sacrifice is the sign of this generosity, or whether the community itself is merely the occasion for sacrifice. In suggesting a correspondence between these seemingly distant realms of human activity, therefore, Bataille is far from positing the existence of an obscure and overriding instinct for reproduction that would account for every form of human activity. There are other needs besides procreation that are satisfied in sexual union. This is a truth that Bataille does not seek to argue — since experience alone can substantiate it; he merely recalls that the erotic realm has designated the act in which it is accomplished as a petite mort. Since Bataille himself would not fully formulate what this remark meant to

71. See Georges Bataille, Choix de lettres, p. 166.
him until *L’Érotisme*, I won’t speak of this yet; but it is clear from a number of comments that the most important link he saw between sacrifice and erotic union is the role they both play in man’s consciousness of his own death. This, however, shouldn’t be overstated. From the bloody cross of Christ to the execution of a king, the almost universal rite of sacrifice far exceeds, in both richness of meaning and multiplicity of forms, the lacerations of sexual passion. Between the two, moreover, there no longer remains anything in common beyond the fact that both unify through a loss of substance. Sacrifice, too, has a history: and just as expenditure has acquired the face of acquisition, a repast of communion — the mere commemoration of death — has come to substitute for the violence of blood sacrifice. With the passage of time the wound in being has healed over, and the Crucified has become a guarantor of social order. But it is here, Bataille says, in addressing this principle of loss at the heart of the community, that the ultimate question of being takes shape.

On the one hand, communication answers a desire to be lost in a new unity: to engender a couple, a crowd, a community; but it expresses, also, beyond this generative principle, a will to lose without end: in laughter, eroticism, the play of chance, festivals, sacrifice, war, and, ultimately, in death itself. Man, therefore, is faced with a double perspective. In one direction, being is drawn toward the unification of the community: to law and order, reason and utility, conservation and the productive expenditure of forces — in other words, to the world of the profane. In the other direction, however, being is confronted by its own excess: by a world of violent expenditures, madness, poetry and horror, in which the sacred erupts into the sphere of isolated being, flooding it. For those who, like Bataille’s lovers, are driven toward the latter, for whom the need ‘to love and be lost’ is stronger than the unified being they form, sacrifice no longer serves to engender the community, but, having become an end in itself, ‘lays claim’, he writes, ‘to a universal value’ (OC II, 372). In suggesting what this value is, Bataille turns, finally, to the questions raised by his affirmation of the mystical dimension of the sacred. Referring to one of his favourite lines from the writings of the mystics, Bataille concludes by telling his audience that when Saint Teresa of Ávila cried out that she was ‘dying of not dying [*meurt de ne pas mourir*]’, her passion, he says, breaking beyond the limits of things, tore open an unstoppable breach in the universe.  

72 In the conclusion to *L’Homme et le sacré*, in which he apologises for straying into the domain of ‘metaphysics’, Caillois would cite this phrase from the Saint’s writings to characterise this double perspective. ‘Contact with the sacred’, Caillois writes, ‘inaugurates a painful conflict between an intoxicating hope of losing oneself definitively in an empty plenitude and the kind of sluggishness by which the profane weighs down every movement towards the sacred, and which Saint Teresa herself attributed to the instinct for self-preservation. Returning the being who dies of not dying [*qui meurt de ne pas mourir*] to existence, this sluggishness appears as the exact counterpart to the ascendancy exercised by the sacred upon the profane, always attempting on its part to renounce its own duration in favour of a leap of ephemeral and dissipating glory’ (Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, p. 138). Bataille would quote these lines, this time more favourably, in his review of Caillois’ book (OC XII,
between man and a totality which is, he concludes, ‘without composition, of either form or being’, and where it seems, he says, ‘that death rolls on from world to world’ (OC II, 373).

The Sorcerer’s Apprentice

These, however, were not Bataille’s final words on communication, the demands of which, he quickly realised, are indivisible from the question of representation. Between the sphere of isolation in which man is imprisoned, and the plenitude he seeks to attain, death is not the only means of passage. A conduit has been opened, Bataille argues, in the form of the adumbration or, as he says, the image of death. Erotic fusion is one such image — perhaps the first; sacrifice is another; but it is in the parallel he draws between them that Bataille’s interest in sacrifice takes on its full meaning for his understanding of the role of the image in relation to the sacred. Although sacrifice, as Bataille pointed out, means ‘to make sacred’, the sacred, as he argues in ‘Le Sacré’, is the most elusive of what has been produced between men, and is defined, moreover, by the very impossibility of our ever grasping it or in any way making it substantial. This is what Laure had meant about the sacred being a reason for living that is ‘displaced’ — onto the material object, or the transcendental being of organised religion. In relation to the sacred, therefore, it would be more accurate to say of sacrifice that it is its means of representation, the role of which, therefore, becomes fundamental to our experience of this unreality.

Bataille had suggested something like this as early as his articles for Documents — in the texts on Van Gogh, on Picasso, on Dalí and Miró, where he first formulated a correspondence between the theatre of sacrifice and modern painting. His final contribution, however, ‘L’Esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions’, brought an end to that. Although Bataille’s passage through Documents had led him to the play of the heterogeneous, it left him, by his own admission, only too willing to dispose of even the greatest works of art, and those in what he considered to be its history’s most brilliant period, in favour of images he describes as ‘infinitely more obsessive’ (OC I, 271). Although these would finally appear, nearly ten years later, in the article on ‘Le Sacré’, in his present state of mind Bataille argued that at the present stage of capitalism, such images could only be known in their negative form: in the products of a modernity obsessed with repressing the expenditures of the human body, in whose place, he writes, modern man has erected a shrine to his new god — the commodity, worshipped in a pantheistic pharmacy indistinguishable from the art gallery. For this reason, Bataille says, the ‘image of decomposition’ for which man waits, and

73. See Georges Bataille, ‘L’Esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions’, Documents, no. 8 (1930); collected in OC I, 271-274.
which would break the *impasse* in which the modern spirit found itself, will take place, he writes, on a 'completely other dimension [*tout autre plan*]' to that of painting and literature (OC I, 274).

Despite the spirit of iconoclasm in which he brought this periodical to a conclusion, however, and to which these lines are his clearest testimony, Bataille found himself, only a few years later, returning once more to the relation between artistic production and the sacred. In ‘La Notion de dépense’, among the examples of expenditure he gave, Bataille listed the various forms of artistic activity, which he divides into, on the one hand real expenditure (architecture, music and dance), and on the other symbolic expenditure (sculpture, painting, literature and theatre). Like Breton before him, however, Bataille reserves the term poetry to designate a quality rather than a form of artistic production. Poetry, he argues, applied to the least degraded and intellectualised forms of the expression of loss, can be considered synonymous with expenditure. Moreover, for the rare human beings who have its virulent power at their disposal, poetic work, he says, as it had been for Laure, ceases to be symbolic, but engages the very life of the one who assumes it. 'Its meaning', Bataille concludes, 'is therefore close to that of sacrifice' (OC I, 307).

This is the task, moreover, that Bataille set himself as 'the sorcerer's apprentice': the title he adopted, only half in jest, to describe the person (who he himself wished to be) who sought to accede to the totality of existence. Such an existence, however, can not be reached through what he characterises as the 'effeminate tricks' of an art bound to a fragmented world, but through the return to the 'virile unity' of the elements that compose its lost intimacy. 'Totality of existence', Bataille writes, 'can no more be cut into pieces than a living body. . . It has the simplicity of an axe stroke' (OC I, 529). Bataille has been criticised for this terminology, which the critique of sexual difference threatens to reduce to farce. But it is a paradoxical unity that Bataille proposes, one which can only be attained through the loss of the self, through the kind of violent laceration that Bataille himself had experienced in the death of Laure. And the sorcerer's apprentice, Bataille says, must accustom himself to the rigour peculiar to the sense of the sacred. This was as far from the fragmented activities of art and literature — even art and literature placed in the service of changing the world — as it was from science or political action. Myth alone, Bataille argues, reflects the plenitude of existence, opening the community to the movement of communication. What he does say, however, is that on this path the sorcerer's apprentice will not encounter demands any different from those met with 'on the difficult road of art'. It was to the demands of mythological invention, therefore, that Bataille's energy came to be directed at this time. Unlike the Surrealists, however, who confined their myth-making to the realms of art and literature,

Bataille argued that myth could only be born from ritual acts hidden from a fragmented society. This was where his interest in sacrifice found its full expression. 'The total world of myth', he writes, 'the world of being, is separated from the dissociated world by the very limits that separate the sacred from the profane' (OC I, 537).

It was to this end that Bataille had founded Acéphale. Although its rituals remain a secret, one of the group's projects, although it was never carried out, was to commemorate the death of Louis XVI. First a human skull was to have been soaked in brine until it became soft and malleable; then, on the 21st of January — the anniversary of the King's execution — it was to have been left at the base of the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde and the press informed of the miraculous return of the king's skull. There are reports, also, of group meditation around a lightning-struck tree in the forest at Saint-Nom-le-Bretèche, where the group regularly met at the new moon, and of orgies orchestrated by Bataille in a brothel on the rue Pigalle. More serious, however, was Bataille's purported intention to perform a human sacrifice. According to some accounts a willing victim was found; only an executioner, apparently, was lacking. Caillois even recalls that Bataille, supposing him to have the necessary severity of character, asked him to do the honours. It is unclear exactly what Bataille thought the effects of such an act would be — to which he himself, moreover, never referred. Doubtless he himself was unsure. But in September 1939, when he convened the final meeting of Acéphale, and its four remaining members met at Saint-Nom-le-Bretèche, the others must have guessed what was coming. With the war now upon them, Bataille solemnly requested that one of the others would assent to being ritually put to death, 'since this sacrifice', he said, 'would be the foundation of a myth, and ensure the survival of the community'.

Whatever one might think of such a request — which the others refused him — it becomes clear that when Bataille, during those last days of peace, turned to the demands of communication, he was speaking of just such a gesture. It is in its shadow, therefore, that we should read the words with which he brought the article on 'Le Sacré' to a conclusion. 'Whoever creates', Bataille

75. Surya notes that it has been suggested that this willing victim was Laure. He immediately adds, however, that absolutely nothing justifies sharing this supposition. Indeed, he says that the source of this speculation (which he withholds) is sufficient to discount its veracity. That Bataille even contemplated such a thing is so impossible to imagine, so hideous to conceive, that it has the ring of truth about it. Among the members of the secret society, Laure alone had the character and the inclination to play such a part. And she knew she was dying. Ultimately, speculations as to the identity of the victim serve no purpose, except to put a human face to the horror of sacrifice. See Michel Surya, Georges Bataille, p. 303.

76. See the conversation with Caillois in Le Nouvel Observateur, no. 521 (November 1974); quoted in Michel Surya, Georges Bataille, p. 301.

writes, 'whoever paints or writes, can no longer concede any limit to painting or writing: alone, he suddenly has at his disposal all possible human convulsions' (OC I, 563). And just as the blade of the executioner fails to distinguish between the neck of the one who wields it and that of his victim, so the artist or writer cannot know, he says, if the power his activity unleashes 'will consume and destroy the one it consecrates'. Difficult terms, no doubt, but these are the resources Bataille called on art to dispose of if, like sacrifice, it was to tear open a long-healed wound onto the field of the sacred.
2 The King of the Wood

Man is not limited to the organ of pleasure, but this unavowable organ teaches him his secret. Since sexual pleasure depends upon the mind opening to a deleterious perspective, we usually deceive ourselves, attempting to reach our joy on a path as far as possible from horror. The images that excite desire or provoke the final spasm are typically dubious or equivocal: if they depict horror or death it is always in an underhand manner. Even from Sade’s perspective, death is diverted onto the other, and the other, initially, is a delicious expression of life. The domain of eroticism is inescapably sworn to ruses. The object that provokes the movement of Eros announces itself as other than it is. So much so that in erotic matters it is the ascetics who are right. They say of beauty that it is the snare of the devil: beauty alone, in effect, renders tolerable our need for disorder, for the violence and indignity that is at the root of love. Undoubtedly the ascetic condemnation is coarse, it is cowardly and cruel, but it accords with the trembling without which we distance ourselves from the truth of the night. There is no reason why sexual love should be invested with an eminence that only life in its entirety has, but if we do not bring the light to bear on the very point where night falls, how should we know ourselves to be, as we are, the projection of being into horror? If being is lost, if it is swallowed in the sickening void from which, at all costs, it must flee...

— Bataille, ‘Préface de Madame Edwarda’ (1956)
I. The Tears of Eros

*But in the end pain is always there, our disgust for which defines us. And the knowledge of possible pain humanises: it is this that makes us so tender and so hard, so gay and so heavy with silence.*

— Bataille, ‘Réflexions sur le bourreau et la victime’ (1947)

After the agony of expression, of competing in the human game, Bataille left Paris in 1938 to await with Laure her own death. Afterwards, a brief return to Paris was cut short when he in turn fell ill with pulmonary tuberculosis and returned to the house at Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Whereupon the war broke out. It is here, in the short period he believed life had accorded him between the death of Laure and what seemed his own imminent death, that Bataille found his voice. When I think of Bataille thinking — with Masson in a Spanish villa, where a phonograph plays the overture to *Don Giovanni*; looking down into the valley from the terrace of the house at Vézelay; or in the thinly disguised (because always autobiographical) landscapes of his erotic narratives — he is always in the country. After the crucible of Paris in the inter-war years, of his active participation in the great urban narratives of the time — Surrealism, Marxism, the Popular Front, sociology, phenomenology, ethnography, psychoanalysis — Bataille retired, worn out, tuberculoid, still anonymous and already into middle age, to the ‘theatre’ of his thought: hills black under a night sky pierced with stars, muddy paths streaked with rain, provincial inns, the straw-strewn farm sheds and cobwebbed attics of Bellmer’s photographs, fields trod lightly at dawn on the edge of small towns, railway bridges and road blocks backed by forests at night — and at the end of it all, Bataille, at his window desk, looking out onto a garden wet with the morning rain and muddy roots. Bataille stayed in the house at Saint-Germain until May 1940, leaving when the Wehrmacht marched into Paris. Within a month, however, the newly formed Vichy government had declared an armistice, and by September Bataille was back in Paris again. He would stay there, living on the rue Saint-Honoré and working at the Bibliothèque Nationale, on and off for nearly three years. Then in the spring of 1943, following a relapse in his health, he moved to Vézelay, where he met Diane Kotchoubey de Beauharnais. That October, still gravely ill, he followed her back to Paris, but after several months of writing interspersed with nocturnal ‘fêtes’, another attack of tuberculosis forced him to leave once more for the country, this time to the town of Samois near Fontainebleau. Bataille, who from the first greeted the war as the externalisation, on the grandest scale, of what he assumed to be his own encroaching death, embraced this physical deterioration with his usual humour. But cycling to Fontainebleau every fortnight for a pneumothorax was a trial of faith he hadn’t expected. ‘I went’, he wrote, ‘to have my lung reinsufflated: the
doctor inserted the needle between my ribs seven or eight times, but in vain. The
air pocket, reinflated at each insufflation, was entirely empty. It was dead. And
that was how I found out I was cured’ (OC IV, 363). Following this unforeseen
resurrection, and with his health finally restored, Bataille returned to Paris in
October 1944 hard on the heels of its own liberation. The mood there, however,
was for retribution, and within a few months Bataille had returned to the house
at Vézelay that would be his home for the next five years.

At the heart of the writings of this period, the most anguished and prolific
of his life, are three short texts. The first is the journal Bataille kept between
September 1939 and March 1940 — which is to say, in the first few months of
the war, while he was still living in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. The second text,
written in Paris between November 1941 and March 1942, is the transcription of
what Bataille, referring to his own experience, called ‘The Torture [Le Supplice]’,
around which the polyglot writings that make up L’Expérience intérieure were
later organised. To these two texts, however, must be added a third, the erotic
novella Madame Edwarda — and not only because Bataille, who wrote this short
narrative between September and October of 1941 (that is, just before ‘Le
Succiple’), insisted that the one ‘cannot be comprehended without the other’ (OC
III, 491). What binds all three texts together, placing them at the heart of
Bataille’s war writings, is that each was written in — each is placed under the
effacement of — the shadow of a death: the death of Laure, Bataille’s own death
— which he reads in the portents of war no less than in his own rapidly
deteriorating health — and a third death, in whose image these other deaths, and,
it might be said, ‘death itself’, found its expression.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the first of these texts. Although
Bataille, when he first began to write his journal, had no intention of having it
published until after his death — a decision, he said, which gave him the
impression of writing ‘from the grave [à l’intérieure de la tombe]’ (OC V, 251)
— because, as he said many years later, he found in the aphoristic tone of its
entries the writing that most ‘resembled’ him, he decided to publish its first pages
under the unlikely pseudonym of Dianus, and with the elliptical title of
‘L’Amitié’ (1940) (OC V, 494).¹ Bataille would later describe these pages —
which would become, with some revisions, the first section of Le Coupable —
as the ‘most significant’ part of La Somme athéologique (OC VI, 368). And yet
his lengthy transcription of the experience at the origin of this writing — the
experience to which it responded and which fills the first pages of his journal
with the most anguished and anguishing of his writing — this experience, Bataille
writes, was, for the sake of propriety, ‘suppressed [supprimer]’ in both forms of
its publication — as article and book (OC V, 494). These were the passages in
which Bataille reflected on the death of Laure and the circumstances surrounding

¹. See Dianus [Georges Bataille], ‘L’Amitié’, Mesures (April 15, 1940); collected in OC VI, 292-306.
his discovery of her reflections on the sacred. And yet despite this elision, *Le Coupable*, Bataille writes, remains a book ‘violently dominated by tears, violently dominated by death’ (OC V, 494). But in the absence of Laure from its pages, those tears are shed, that death is mourned over the body of a third figure: someone Bataille also, in his way, loved, and to whom he was bound, as he says, ‘by bonds of horror and friendship’ (OC V, 283).

*An Image of Torture*

Throughout Bataille’s writing a movement of effacement is at work (how could it not be?); as a result of which we are left with two texts: that published under his own name, and another, sprawling text, published under an array of pseudonyms or, in even greater quantity, unpublished during his lifetime. The two, however, complement each other, and not only in that the history of their writing is parallel, but because the one is — to use Bataille’s overtly Catholic vocabulary — the ‘unavowable [inavouable]’ expression of the other. To speak only of the inter-war years, Bataille, while contributing his early numismatic studies to the archaeological revue *Aréthuse*, also writes the scatological *L’Anus solaire* and *Histoire de l’oeil*; alongside the articles in *Documents* there are the unpublished texts on the pineal eye; during the theoretical rigour of the essays for *La Critique sociale*, he writes, but only later publishes, *Sacrifices*; for the political engagement of *Contre-attaque*, there is the impotence of *Le Bleu du ciel*; and in the shadow cast by the public life of the Collège de sociologie, the secrecy and silence surrounding *Acéphale*. Then, during the war, and accompanying the three volumes of *La Somme athéologique* — the title under which all the texts appearing in his name during this period were later brought together — a series of pseudonymous texts appear, providing, in Bataille’s own phrase, a ‘lubrious key [clé lubrique]’ to the already great lubricity of the former: *Madame Edwarda*, *Le Petit*, and the unpublished *Le Mort* — in the margins of which are the texts later assembled under the title *La Haine de la poesie*. Still further in the shadows is that text which, written and then abandoned under the title of *La Limite de l’utile*, would emerge in the post-war period in the only partly realised project of *La Part maudite*, which, with some diversions, would occupy Bataille for the rest of his life. But beyond this sharper division, the volumes that make up *La Somme athéologique* are themselves composed of diverse discursive fragments (prefaces, introductions, re-worked articles, presentations, post-scripts and appendices) which, for all their rigour, fail to systematise the journal entries that comprise their centre, and to which still further works are later appended: *Méthode de méditation* to *L’Expérience intérieure*; *L’Alleluiah* to *Le Coupable*; *Memorandum* to *Sur Nietzsche*. Finally, from within the very fabric of the text itself, images of horror and joy erupt like so many aids to what Bataille — with a discretion owing more to the eye of the censor than to the sensibilities of his reader — termed his ‘meditations’. These above all, drawn from what Bataille called his ‘experience’
— that inexpressible, ungraspable reality in whose shadow he placed his writing — testify to the violent silence from which his thought flowed and into which it threatened to dissolve again.

Not long after Laure’s death, and only shortly before the Second World War, Bataille published his article on ‘Le Sacré’ in the 1939 issue of Cahiers d’art, an edition edited by Georges Duthuit, an art historian and member of the Collège de sociologie. Bataille’s intention for this article was to include seven ‘illustrations’ of the sacred as it manifested itself in images which, in their diversity, span the range of Bataille’s obsessions during the interwar years. In Bataille’s notes to his article these illustrations were listed under the following headings: a burial mound; the skulls of horses; a lightning flash; a volcanic eruption; a bullfight; an erotic photo; and, lastly — this category followed, as if doubting its propriety, by a question mark — an image of ‘torture [supplice]?’ (OC I, 683). When it came to publishing the article, however, only four of these images appeared. The first a photograph of a sacred site in Lithuania, on which Christian crosses, planted by the local peasants, ‘only perpetuate the memory’, Bataille writes in the caption, ‘of a pagan burial mound where sacrifices were once carried out’. The second a photograph of the Spanish torrero Nicanor Villalta — one of Hemingway’s favourite matadors — standing before the bull he has just killed in the corrida (plate 1): a spectacle whose ‘ritual enactment and tragic character’, Bataille writes, ‘represents a form close to ancient sacred games’. The third image a photograph of the ‘Phallus of Delos’, a Hellenistic monument from the temple of Dionysus, whose sacred meaning escapes us, Bataille writes, ‘to the extent that the awareness of the secret horrors at the basis of religion is lost’. And the fourth, not the image of torture Bataille had originally intended, and which it here replaces, but the depiction of an Aztec human sacrifice — ‘by tearing out of the heart’ — from a sixteenth-century, post-Hispanic manuscript (plate 2).

2. Duthuit, who commissioned Bataille’s article for this issue, also included his own article on ‘Représentations de la mort’, which he illustrated with a number of images that had previously appeared in Documents (see Cahiers d’art, 14e année, no. 1-4 (1939), pp. 25-39). Duthuit had also been a member of the Société de psychologie collective, which Bataille had co-founded in April 1937. This small group, which met between January and June 1938, included among its other members, Pierre Janet — the society’s President (Bataille was its Vice-President), Michel Leiris, Adrien Borel (the former analyst of both Bataille and Leiris), Daniel Lagache, René Allendy and Paul Schiff. The papers for the first year were, by common consent, devoted to the study of ‘attitudes in the face of death’ (OC II, 444-45), to which Duthuit’s contribution was a paper on ‘La Représentation artistique de la mort’. This would subsequently become, with some modifications, the article he published in Cahiers d’art. Like most of Bataille’s projects during this period, the society was short-lived, but its concerns remained at the forefront of his thoughts. A year later, in June 1939, Bataille gave his talk on the subject of ‘La Joie devant la mort’; and in the same month, in the last issue of Acéphale, he published his article on ‘La Pratique de la joie devant la mort’. See the commentary in Denis Hollier, ed., The College of Sociology, 1937-39, pp. 322-328.

3. All four illustrations and their captions appear on pages 47-49 of Cahiers d’art, and are reproduced in OC I, plates XXVII-XXX. The photograph of Villalta was a gift to Bataille from Leiris, who acquired it for him from André Castel following Laure’s death. See Annie Maillis, Michel Leiris:
Of the small number of visual images to force a reappearance in Bataille’s published work, the most insistent is this image of sacrifice from the *Codex Vaticanus*. Although it would eventually have to wait until 1957 to reappear in *L’Érotisme*, and another four years until *Les Larmes d’Eros* (1961), in 1954 Bataille had included this image in a list of illustrations he wished to include in the reprint (never in fact realised) of the three volumes of *La Part maudite* (where it was to appear in volume one, in connection with Bataille’s long-standing interest in Aztec culture, in the chapter on ‘Sacrifices et guerres des Aztèques’). This image of human sacrifice, so resurgent in Bataille’s published writings, was not, however, the image of torture Bataille had originally intended to include in his article on ‘Le Sacré’. This suppressed image — which would be repeatedly placed, so to speak, in the shadow of this sixteenth-century manuscript whenever Bataille spoke of sacrifice — would only appear in a published work by Bataille a year before his death, when he included it, finally united with the image of Aztec sacrifice that had first displaced it, in the concluding pages of *Les Larmes d’Eros*. It only appears here, however, as the illustration of what Bataille, in the final lines of this book, calls ‘the inevitable conclusion to a history of eroticism’ (OC X, 627). And yet, despite the valedictory tone of this deferred and long overdue meeting, this image was one Bataille had known since he was a young man, and oblique references to it are scattered throughout his writings whenever, as was often the case, he had looked for a concrete image of a more general disgust. In the last days of Laure’s illness, moreover, when Bataille was initiated — if in an unorthodox manner — into something like the practice of yoga, he chose this image of torture, perversely enough, as the ‘object’ of his meditations. In the ensuing months and years — when he experienced the full anguish of death for the first time since, as a child, his family had abandoned his invalid father to the invading German army — this image became the focal point of Bataille’s thought, one from which his gaze never strayed, and against which his eyes constantly rebelled — as if staring at the sun — only to be drawn irresistibly back

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5. See, respectively, *L’Érotisme*, plate XI (reproduced in OC X, plate XI); *Les Larmes d’Eros*, p. 235; and the list of illustrations in OC VIII, 594.

again. In 1925, on the advice of his doctor, Bataille had met with Adrien Borel, one of the founders of the Société psychanalytique de Paris who was well known for his preference for receiving artists and writers as his patients. Sometime over the next two years Bataille entered into a brief analysis with Borel. As was usual for the time, this lasted no longer than a year; but as part of this attempt to exorcise what Bataille called the ‘intellectual violence’ by which he was then afflicted, and which manifested itself in a leaning toward alcoholism, the expenditure of most of his time and nearly all his money in brothels, and — at least according to Leiris — a penchant for the occasional game of Russian roulette, Bataille began to write Histoire de l’oeil, which Borel read chapter by chapter as part of the process of analysis. Looking back on his life many years later Bataille would say that without this analysis, brief as it was, he would never have been able to write; that the two were, in his personal history, intimately linked. At their first meeting, however, anticipating, and perhaps precipitating, the disturbed young librarian’s imminent arrival on his couch, Borel made the curious and in retrospect decisive gesture of giving Bataille a photograph of the execution of a young Chinese man by the torture called ‘Leng-Tch’e [cutting into pieces]’, which in French is known as the ‘cent morceaux [hundred pieces]’ (plate 3).

The photograph shows a young Chinese man, stripped naked and bound to a stake. His body, already thin, almost feminine, has wasted away from the cruel conditions of his imprisonment: the stomach shrunken, the hips protruding, the penis shrivelled and withdrawn into the pelvis. His arms, lashed brutally behind him, are already partially severed above the elbow. Two crude and gaping wounds have exposed his rib-cage and chest cavity, and his lower body is striped with

7. Bataille recalled the events surrounding his father’s death in ‘W.-C., Préface à l’Histoire de l’œil’, from Le Petit. ‘On November 6, 1915, in a bombarded town, four or five kilometres from the German lines, my father died in abandonment. My mother and I abandoned him during the German advance, in August 1914. We had left him with the housekeeper. The Germans occupied the town, then evacuated it. We could now return: my mother, unable to bear the thought of it, went mad. Late that year, my mother recovered: she refused to let me go home to N. We received occasional letters from my father, he just barely ranted and raved. When we learned he was dying, my mother agreed to go with me. He died a few days before our arrival, asking for his children: we found a sealed coffin in the bedroom’ (OC III, 60).

8. In conversation with Madeleine Chapsal in the Spring of 1961, the only interview he ever seems to have given, Bataille said: ‘the first book I wrote, the one I mentioned [the destroyed W.C., the only surviving chapter of which became the introduction to Le Bleu du ciel, and was also published separately, in 1945, under the title of ‘Dirty’], I was able to write it only when psychoanalysed, yes, as I came out of it. And I believe I am able to say that it is only by being liberated in this way that I was able to write’. Madeleine Chapsal, Quinze écrivains (Paris: Éditions Juillard, 1963); translated by Michael Richardson in Georges Bataille, Essential Writings (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), p. 221. For the history of Bataille’s analysis see also Élisabeth Roudinesco, ‘Bataille entre Freud et Lacan: une expérience cachée’, in Denis Hollier, ed., Georges Bataille — après tout, proceedings from Orléans colloquium (27-28 November, 1993); L’Extrême contemporain, series edited by Michel Deguy (Belin, 1995), pp. 191-212.
blood. In front of him the executioner, crouched over his work, is busy trying to cut off his left leg at the knee (the heavy blade of his knife has just entered the flesh). Around these two figures a crowd jostles to witness this bloody dismemberment, their necks craned with curiosity. Nearest to the victim several mandarin officials distinguish themselves not only by their headwear but by their demeanour, which, in stark contrast to the expressions of dark fascination in the faces of the peasants behind them, brings a cold air of purpose to the proceedings. Above these onlookers, both official and curious, the young victim raises his head, and in a face drawn with agony, his eyes roll back on this scene of horror.

Of the historical circumstances surrounding this torture, Bataille, in the caption to the image, recalls only that on the 25th of March 1905, the following imperial decree, issued in the name of the Emperor Koang-Sou, was published in the *Ching-pao* [Peking Gazette]: ‘The Mongolian Princes demand that that the aforesaid Fou-Tchou-Li, guilty of the murder of Prince Ao-Han-Ouan, be burned alive, but the Emperor finds this torture too cruel and condemns Fou-Tchou-Li to slow death by *Leng-Tch’e*. Respect this!’ Apart from the identification of his crime and the manner of his death, nothing else is known of the man in the photograph; but in his book, *China: Past and Present* (1903), Edward Harper Parker, a former consul at Kiungchow, gives an account of a torture of just this type, which, in what is no doubt a corruption of *Leng-Tch’e*, he calls ‘piecemeal hacking’. In his description of this and other forms of executions carried out in Peking, Parker, in a chapter devoted to what he calls the ‘seamy side’ of Chinese life, is struck by two things: first — and in contrast to the evidence of Bataille’s photograph — Parker remarks on the apparently blasé attitude of the witnesses to this torture when confronted with what, for Western eyes, was the unimaginable horror of the proceedings; and second, and perhaps more tellingly for his own observations, he observes how rapidly this attitude became his own when it became apparent to him how little value was placed on these lives. The execution of criminals in Peking, Parker says, was typically carried out one mile outside the inner, or Tartar city, in the middle of the main street running through the outer, or Chinese city, at the entrance to the vegetable market; and in accordance with this everyday setting, the executioner, in Parker’s words, ‘went about his business as quietly as though he was trimming a bale of cotton’. This was an attitude, however, which did not exclude the demonstration of a certain pride and pleasure which the executioner evidently took in displaying both his technical prowess and a bearing Parker compares, appropriately enough, to the *matadors* in the Spanish corrida. Between the successive executions, moreover, the crowd — who were allowed to approach sufficiently close to the victims to become sprinkled with their blood (which, Parker says, they typically brushed off


with their sleeve cuffs as if wiping snot from their noses) — continued to smoke their pipes, exchange pleasantries, and laugh and joke in the most casual manner, often displaying more interest in the appearance of the foreign visitors than in the spectacle unfolding before them. During the torture and execution itself, however, an absolute silence reigned, broken only by the restrained groans of the victim. Besides these general descriptions, however, Parker — who was writing in 1896 — describes an execution which took place in Peking in 1869, where he witnessed the execution of both male and female criminals by the two methods most commonly used: decapitation and strangulation. Parker, however, goes on to describe a third, less frequent kind of execution, reserved for the gravest of crimes:

There is a third form of capital punishment called 'piecemeal hacking', which is performed upon women who poison or otherwise murder their husbands (usually by running a stiff bristle into the navel whilst asleep); individuals of either sex who cause the death of a parent or senior agnate; traitors, etc. I never saw this performed, but I once saw a snap-shot photograph of a man at Canton upon whom it had been executed. Almost invariably the executioners allow the victim to stupefy himself or herself with opium: the breasts are first sliced off, then the flesh at the eyebrows, then the calves, muscles of the arm, etc., until at last a dagger is plunged into the heart, which is crammed into the mouth of the corpse. Many Europeans, and most Chinese officials, deny that this cruel punishment is ever carried out; but, as I have said, I possess the photograph, and the Viceroy was so angry about it that the British Steamer Company had, in their own interests, to remove the engineer who took it.11

In their recent meditations on Bataille’s photograph, Pierre Alféri and Olivier Cadéot have written that the circulation of such images in France during the 1920s belongs to what they call a ‘fin-de-siècle pornographic tradition’ based on ‘representations of exotic torture’.12 When Borel handed Bataille this photograph, they argue, he was behaving in a manner entirely consistent with the attitudes of the European bourgeoisie at the turn of the century. Bataille’s own response to the image, however, was to be a very different one. Bataille was certainly not the only patient on whom Borel tried this trick; but whatever it was that influenced his analyst to bestow such a weighty gift upon him, this photograph had, in Bataille’s valedictory words, ‘a decisive role’ in his life: ‘I have never ceased’, he writes in Les Larmes d’Eros, ‘to be obsessed with this image of pain, at once ecstatic (?)’; he writes — again, with a question mark — ‘and intolerable’ (OC X, 627).

11. Edward Harper Parker, China: Past and Present, pp. 379. Parker notes that in 1901 he succeeded in obtaining a copy of this photograph the day before the negative was destroyed.

An Infinite Value of Reversal

The photograph Bataille owned, presumably made at a similar risk of displeasure to the Viceroy, was taken in Peking on April 10, 1905, and — to judge by the hazy outlines of the buildings behind the crowd — most likely near the entrance to the vegetable market Parker describes. The photographer was Louis Carpeaux, a travel writer who first published it in his *Pékin qui s'en va* (1913), a book which, according to Bataille’s editor, J. M. Lo Duca, enjoyed a certain notoriety in Paris during the years of the Great War. Bataille’s photograph, however, was only the third in a series of five taken at the time, four of which would later appear together, nearly twenty years after the publication of Carpeaux’s work, in the second volume of the *Nouveau traité de psychologie* (1932). This was edited by the psychologist Georges Dumas, who included details of these photographs as illustrations to his own chapter on ‘La Douleur et le plaisir’. In his reference to these photographs, Dumas, who was a colleague of Borel’s, remains understandably apologetic about reproducing such images in the service of a discourse, no matter how scientific, devoted to the analysis of ‘expressions of physical pain’. For this reason, perhaps, he deliberately misattributes this torture to an earlier period (‘a half century ago’) and assures the reader that ‘tortures of this type have been suppressed [supprimer] for a long time in the country in which these photographs were taken’. Focusing, instead, on the facial contractions of what Dumas, with what remains the foundational gesture of the psychologist, calls ‘the patient’, his analysis of the body’s reaction to torture offers instead a description and interpretation of the stages through which this ‘patient’ of torture passes as they unfold before him in the four photographs:

The first photograph was taken before any torture and the face, which expresses

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13. Alféri and Cadiot contest this location, identifying it instead as Canton, in south-east China, rather than Peking. No source, however, is given for this information, or why it contradicts Bataille’s own. Continuing the history of obfuscation in which this image is wrapped, however, Alféri and Cadiot mistakenly identify it as appearing in *Documents* — the site, in fact, of the image of Aztec sacrifice that would replace it. See Pierre Alféri and Olivier Cadiot, ‘Bataille en relief’, p. 408.


15. The first plate of this series has recently been published, in stereoscopic form, in *Revue de littérature générale*. Alféri and Cadiot, who are critical of what they call Bataille’s ‘substitution’ of religious sacrifice for political violence, write: ‘In choosing to publish only the first, and least known, of these plates, it is no longer an icon that we show, but a document which this image merits its name. A photo (neither a curiosity in 3D, nor a sublime image) of a man condemned to death’ (Pierre Alféri and Olivier Cadiot, ‘Bataille en relief’, p. 408).


fear, shows only that a narcotic has been administered to the patient. In the second photograph the face expresses a sort of ecstatic joy, with the mouth half open, the eyes partially closed, the right eye lightly rolled up [révulsé], the cheeks drawn back [remontées], and the head thrown back [relevée en arrière]. In the third photograph one is presented with an expression which is very difficult to classify, where the eyes appear rolled up, where the lips are half parted and pulled back in a sort of grimace and the zygomatic muscle, still stimulated, relieves a little the flesh of the cheeks. Finally, in the third [sic: fourth] photograph, one can identify a completely understandable expression of weariness and infinite depression in the features of the unfortunate victim, who has probably ceased or at least ceased to suffer. The extreme of suffering is reached, therefore, in unclassifiable expressions, as in expression three, or in paradoxical expressions, as in expression two, which seems to defy all explanation. Why, in this unimaginable pain, with these half-closed eyes and these drawn [remontent] cheeks, with this head thrown back on itself [se relève en arrière], does this mouth seem to smile?
— One can only hypothesize . . . But whatever explanation one adopts, it seems to me that one ought to recognise that in extreme suffering like this, it is understandable that the expressions of the patients cannot enter into the usual framework of our interpretations. These expressions seem paradoxical because the reactions which are familiar to us only correspond to average levels of excitation. Here we have expressions of joy, of trepidation, of shock, of death, which would not violate the mechanical laws of muscular reaction but which escape the customary schemas under which these laws present themselves in the ordinary conditions of life. Only the final expression of depression and exhaustion returns us to a known reality.

In the introduction to the second, posthumous edition of *Les Larmes d'Eros*, J. M. Lo Duca — the editor of the 'Bibliothèque internationale d'érotologie' in which the first edition of this book had appeared, and Bataille's assistant in collating its illustrations — speaking of the correspondance which passed between Bataille and himself during its writing, mentions that he still possessed, 'copied in his [Bataille's] hand, on two fragments of orange paper, the text by Georges Dumas on "Pleasure and Pain [le plaisir et la douleur]" (sic) which had so

18. In actual fact, this photograph shows an early stage of the torture, with the left breast hacked away. Dumas, however, only shows a detail of the head of the victim. He would later reproduce this detail in the third volume of the *Nouveau traité*, accompanying a passage Bataille refers to, where it is used as an example of 'horripilation [hérissement]'. See Georges Dumas, ed., *Nouveau traité de psychologie*, vol. 3, *Les associations sensitivo-motrices* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1933), p. 228, fig. 121. Bataille himself notes the effect of the opium — which was administered to prolong the victim's consciousness of his torture — on the expression on his face, but he only accords it a part in augmenting what, he writes, 'is most anguishing about this photograph' (OC X, 627).

impressed [marqué] him. Although Lo Duca does not say what it was about this unlikely text that had left so indelible a mark on Bataille, in his many references to and meditations on this photograph Bataille would almost mimic the objective and scientific vocabulary of Dumas’s description, and in particular its vocabulary of reversal (‘révulsé’, ‘remontées, ‘relevée’), as if to mark the moment when this account of the passage of a victim of torture to his death — so perversely illustrated, so equivocally recorded — fails: a point where, after the intoxication of agony, there is only the ‘unclassifiable’, the ‘paradoxical’, the ‘inexplicable’, the ‘unimaginable’ — and then silence, before the return to a ‘known reality’. Like Dumas, Bataille located this point in the face of this victim, who, even at the ‘extreme’ of his suffering, ‘seems to smile’. In order to speak

20. Georges Bataille, *Les Larmes d’Eros*, second revised and expanded edition; with an introduction by J. M. Lo Duca (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1971), p. v. Lo Duca, however, like Bataille, and indeed his biographer, Michel Surya, is mistaken in his attribution: there is no reference to this photograph in the section on ‘Pleasure and Pain’ by Dumas in the earlier *Traité de psychologie*; nor does Dumas’ description of horripilation, to which Bataille refers, appear here, this being a later addition to the revised text. The only likely alternative to the identity of the passage by Dumas which, according to Lo Dorca, and as Bataille’s own testimony in *Les Larmes d’Eros* reaffirms, left so indelible a ‘mark’ upon him, is not that on ‘Pleasure and Pain’ but that on ‘Pain and Pleasure [La Douleur et le plaisir]’, from volume 2 of the *Nouveau traité*, which it is reasonable to assume Bataille must have read some time between 1932 and 1934 when the list of his borrowings at the Bibliothèque nationale show his interest in the works of Dumas was at its greatest. See ‘Emprunts de Georges Bataille à la Bibliothèque nationale (1922-1950)’, OC XII, pp. 549-621, borrowings nos. 415, 416, 430, 438 and 445 from 1932, and 588 from 1934. Bataille’s photograph, in any case, only appears in the *Nouveau traité de psychologie*, vol 2. *Les fondements de la vie mentale* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1932), which Dumas was both contributor to and editor of. All four of the photographs taken by Carpeaux appear in Book III (‘Les états affectifs’) in Dumas’ chapter on ‘La Douleur et le plaisir’, on the subject of ‘Expressions internes et externes de la douleur et du plaisir’, section 6. ‘Quelques exemples d’expressions de la douleur physique’ (pp. 283-286, figs. 54-57 bis). This chapter was a revised and expanded version of Dumas’ own revision — which appeared in Book II (‘Les éléments de la vie mentale’) of volume one of the earlier *Traité de psychologie* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1923) — of L. Barat’s chapter on ‘Les états affectifs’, section 1. ‘Le plaisir et la douleur’ (pp. 405-427). The following year, in the *Nouveau traité de psychologie*, vol 3. *Les associations sensitivo-motrices* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1933), two of these photographs, including the one owned by Bataille, would again appear, in Book II (‘L’expression des émotions’), in Dumas’ chapter on ‘Réactions émotionelles communes’, section 3. ‘La chair de poule, i) Les conditions de l’horripilation’ (p. 228, figs. 121-122). Again, this was a revised and expanded version of chapter II, ‘L’expression des émotions’, of Book III (‘Les associations sensitivo-motrices’), from volume one of the earlier *Traité de psychologie* (pp. 606-690). Bataille, not only in *Les Larmes d’Eros*, in which these images finally appeared in his work, but elsewhere, notably in the volumes of the *Somme athéologique*, always mistakenly identified his photograph as appearing in the earlier *Traité de psychologie*, which, according to the records of his borrowings, he first read, together with volume 1 of the *Nouveau traité de psychologie* (1931), in March 1932. However, neither the photographs nor any reference to them appear in the relevant chapters of the earlier *Traité*. Two years later, in December 1934, Bataille borrowed volume 3 of the *Nouveau traité*, and it is here that his photograph appears in the relation to Dumas’ text that Bataille, in *Les Larmes d’Eros*, refers to with an exclamation mark, as an example of ‘horripilation!’ (OC X, 626). Between these two dates volume 2 of the *Nouveau traité* was published, in which Bataille’s photograph appeared as an illustration to Dumas’ chapter on ‘pain and pleasure [La Douleur et le plaisir]’ (pp. 251-296). Although there is no record of Bataille borrowing this volume from the Bibliothèque nationale, I have assumed that he did read it, and that this is the source of the text he copied out, and to which Lo Duca refers.
of this moment, therefore, which marks the limit of the psychologist’s discourse, Bataille, in describing his own response to this photograph, not only retains but emphasises the vocabulary of reversal in Dumas’s description: not only, like Dumas, to describe the alteration in the features of the young Chinese victim (an alteration which was mirrored in his own face when, during his meditations on this image, Bataille looked at it, he says, ‘to the point of harmony’), but above all to describe what, in the course of these meditations, he ‘discerned’, he says in Les Larmes d’Eros, ‘in the violence of this image’, as an ‘infinite value of reversal [renversement]’. ‘Through this violence’, he writes, ‘I was so astounded [renversée] that I reached the point of ecstasy’ (OC X, 627). When Bataille, therefore, in what he knew would be his last book, finally published this image of torture, he attributes the decisive role it played in his life to the effort it had cost him to accomodate this value, in which he found, moreover, the answer to Dumas’s question. ‘What I suddenly saw’, Bataille wrote, ‘and what imprisoned me in my anguish — but which at the same time delivered me from it — was the identity of these perfect contraries: divine ecstasy and its opposite, extreme horror’ (OC X, 627).

This was a value, however, that Bataille had discerned — or, to put it less abstractly, a relation by which he felt bound — not only in the face of the Chinese victim, but in that of the dying Laure, for whom this image had come to substitute, just as Laure had in her turn substituted for the death of Bataille’s blind father. Bataille had first drawn this parallel in his journal entry of 28 September, 1939: ‘Laure’s face [visage], he writes, ‘had an obscure resemblance to this man so dreadfully tragic: the vacant and half-demented face of Oedipus. In the course of her agony, while fever gnawed at her, this resemblance grew, particularly, perhaps, during her terrible fits of anger and attacks of hatred against me’ (OC V, 504). No doubt this was just the face that Laure, in the agony of her long wait, had prepared for him — sharing, as she did, Bataille’s fascination with the young Chinese victim. Indeed it was she who had first suggested this

This emphasis on the contradictory expression in the face of the Chinese victim was also remarked by the poet and mystic Pierre Jean Jouve, another patient of Borel’s who, like Bataille, had been shown him the photographs of the ‘hundred pieces’ as part of his analysis. In his novel Vagadu, a copy of which he sent to Freud, and which recounted the therapy of the appropriately named Catherine Crachat, Jouve describes a scene in which Catherine, leafing through the pages of an illustrated review, comes across the photographs of the torture — but cropped, so that all that remains of the scene is the face of the victim at the various stages of his suffering. ‘Her fright’, Jouve writes, ‘took on the force of outrage when she perceived that the expression of the unfortunate being was not that of terror. He did not cry. Around this open mouth, which expressed such great torment, there reigned a sort of happy delicacy, of bliss ... under the streaks of sweat and blood ... a celestial joy opened. Ah, double horror! It was magnificent. ... Catherine wanted to cry with horror, but how — how to explain the mechanism, and that a horror so personal, mixed with pleasure, came from the photo of the Chinese man? How to explain to her that the ecstasy of the Chinese man was one of her own states, and communicate to his soul from the interior to the exterior?’ (Pierre Jean Jouve, Vagadu, troisième édition (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1931), pp. 135-136). It should be recalled that Jouve had previously worked with Klossowski on the French translation of Hölderlin’s Poèmes de la folie (Paris, 1929).
connection. Toward the end of January 1938, less than a year before her death, Leiris recorded a conversation to this end with the by now ailing Laure: 'Colette [Laure]', he writes, 'spoke to me of Chinese torture victims who have been courageous, and of people who swallow their fear in order to give themselves courage; it is a destiny she admires. "Not to lose face" [ne pas perdre la face], it is this to which she holds'.

Several years after Laure’s death, Bataille and Leiris decided to publish a second volume of her writings as Histoire d’une petite fille (1943), a title that consciously echoed Bataille’s own novel of youthful excess. When Bataille proposed accompanying this narrative of her childhood with an account of Laure’s adult life — and particularly of the years she had spent with him — he found himself, he says, over the next few months, repeatedly postponing the writing of this text when faced with his own anguish at the prospect of having to justify her life. In what eventually became the brief and unfinished ‘Vie de Laure’, Bataille recalls that he was only able to surmount this delay when, sorting through his papers one day, he came across a photograph of Laure, and her face, appearing before him once again, suddenly responded to this anguish and — now that he was writing — to the demands this writing made upon him. It was, he says, a face in which life and death, ecstasy and horror, converged at a dark and brilliant apex. 'Laure’s beauty', he wrote, 'only appeared to those who divined it. No-one has ever seemed to me as uncompromising and pure as she, or more decidedly "sovereign", and yet there was nothing in her that was not devoted to darkness. Nothing came to light' (OC VI, 276). Just as Bataille had first seen this dark beauty — that of Laure no less than of the Chinese torture victim — in the expression of his dying father, it was by this face that he would continue to find himself confronted whenever he looked for the image — at once 'ecstatic and intolerable' — of the anguish of death. Ultimately, however, this play of substitutions ended with Bataille himself, and his own identification with this victim of torture. More than the pull of these opposites — opposites which, no less than the blade of the executioner, tore him apart — the strain of the effort required to maintain this tortured expression, as it were, on his own face, reverberates silently throughout Bataille’s writing, to the extent that only in his final work could he finally include an image so impossible that, even before the book’s suppression by André Malraux (at the time the French Minister for Culture), only the certainty of his own imminent death could excuse its final publication.


23. See Laure, Histoire d’une petite fille (1943); collected in Écrits, pp. 51-80.

24. 'No-one on earth or in heaven cared about the anguish of my father’s dying agony', wrote Bataille. 'Still, I believe he faced up to it, as always. What "horrible pride", at moments, in father’s blind smile!' (OC III, 61).
And yet the violent silence in which this image is enshrouded — the
displacements, substitutions, and suppressions to which it was subjected by
Bataille, no less than it was by Malraux, Dumas and before him the Viceroy of
China — cannot be explained by the horror of what it portrays (one knows of,
can imagine worse). Nor can its eventual appearance in *Les Larmes d’Eros.*
Bataille’s purpose, he writes, in finally publishing this image here, was to
illustrate what he calls a ‘fundamental bond [lien]: between religious ecstasy and
eroticism — and in particular sadism. From the most unavowable [inavouable],’
he adds, ‘to the most elevated [élévé]’ (OC X, 627). This bond, like that binding
the victim to the stake, was one Bataille constantly referred to when speaking of
the victim of this torture, to whom he himself felt ‘bound [lié],’ as he wrote in
*Le Coupable,* ‘by bonds [liens] of horror and friendship’ (OC V, 283). Bataille,
however — whose ongoing horror of and fascination with this image was not
least due to the fact that he had been alive at the time of the torture (he was
seven years old) — experienced this bond as both ecstatic loss and violent
pleasure. Throughout his meditations on his photograph, therefore, the relation he
has to this spectacle is torn between a sadistic complicity in the torture, and at the
same time a masochistic identification with its victim. ‘But if I look at this image
to the point of harmony,’ he writes, ‘it suppresses in me the necessity of being
only myself’ (OC V, 283).

There is a slippage, however, between these two statements — from one
form of identification to another. On the one hand there is the identity Bataille
saw between opposed and seemingly contradictory responses to the violence of
this torture (horror and ecstasy), and on the other the identification he felt
between himself and the object of that violence. It is in this slippage,
nevertheless, that the key to Bataille’s fascination with his photograph is found.
The value of reversal Bataille discerned in the violence of this image — the value
that turned his horror to ecstasy — is the same value that bound him to the victim
of this torture — as friend, certainly, but also as executioner: because it is through
this reversal between subject and object — or, rather, in the collapse of the
distinction between them — that the executioner, at the instant the blade enters
the flesh of his victim, identifies with him, and what appears to be an
unimaginably and therefore inexplicably violent torture enters the dimension of
sacrifice. More than merely symptoms of its repeated censorship, therefore, the
substitutions, displacements and suppressions to which this photograph was
subjected take on the weight not only of the bond Bataille saw between the
elevated object of religious ecstasy and the most unavowable of pleasures, but of
the identity he insisted on seeing between sacrifice and the horrors of torture.

Precisely because of the unspeakable nature of the sacred, however, this
identity remains shrouded in a silence impervious to the profane world of
discourse. This is nowhere more apparent than in *Les Larmes d’Eros,* which has
been criticised in Bataille’s *oeuvre* for a lack of discursive clarity hiding behind
a relative proliferation of images. No doubt the economy of Bataille’s writing reaches a height of opacity here; but it is to the nature of the sacred, rather than a purported decline in his writing talents, that we should turn to understand the inverse relation between text and image in Bataille’s last work. This hierarchy, maintained throughout the book, is particularly apparent in its last pages. Introducing the ‘compelling figures’ with which he will bring his reflections to a conclusion — in addition to the photographs of the Chinese torture victim these include several photographs by Pierre Verger of a Voodoo sacrifier — Bataille writes: ‘The game I propose for myself is to represent what they were living at the moment when the lens fixed their image on the glass or film’ (OC X, 625). What Bataille seems to suggest by this, and which the history of Carpeaux’s photographs supports, is not so much that he saw this scene of torture as a sacrifice, but that the ‘strange reality’ sacrifice opens onto, while remaining inaccessible to the abstractions of discourse, yields its secrets to the immediacy, the totality, and above all the silence of this image. Indeed, without this intimate connection to sacrifice, Bataille’s lifelong interest in the image, which reaches its apotheosis in his final work, can only be seen as incidental to his thought. The key to this reality, therefore, is the relation Bataille saw between this image of torture and the spectacle of sacrifice.

II. The Enigma of Sacrifice

For every accessible reality, in each being, you have to find the place of sacrifice, the wound. A being can only be touched at the point where it yields: for a woman this is under her dress, and for a god it’s on the throat of the animal being sacrificed.

— Bataille, Le Coupable (1944)

In the year he published Histoire de l’oeil, Bataille undertook his first discursive engagement with sacrifice. The result was ‘L’Amerique disparu’, a short article which appeared, together with contributions from, among others, Jean Babelon, Alfred Métraux, and Paul Rivet, in L’Art précolombien: L’Amerique avant


26. The four photographs show the sacrifice of a ram by a Voodoo cult in Haiti. Photographs from the same series of images by Verger also appeared in Alfred Métraux’s book on the voodoo cult, to which Bataille refers the reader. See Alfred Métraux, Le Vaudoo haitien, L’Espèce humaine, no. 14 (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1958); translated by Hugo Charteris as Voodoo in Haiti (London: Andre Deutsch, 1959). Metraux, an ethnographer and Bataille’s oldest friend, had been responsible for introducing him to the study of anthropology and the history of religions, and had himself become an initiate into the voodoo cult. Bataille had previously included two other photographs from this series in L’Érotisme (plates III and IV).
Although one of his earliest texts, written when he was still new to the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, Bataille was already associating the violence of Aztec civilisation, and above all its sacrificial rites, not only with the 'blinding debauches' of the Marquis de Sade (an association in keeping with the gambits of the avant garde), but more importantly with what he calls 'an excessive taste for death' (OC I, 158). Indeed, Bataille does not hesitate to propose this as the true explanation not only for the extraordinary conquest of the Aztec empire by Cortés and a handful of conquistadors but for the sacrificial rites of the Aztecs themselves. 'For the Aztecs', he writes, 'death was nothing. They asked of their gods not only to let them receive death in joy, but to help them to find its sweetness, its charm' (OC I, 157). Having reached this degree of 'joyous violence', Bataille argues, all that was left to the Aztecs was a sudden and terrifying death. If what he says was true, the coming of the Spanish soon granted them their wish; but it also indicates that from the start Bataille thought of sacrifice in terms of the spectacle it presented to those it served, which in this case were the gods of the Aztec world. 'They wished until the end to serve as "spectacle" and "theatre" to these capricious characters', Bataille concludes, "to serve for their amusement", for their "diversion". Such, in effect, was how they conceived of their strange excitement' (OC I, 157-158).

The following year, when he assumed the de-facto editorship of Documents, Bataille found himself with the forum in which to pursue his conviction that, despite the decline of sacrifice as a social phenomenon, this 'taste for death', which reached its apotheosis in Aztec civilisation, still found its attenuated expression in contemporary forms. This was most forcibly expressed in his 'Dictionnaire' article on the abattoirs of la Villette, caught so startlingly in the accompanying photographs by Eli Lotar (plate 4). As has been pointed out, Lotar's photographs do not reveal the violence of the slaughterhouse, but rather its repression — 'cursed and quarantined', as Bataille wrote, 'like a plague-ridden ship' (OC I, 205). Bataille attributes this squeamishness, which has led modern man to avert his eyes from the daily slaughter of thousands of animals in the very heart of the modern metropolis, not only to the dominant role of the 'sublimatory mechanism', as Freud would have it, in the march of civilisation, but — and Bataille locates this at the origin of this mechanism — to the ambiguous nature of the sacred nucleus. 'The abattoir is linked to religion', he writes, 'in the sense

28. See Georges Bataille, 'Abattoir', Documents, no. 6 (November 1929); collected in OC I, 205. Several more photographs from this series subsequently appeared in the Belgium periodical Variétés (April 1930).
that the temples of by-gone eras . . . had a double purpose, serving at the same time both prayer and killing' (OC I, 205). Although divided in the contemporary world, therefore, between the church and the slaughterhouse, beneath the veneer of western civilisation, Bataille seems to say, the cities of modern Europe are not so different from the ancient capital of the Mexica, in which, as he had previously observed, 'the most streaming of human abattoirs' were surrounded by a 'veritable Venice, with canals, footbridges, ornamented temples, and above all flower gardens of extreme beauty' (OC I, 157). It was this repressed and forgotten link between the Christian church and the modern abattoir that led Bataille, in another 'Dictionnaire' entry on 'Homme', to quote Sir William Earnshaw Cooper, a militant vegetarian and the author of *The Blood-Guiltiness of Christendom* (1922):

> Taking the animals done to death in a single day in the red-shambles of Christian countries, and marshalling them into line, head to tail, with but just room enough between them to prevent over-lapping, they would stretch forth in an unbroken Indian file for 1,322 miles — upwards of thirteen hundred miles of warm, palpitating, living bodies, driven each day, as the years come round, to the bloody butcher-yards of Christian Man that he may slake his blood-thirst at the red fountain spurtling forth from the veins of his murdered victims.30

There was much more where that came from; but Bataille, of course, had little sympathy for those who, as he says, 'are reduced to eating cheese' (OC I, 205). On the contrary, he saw in this procession, whose bloody fate he offers as the very 'definition' of man, a mirror image of the unimaginable multitude of victims (reports vary between twenty and seventy thousand a year) sacrificed in the Aztec capital. What Bataille saw in the spectacle of human sacrifice, therefore, was not simply an apotheosis of man's inhumanity to man, but the key to what he identified as the 'spirit of sacrifice'. He would pursue this spirit, however, not in the declining phenomenon of the sacrificial rite in either Hindu or Christian ritual, but in those forms of social expenditure in which he was convinced it still found its contemporary expression.

**The Spectacle of this Great Cruelty**

Because of this conviction, Bataille never returned to the Aztecs in *Documents*. In a sense he didn’t need to, since it was in this periodical that the image of Aztec sacrifice from the *Codex Vaticanus* first appeared in connection with his work, nearly ten prior to its reproduction in 'Le Sacré', in Roger Hervé's article

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on the 'Sacrifices humains du Centre-Amérique'. Hervé's article is a brief historical survey of the various attitudes taken toward the human sacrifices of Aztec Mexico, and of the equally various interpretations subsequently put forward to explain or at least account for its presence in what appeared to its European conquerors as an otherwise civilised culture. Hervé himself, however, has a very different attitude to that of Bataille. Beginning with the initial encounter between the Aztecs and the Spanish in 1519, Hervé opens his article by quoting a famous passage from the eye-witness account of the Conquest by one of the conquistadors, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who describes the capture, during the siege of Mexico, of sixty-two of his comrades. These were taken to the heights of the great pyramid in the sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan, the heart of the Aztec realm, where they were sacrificed to the war god, Huitzilopochtli:

Suddenly the funereal drum of the war god was sounded, and many other conch shells and horns and things like trumpets, and the sound of them was terrifying, and at that moment our eyes were drawn to the height of the great temple from where this lugubrious din arose, and we saw that our comrades, who had been taken prisoner when Cortés was defeated, were being carried forcibly up the steps where they were taken to be sacrificed, and when they reached the small plateau at the top of the temple, in front of the sanctuaries to their accursed idols, some among them had crowns of feathers placed on their heads and with things like fans in their hands they were forced to dance before Huitzilopochtli, and after they had danced they were seized and spread on their backs across the sacrificial stone, and with a large obsidian knife their breasts were cut open and their hearts torn out and offered still beating to the idols in whose presence the sacrifice was made, and then the bodies were taken by the feet and thrown down the steps of the great staircase, and the butchers who waited at the bottom cut off the arms and legs and flayed the skin off the faces so that the skin might be tanned like the leather of a glove and preserved with the beard still on for their Bacchic feasts, and the flesh was prepared in a chilmole sauce and served as their meal. In this way all our unhappy comrades were sacrificed, the arms and legs were eaten, the heart and blood offered to the idols, and the trunk and entrails thrown to the tigers and lions they kept in the house of carnivores. . . . Thus were we presented with the spectacle of this great cruelty.

Although Hervé, in his article, describes the image of Aztec sacrifice accompanying it as an illustration to the narrative by Díaz, presumably accompanying this very passage, the codex from which it came is not written in


Spanish but Italian, and was presented to the Vatican by a friar Ríos sometime between 1566 and 1589. The *Codex Vaticanus*, however, is itself a partial copy of a lost prototype or types which would have been completed before 1549. It is to this earlier manuscript that Bataille was presumably referring when, in the caption to this image in *L'Érotisme*, he wrote that this image was, he says, ‘painted at the beginning of the Spanish occupation of Mexico, by an Aztec who must when young have been a witness of such a sacrifice’ (OC X, pl. XI). The codex itself is comprised of three parts: the first (which was probably a copy of a pre-Hispanic codex) depicts the cosmic origins of Mexico; the second part contains a ritual calendar; and the third is made up of diverse material from the time of the conquest. It is in this last part that the image on folio 56 verso appears, painted in the style of the second stage of the school of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, by which time it displayed the marked influence of European representational codes on early colonial native society. The victims in this depiction of human sacrifice, however, are identifiably Europeans; it is not impossible, therefore, as Bataille conjectures, that this image, although undoubtedly post-Hispanic, originated from the recollection of a Mexican Indian who witnessed the sacrifice described by Díaz, or at least one just like it, during the Conquest. But whatever the exact origin of this image, the text surrounding it is not an extract from the narrative by Díaz, but a commentary on the image itself, which it reveals to be a gladiatorial form of sacrifice that the Aztecs called ‘*Tlamijctiliztli* [sacrificial slaying]’. This was reserved for warriors captured, like the companions of Díaz, in battle:

When they had to be sacrificed, the captains of those who had been captured in battle were led to the entrance to the temple, to the top of a very large stone, and there they were given a small buckler and a short club, so that they might defend themselves; and the treacherous captain, armed with a large shield and a weapon like a mace with blades, fought with them until each had been wounded to the death; and streaming thus with blood, the priests carried them to the top of the temple where they were sacrificed. Before they were sacrificed, however, they were made to fast for forty days, during which time they were dressed in the garb of the demon for whom they would serve as a feast, and all of them had their faces painted black and pricked with razors, and on the day of the festival they decorated their heads with white feathers.

This is the way in which the men were sacrificed: those that are shown fallen are the ones that have been sacrificed; and the one that is dancing is the same as those that are dead; before the sacrifice they too danced and sang. The black figures above are the priests who carried out the sacrifices. And it should be noted that in all the sacrifices that were performed on the highest steps above the temple, those

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that were sacrificed did not wish to be, even if they maintained this impression. Before they performed these sacrifices, the priests had to sacrifice themselves.  

It is perhaps surprising that Bataille, whenever he looked for a representation of sacrifice, repeatedly chose this particular image, rather than the image that had headed Hervé’s article, and which better illustrates the scene described by Díaz, from the Codex Magliabecchiano. But Bataille, I can imagine, would have been particularly drawn to both the description and the depiction, in the former image, of a sacrifice in which the victims were forced to dance before a feast at which they were shortly to serve as the main meal! No wonder, too, that Díaz described these festivals as ‘borracheras’ (which Jourdanet translates as ‘Bacchic feasts [festins bachiques]’). Because like Dionysus, whose followers tore their victims to pieces in a drunken frenzy, Huitzilopochtli was closely identified with death by violent dismemberment. According to an Aztec myth, the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui and her brothers the uncounted stars, hearing that their mother, Coatlicue, had conceived a new child from a ball of feathers, stormed Coatpecul, the mountain of the serpent, and tried to slay Huitzilopochtli while he was still in her womb. The war god, however, leapt fully armed from his mother’s body and tore his sister apart, threw her dismembered body down the slopes of the mountain, and scattered the stars. Because of this, Huitzilopochtli, whose name means ‘hummingbird of the south’, is also identified with the birth of the sun. It was this celestial myth, recounting not only the victory of the sun over the deities of the night, but of the triumph of the Aztec people over their Tolteca oppressor, that the Mexica re-enacted when, at the feast of Huitzilopochtli, they sacrificed enemy warriors taken in battle, tore out their hearts, and offered them, still beating, in dedication to the sun. But it also determined the very structure of the Templo Mayor. The great pyramid itself was called Coatpecul, and the shrine of Huitzilopochtli that crowned it stood on the left of the pyramid plateau, opposite that of Tlaloc, the god of rain. Below it, moreover, set in stone at the foot of the great staircase where the victim’s bloody corpse would come to a halt from the plateau a hundred and fifty feet above, a huge round relief carved from volcanic rock, which the Aztecs called ‘Huitzilopochtli’s dining table’, depicted the dead and dismembered body of

34. Franz Ehrle, ed., Il manoscritto messicano Vaticano 3738, p. 36. Although this text is included in the reproduction of the image in Herve’s article, it is edited from its appearance in ‘Le Sacré’. It reappears in L’Érotisme, only to disappear again in Les Larmes d’Eros. I would like to thank Daniel Godfrey for his translation from the Italian.

35. See Codex Magliabecchiano, mid-sixteenth century, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence, folio 58; reproduced in facsimile as The Book of the Life of the Ancient Mexicans, Containing An Account of Their Rites and Superstitions, translated, with an introduction and commentary by Zelia Nuttall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1903).

Coyolxauhqui. And although her broken bones are shown jutting from her torn and bleeding flesh, the body of the moon goddess nevertheless still seems to dance, the bells and plumes of her dress caught up in the violence of her death. For this was the attitude that the victims of the Aztecs were expected to imitate as they were led over this figure, for the first and last time, to their ascent of the great pyramid. Sacrifice, for the Aztecs, was the cause of a celebration which must extend even to its victims — above all to its victims, who were expected to embrace death in a sort of danse macabre: to taste its sweetness, as Bataille said, as well as its terror.

If such practices were perceived by the conquistadors as the clearest sign not only of the horror and marvels of Aztec culture, but also of a pagan and idolatrous civilisation it was both their right and their duty as Christian soldiers to conquer, this did not prevent the Franciscan monk Bernardino de Sahagún, who arrived in Mexico eight years after the conquest, from recognising an uneasy similarity between Aztec religious beliefs and the doctrines and rituals of the Catholic Church. In the Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España (1559-69), which Bataille called 'the most authoritative and detailed document we have on the terrible aspects of human sacrifice' (OC VII, 360), Sahagún, in the volume devoted to the various ceremonies that made up the religious life of the Aztecs, drew attention to the similarities between certain aspects of Aztec sacrifice and the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. Like the Catholic Church, the Aztecs believed that by consecrating bread, often moulding it into the shape of a figure, their priests could turn it into the very body of the god, so that all who ingested a portion of the divine substance entered into communion with the deity. This communal meal, which has obvious parallels with the rite of the Holy Eucharist, was extended to the consecrated flesh of the human sacrifices, which was eaten by the family and friends of the victim's captor. It was even noted that the most important festival of the Aztec year — the great feast of Toxcatl, which celebrated the beginning of Spring, and was devoted to Tezcatlipoca, 'the god of gods' — occurred on the first day of the fifth Aztec month of their eighteen-month seasonal cycle, and therefore fell within a few days of Easter Sunday. This led some of the first Spanish missionaries to believe that one of Christ's apostles had somehow contrived to preach the gospel to the Indians, who in the intervening centuries had managed, at least in their eyes, to invert its message.38

37. Bernardino de Sahagún, Histoire générale des choses de la Nouvelle-Espagne, Book II. Although Bataille first read Sahagún’s text in the French, and cites from this edition in 'L’Amérique disparu', from thereon, while continuing to use Jourdanet’s translation, he refers to the original Spanish text. This, however, was itself a revised translation by Sahagún of his own original Nahuatl text, which he had completed by 1569. This has been translated, with the Nahuatl, by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble as The Florentine Codex: A General History of the Things of New Spain, 13 vols, Monograph of the School of American Research (Santa Fe and Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1950-81).

This recognition of the fundamental similarities between the religious rituals of the two cultures was continued, according to the preoccupations of the time, in the disputes which later ensued between historians over the moral legitimacy of the Conquest, and the inevitable comparisons made between the religious excesses of the conquered and the military excesses of their conquerors. The Protestant writer William Prescott, for instance, in his *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843), compared the rites of the Aztecs to the anomalous presence, in sixteenth-century Europe, of the Catholic Inquisition — an institution, he says, far more degrading than the practices of the Aztecs:

Human sacrifice, however cruel, has nothing in it degrading to its victim. It may be rather said to enable him by devoting him to the gods. Although so terrible with the Aztecs, it was sometimes voluntarily embraced by them, as the most glorious death, and one that opened a sure passage into paradise. The Inquisition, on the other hand, branded its victims with infamy in this world, and consigned them to everlasting perdition in the next.\(^{39}\)

Whatever insights this contains into the role of violence in religious experience, in the opinion of Hervé, who rejects this comparison, the first valid interpretation of sacrifice was offered toward the end of the nineteenth century by the British school of anthropology represented by Edward Burnett Tylor, William Robertson Smith and James Frazer. And although immediately subject to considerable critique, what Hervé calls the ‘clearing’ made by these theories opened up a path for the studies of French sociology. The most important of these was by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, who proposed a theory that approached sacrifice according to the function it served. Following this work in particular, Hervé argues, any study of human sacrifice based upon what he calls its ‘exterior characteristics’ — and above all one which approaches it according to ‘different categories of torture’ — belongs to a tradition of interpretation which he disdainfully calls ‘pictoresque and subjective’.\(^{40}\) As an example of just such an approach Hervé cites an early essay on Aztec sacrifice by Denis Jourdanet, the translator of Diaz and Sahagun, titled ‘Les sacrifices humains et l’anthropophagie chez les Aztèques’ (1877).\(^{41}\) Here, in a passage which confounds precisely those exterior characteristics of human sacrifice — those relating to the subjective experience of torture in the minds of its participants — with the function of sacrifice within the rituals of Aztec religious practice, Jourdanet writes:

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In relation to sacrifice, what, in a general manner, most repelled human sentiment, was its foundation on the belief that this act would sanctify the victim, the priests and the devotees demanding that the barbarous ceremony be surrounded by signs of exhilaration. The victim himself must show his joy before dying [joie avant de mourir], and dance in the presence of the god to whom the sacrifice is made. These beliefs and customs were so successful in masking whatever horror the act would have inspired, that there exists examples of voluntary sacrifices, even among the most elevated of personnages. The honour which appeared to all must result in blood spilt for the glory of the god, inspiring in the greatest number the desire for mutilation or voluntary suffering. If anything could excuse the barbarism of the practices of the temple, it would be this mania for martyring oneself, since one must see in it the proof of a conviction, of a belief.42

Despite Hervé’s proscription of this line of enquiry, and his own admiration for the work of Hubert and Mauss, it was precisely these ‘subjective’ aspects of human sacrifice that most interested Bataille, since it is they that distinguish sacrifice from the ‘function’ it serves in a particular culture, thereby conferring upon it its human magnitude. Between April and May 1940, in one of the many discarded drafts for La Part maudite — a work destined to repudiate precisely the principle of utility in explanations of social phenomena — Bataille, in one of the most brilliant of his texts (which, typically, he never published), designated these subjective aspects as constituting precisely the ‘enigma’ of sacrifice.43 ‘How was it’, he writes, ‘that wherever men found themselves, without prior counsel, in accord on an enigmatic act, they all had the need or felt the obligation to put living beings ritually to death?’ (OC VII, 263-264). After considering the interpretations offered first by Smith and Frazer, then by Hubert and Mauss — interpretations, moreover, to which he always accorded the greatest importance and therefore took, he says, as his ‘point of departure’ — Bataille nevertheless felt it necessary to point out that these explanations only accounted for the ‘effects’ of sacrifice: ‘they say nothing’, he writes, ‘of what forced men to kill their own kind in religious ceremonies. The latter, it must be said, precisely situate the enigma: it is the key to all human existence’ (OC VII, 264). In searching for this key, however, Bataille made it clear that it was not to be found in the already existing discourse on sacrifice, but, rather, in the lived experience of the participants. ‘The answer to the enigma’, he writes, ‘must be formulated on a level equal to that of its celebrants’ performance. My wish is that it enter into the history not of science, but of sacrifice’ (OC VII, 272). In order to resolve its enigma, therefore, Bataille turned to those aspects of sacrifice in which the sadistic instinct found its most complete expression: in — to use Jourdanet’s terms — the ‘exhilaration’ and ‘joy’ of death, in ‘voluntary suffering’ and ‘mutilation’, and in a ‘mania for martyrdom’ that extended to even the most


‘elevated of personnages’, and which Bataille, only a year before, had described as an attitude of ‘joy in the face of death’. It is this, I want to argue, that Bataille saw in the image from the *Codex Vaticanus*, and which made it so important to his own understanding of the spirit of sacrifice it represented. When he reproduced it for the first time, therefore, in his article on ‘Le Sacré’, it was not mere whimsy that led him to write in the caption to the image:

Human sacrifice is a more complete sacrifice than any other — not in the sense that it is crueler than any other, but because it is close to being the only sacrifice without trickery, which could only be the ecstatic loss of oneself. (OC I, plate XXX)\(^4^4\)

*The History of Sacrifice*

As Bataille’s tone at the time makes clear, he had high hopes for what this ‘key to all human existence’ would unlock. In May 1940, as the Wehrmacht rolled into Paris and the rest of France was thrown into panic, Bataille calmly noted in his journal: ‘Sacrifice will illuminate the conclusion of history just as it lit its dawn’ (OC V, 289). And although unclear about where this history would lead him, he was certain about the path he would not take to get there. ‘We must not linger’, he writes, ‘over answers already received’ (OC VII, 264). In following Bataille, however, it is equally necessary not to be deceived by his sleight of hand. Behind this haste lay a decade’s reading; and if Bataille could dispense with it so lightly, it was only because he was so thoroughly schooled in its rigour.\(^4^5\) It was often

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44. In the *Oeuvres complètes*, ‘complete [achevé]’ is replaced, without comment, by ‘elevated [élévé]’. Since this article was never reprinted, and Bataille presumably would never have had cause to revise it, it is difficult to account for this substitution. Nevertheless, it offers an interesting comparison between the notion of completion and elevation in Bataille’s thinking on the movement of transgression. In the second of his presentations to the Collège de sociologie on ‘Attraction et répulsion’, Bataille, comparing blood sacrifice to the symbolic sacrifice of the Catholic mass, wrote: ‘Elevation and putting to death appear, respectively, as the central point of sacrifice and its terrible moment’ (OC II, 327).

45. Bataille first referred to Sahagún’s *Histoire générale des choses de la Nouvelle-Espagna* in 1928, when, together with Prescott’s *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, he cited it in ‘L’Amérique disparue’ (OC I, 155-56). He mentions Sahagún again in the manuscript to *La Limite de l’utile* (OC VII, 192-194), and would draw on him extensively in the two chapters on ‘La Société de consommation’ from *La Part maudite* (OC VII, 51-79). Robertson Smith’s *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* are first cited in 1930 in the notes to Bataille’s article ‘La mutilation sacrificielle et l’oreille coupée de Van Gogh’ from *Documents* (OC I, 268), and again in ‘La Structure psychologique du fascisme’ (OC I, 348). Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* is also first mentioned in the manuscript to ‘La mutilation sacrificielle’ (OC I, 655n), and again in the notes to ‘La Valeur d’usage de D. A. F. de Sade’ (OC II, 59). Between 1931 and 1939, Bataille read Frazer regularly, particularly Part VI of *The Golden Bough*, on *The Scapegoat*. Bataille’s only references to Frazer during this period, however, were in his presentation to the Collège de sociologie on 19 February 1938 (‘Le Pouvoir’), when he spoke about the sacrifice of the king (OC II, 339-40), and again in *La Limite de l’utile*, where he applauded Frazer for linking sacrifice ‘to the rhythm of the seasons’ (OC VII, 264). *The Golden Bough* is also one of a handful of texts Bataille originally included in, but ultimately left out of, the table of references to
the case that Bataille came to the formulation of his own thought by identifying the blind spot in an existing discourse, and sacrifice was no exception. Because of this, the best approach to Bataille’s understanding of sacrifice, I want to argue, is a critique of the authors from whom he himself took his point of departure. Bataille himself never undertook that critique, at least not systematically, which gives his final statements on sacrifice an often peremptory character (the quote above being an example); but it is there, behind his exhortation not to linger. And while this means returning to some of the authors we looked at in chapter one in the course of tracing the antecedents to Bataille’s notion of the sacred, it is among them that we find the authors of the key texts in the history of the theory of sacrifice. As we have seen, the questions are intimately linked, but they require disentangling if we are to fully understand Bataille’s own understanding of sacrifice. Bataille’s thought may rest on the authority of lived experience, but he only arrived there after a long labour of discursive negation, the seriousness of which he always insisted upon, and which must itself be undertaken in order to see from his perspective.

Theories of sacrifice, as Hubert and Mauss point out, are as old as religion itself. They dated their own undertaking, however, to the work of Edward Burnett Tylor. In the two volumes of *Primitive Culture* (1871) — which, after the work of Darwin and Spencer, was the single most influential anthropological text of the Victorian era — Tylor proposed a genealogical theory of sacrifice that situated the rite within the historical phases through which it has passed. The key to sacrifice, for Tylor, was the manner in which the offering was supposed to have passed from devotee to deity; each phase, therefore, was defined according to its distinct method of transmission. These he divided into three main doctrines of sacrifice, which he called the gift-theory, the homage-theory, and the abnegation theory. Sacrifice, he argued, originated as a gift from primitive man to the supernatural beings who were understood to receive, and sometimes even to consume an offering which, while not always conceived of as food, was understood to be beneficial to the deity. The motive for this earliest form of sacrifice, Tylor reasoned, is explained by a general principle which he had placed his *Théorie de la religion* (OC VII, 606). It would finally appear, however, in 1957, in the bibliography to *L'Érotisme*. Another text that deserves mention is Sylvain Lévi’s *La Doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brâhmanas* (1898), which Bataille first read in March 1940, and cited in *Théorie de la religion*. The main text for Bataille, however, is Hubert and Mauss’ *Essai sur la nature et la fonction de sacrifice*, which he first mentions in ‘La mutilation sacrificielle’, and again in *Théorie de la religion* (OC VII, 359). Mention must also be made of Freud’s *Totem und Tabu* (1913), which Bataille referred to in ‘La mutilation sacrificielle’, and again, although with considerable reservations, in his inaugural presentation to the short-lived ‘Société de psychologie collective’ (OC II, 286). Together with Durkeim’s own exegesis in *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, which largely follows that of Hubert and Mauss, these are the texts which Bataille took as the ‘point of departure’ for his own thinking about sacrifice.

at the foundation of his animistic theory of primitive religion. 'If the main proposition of animistic natural religion be granted', he writes, 'that the idea of the human soul is the model of the idea of the deity, then the analogy of man's dealings with man ought, inter alia, to explain his motives in sacrifice'. By offering a gift, Tylor concluded, the devotee sought to ingratiate himself with a deity from whom he expected something in return.

In offering this eminently practical account of the origins of sacrifice, however, Tylor was less forthcoming about the transition of the rite from a form of exchange to its later manifestation as a reverent and ceremonial homage from which the devotee no longer expected anything in return. His only explanation is that it arose from an inability to separate the actual value of the gift from the sense of gratification the devotee experienced in giving. From here, however, it was only a short step for sacrifice to acquire its current sense of abnegation, renunciation, and self sacrifice, in which the meaning of the rite no longer lies in its benefit to the deity, but in the piety with which the devotee gives something of himself. This final phase in the history of sacrifice, Tylor says, is linked to what he identifies as the growing conviction that the deity did not need and in any case could not possibly profit from the gift. Despite the shortcomings of this approach, therefore, Tylor's gift-theory, in the view of Hubert and Mauss, accurately described the phases of what they call the 'moral development' of the phenomenon of sacrifice. What it failed to provide, however, was an account of its 'mechanism'. For this, they write, it was necessary to wait for the work of William Robertson Smith, to whom, accordingly, they attribute the first 'reasoned explanation' of sacrifice.

When Robertson Smith first formulated his theories on sacrifice, Tylor's gift-theory prevailed in anthropological circles. Inspired, however, by the recent discovery of the importance of totemism for the early history of society, Robertson Smith pointed out two fundamental features of the rite which the gift-theory did not explain: first, that sacrifice was primarily a meal; and secondly, that it was shared by both the worshipper and the deity to whom it was offered. Indeed, he argued that the slaughter and consumption of an animal among agricultural peoples always had a sacrificial character. Taking this as the point of departure for his ground-breaking lectures on *The Religion of the Semites* (1889), Robertson Smith placed the consubstantiality of man and animal at the


origin of the whole sacrificial system.\textsuperscript{50} Since food constantly remakes the substance of the body, and since in the totemic system the totem is seen to be related to its devotees, the totemic meal, he argued, served to maintain and renew the bonds of kinship between beings who, by eating the totem, assimilated it to themselves, were assimilated to it, and in doing so became the same flesh and blood. Sacrificial slaughter, therefore, was incidental to the devouring of what was a sacred and consequently taboo animal. Indeed, outside this function the death of the victim had no significance for the rite whatsoever. 'The fundamental idea of sacrifice', Robertson Smith concluded, 'is not that of a sacred tribute, but of communion between the god and his worshippers by joint participation in the living flesh and blood of a sacred victim'.\textsuperscript{51}

In rejecting the gift-theory of sacrifice, however, Robertson Smith also rejected the primacy previously attributed to ideas of tribute, expiation, guilt and solemnity, all of which, he argued, while undeniably an aspect of later doctrines, were the result of the rise of a priestly caste within a divided and stratified society. This was a key point in Robertson Smith's understanding of sacrifice, and underpinned his belief not only that the rite could be traced back to a single, primitive form, but that it was from this communion sacrifice that all other forms of sacrifice derived. He pointed out that the sacrifice of an animal victim among nomadic tribes clearly predates the tribute of a cereal oblation taken from the produce of the soil by pastoral peoples; it is more than likely, therefore, that sacrifice is older than the ideas of individual property which only arose with agricultural society. What is certain, in any case, is that its origins lie in a time when an animal did not belong to its owner, and could only be slain in order to be distributed among his kinsmen. Following this line of reasoning, Robertson Smith argued that sacrifice, untroubled by feelings of guilt and sin, was originally a joyful, totemic feast, expressive of a cohesive, undifferentiated society common to primitive man as a whole.

From this, however, came what Robertson Smith first identified as the division and original identity between the pure and impure poles of the sacred. With the domestication of animals by pastoral peoples, the veneration of livestock gradually replaced the ancient covenant between man and his totem. But as their sacrifice grew rarer, the sacredness of animals increased to the extent that their extreme purity was perceived as a kind of impurity, and only the priest could eat of their flesh. Inevitably, however, the daily profanation of domestic animals for the nourishment of man led to the erosion of their sacred character; and as the sacrificial victim grew further away from the god, it drew nearer to man, the owner of the herd, who came to represent it, instead, as a gift to his god. It was only then, Robertson Smith argued, when ideas of property were introduced


\textsuperscript{51} William Robertson Smith, \textit{The Religion of the Semites}, p. 345.
between man and his god, that sacrifice came to be represented as the sort of bartering expressed by the gift-theory of sacrifice, at which point the original idea of communion gave way to two distinct doctrines of sacrifice: on the one hand honorific, in which the sanctity and inviolable character of the victim had dissipated to such a degree that its flesh, while still offered to the god, served as a meal for the devotee; and on the other piacular, in which the sacredness of the victim had increased to such an extent that its flesh could no longer be eaten, except by the priest, and served instead as a means of appeasement, offered to the deity in order to atone for the sins of the community.

Having proposed this new chronology, Robertson Smith was able to argue that, contrary to the views of Tylor and what common sense had dictated, human sacrifice antedated animal sacrifice. The long-held assumption that the animal victim was a surrogate for the human victim simply does not explain the historical facts. In prehistoric times, moreover, there could have been no reason to think that a man's life was more sacred than that of an animal; on the contrary, the life of an animal would have been regarded as the purer. No doubt certain impious crimes would have been expiated by the death of the offender; but these, according to Robertson Smith, cannot properly be called a sacrifice. It was only when the full kinship of men with animals was no longer recognised that human life, or rather the life of a clansman, came to be regarded as an object of unique sanctity, and therefore alone capable of establishing a direct exchange of blood between the clan and their god. The new value placed on the life of the individual, however, meant that human sacrifice soon met with the interdiction on cannibalism. Animal sacrifice, therefore, which originally preceded that of humans, came to be explained by the doctrine that at the altar the victim took the place of a man. Indeed, human sacrifice is inextricable from this doctrine of substitution. But it is at this point in the history of sacrifice, when the theanthropic character of the victim was most apparent, that the distinction began to be made between honorific and piacular forms of sacrifice. Because the idea that the gods ordained meals of human flesh was too repulsive to be long retained, in those offerings in which a simulation of human sacrifice continued to be performed, the sacrificial meal either fell out of use, or, where it was retained, those features that recalled the idea of cannibalism were dropped. At the same time, however, the similarity between rites of punishment and sacrifice gave a punitory character to what was originally a communion sacrifice, and transformed it into an expiatory rite. In addressing the phenomenon of human sacrifice, therefore, Robertson Smith insisted on the distinction between those sacrifices in which the victim was simply a captive of or otherwise foreign to the community, and which were derived largely from cannibal feasts, and those cases, far more numerous, in which the sacrifice assumed an expiatory character.

Robertson Smith's ideas had a profound effect on religious studies, and when Hubert and Mauss, less than ten years later, formulated their own approach to sacrifice in their famous 'Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice' (1899),
they began with a brief review of his theory. While acknowledging the ground Robertson Smith broke, Hubert and Mauss criticise him for seeking to bring the multiplicity of sacrificial forms within the unity of what they call an ‘arbitrarily selected principle’ derived from the hypothesis that the totemic system, which survives in its pure form only in a few isolated tribes of Australia and America, is nevertheless universal. The historical sequence, moreover, on which Robertson Smith established the logical derivation of every form of sacrifice from a communion meal is not supported by the ethnographical data, which shows, to the contrary, that piacular forms of sacrifice have existed side by side with the communion meal. Indeed, one of the aims of their study, Hubert and Mauss say, is to demonstrate that the expulsion of a sacred spirit is just as primordial and irreducible a component of sacrifice as communion. In place of Robertson Smith’s evolutionary theory, therefore, Hubert and Mauss proposed a theory of sacrifice which defines the rite according to its social function.

They begin by pointing out that sacrifice always implies a consecration, not only of the object of the rite, but of the individual or collective who bears the expense of the ceremony. A distinction has to be made, therefore, between the ‘sacrificer [sacrificateur]’ — that is to say, the agent or priest who actually performs the sacrifice — and what they call the ‘sacrifier [sacrifiant]’, who is the person, family, clan or tribe to whom the benefits of sacrifice accrue or who undergoes its effects. Sacrifice, therefore, can be distinguished from other rites of consecration in that the victim acts as a mediator between the god and the sacrificer. Furthermore, unlike mere votive offerings, sacrifice is an oblation in which the offering or part of it is destroyed in the course of the ceremony. Having formulated these principles, Hubert and Mauss were able to arrive at their first, preliminary definition of the function of the rite. ‘Sacrifice’, they write, ‘is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the state of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned’. The originality of this approach was that it sought the unity of sacrifice not, as Robertson Smith had, in a single, originary, and irreducible form, but in its procedure, which, beneath the diversity of its forms, they argue, remains the same. The key to this procedure, according to Hubert and Mauss, is the role of the victim, who, contrary to what Robertson Smith argued, does not enter the sacrifice as an already sacred being; on the contrary, it is the sacrifice itself, as the etymology of the word suggests, that confers this sanctity upon it. Robertson Smith had twisted and turned under this point, arguing that sacrificium means ‘an


53. Hubert and Mauss, Sacrifice, p. 13.
action within the sphere of things sacred to the gods'.\textsuperscript{54} For Hubert and Mauss, however, it is sacrifice that makes the sacred, not the other way around. The task they set themselves, therefore, was to dismantle and describe the schema of what they propose is the sacrificial system.

They start with the observation that sacrifice is a religious act carried out in a religious atmosphere by essentially religious agents; before the ceremony itself, however, neither sacrifier nor sacrificer, nor the place, instruments or victim possess the suitable degree of sanctity. The first phase of sacrifice, therefore, is to impart this quality to them through initiatory rites, such as fasting and ritual ablutions, which introduce the agents of sacrifice into a consecrated state. The central point of the ceremony, however, and its second phase, is the consecration of the victim, on which Hubert and Mauss focus their attention. There is a certain ambiguity, however, in what they say about its role in the rite. ‘There is in the victim’, they write, ‘a spirit which it is the very aim of the sacrifice to liberate’.\textsuperscript{55} Since they had previously argued that this spirit is not already present, but must be acquired through an often extensive series of rites which initiate the victim into the sacred world, this is confusing. The image of the victim gradually acquiring a quality of ‘sacredness’, moreover, is not a convincing one, and has led to the misrepresentation of their theory. René Girard, for instance, in \textit{La Violence et le sacré} (1972), is rightly dismissive of a formulation that claims, as he says, that ‘because the victim is sacred, it is criminal to kill him — but the victim is sacred only because he is to be killed’.\textsuperscript{56} Hubert and Mauss, however, say nothing of the kind. It is not criminal to kill the victim because he is sacred (a position their entire theory is predicated on refuting) but because of the interdiction on murder that sacrifice violates. Nor does the victim become sacred because he is to be killed, but because his ritual murder transgresses this interdiction. It is unclear, in any case, exactly how initiatory rites could introduce the victim into a state as qualitively distinct as the sacred. More convincing is their argument that communication with the sacred is only established at the moment when the mortal body in which it is contained is detached from its final link with the world of profane things. Death alone releases it. Hubert and Mauss call this the ‘solemn moment’, the analysis of which brings them to what for Bataille is the crux of their theory of sacrifice. ‘What begins now’, they write, ‘is a crime, a kind of sacrilege’.\textsuperscript{57} When the blade of the sacrificer enters the flesh of the victim, it opens a wound not only in its body, but in the sphere of the profane, and it is through this wound that the sacred enters. In doing so, however, the interdiction separating the two worlds is broken and the sacred world is

\textsuperscript{54} William Robertson Smith, ‘Sacrifice’, p. 132.

\textsuperscript{55} Hubert and Mauss, \textit{Sacrifice}, p. 30.


\textsuperscript{57} Hubert and Mauss, \textit{Sacrifice}, p. 33.
profaned. What occurs, in other words, is a transgression through which the sacred flows into the body of the victim. For Hubert and Mauss, therefore, the immolation of the victim, far from being instrumental to its ingestion, is the key to the procedure and therefore, in their eyes, the unity of the sacrifice rite — the final definition of which it leads them to. ‘This procedure’, they write, ‘consists in establishing a communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of a victim, that is to say, of a consecrated thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed’. 58

For Hubert and Mauss, therefore, sacrifice is dependent upon the victim because it is through its death that communication is established with the sacred. Thus far Bataille is in agreement; where he begins to disagree, however, is that according to them it is through the body of the ‘consecrated’ victim that the powers concentrated in it are transmitted, according to the specifics of the rite, to the sacrifier. On the face of it, however, this is hard to refute. In his account in *Minotaure* of the sacrifice of the bull of Seyfou Tchenger in Gondar, Ethiopia — the various stages of which were captured in the accompanying photographs by Marcel Griaule (plate 5) — Leiris records that after the bull’s throat was cut, its blood was drunk to purge an evil spirit who had possessed one of the women of the tribe, its bones were carefully buried, the horns and hoofs were use for fumigations, and the diaphragm hung like a veil over the head and shoulders of the possessed woman. 59 In the Aztec sacrifices described by Díaz, moreover, the victim’s skin was flayed and worn by his captor, and his flesh eaten by his family. In other rites, however, simple physical contact with the corpse is enough, or even a mere blessing; sometimes the animal is cut into two halves and the sacrifier walks between them. But in each case the point of the rite is to establish a continuity of substance between the sacrifier and the god. Because of this, Hubert and Mauss argue that the body of the victim must be divided, depending upon the rite, between the god who incarnates himself in it and the sacrifier. In this way their respective substances are commingled. And while this clearly has a lot in common with Robertson Smith’s theory of alimentary communion, according to Hubert and Mauss, establishing continuity between sacrifier and god is dependent upon a further condition. ‘For the victim to be used by men’, they write, ‘the gods must have received their share’: a principle of exchange they express with the Latin phrase ‘do ut des [I give in order that you may give]’. 60

What this means, however, is that only ten years after its refutation by Robertson Smith, and nearly thirty years since its was first formulated by Tylor, Hubert and Mauss had resurrected the gift-theory of sacrifice.


59. See Michel Leiris, ‘Le taureau de Seyfou Tchenger’, p. 79.

60. Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, p. 44.
A Spirit of Sacrifice

Given Bataille’s acknowledged debt to Mauss’s ‘Essai sur le don’, it might be imagined, and it has become something of a commonplace to assume, that he shared his theory of sacrifice. It was this theory, after all, that Caillois had adopted in *L’Homme et le sacré*, and which he expressed in his usual, trenchant manner. ‘Through sacrifice’, he writes, ‘the believer makes himself a creditor; he expects the powers that he venerates to settle the debts they have contracted on his account by granting his wishes. In doing so, they furnish the response that all unilateral acts demand, and restore the balance that a self-interested generosity has disturbed to its profit’.61 What becomes glaringly clear from this passage, however, is that despite Caillois’s claims, in the preface to this work, that at the time of its writing there existed between himself and Bataille an ‘intellectual osmosis’ (the closest, perhaps, he ever got to his notion of communication), the two men in fact had very different understandings of the sacred. Caillois’s vocabulary here once again calls to mind Bataille’s remark about ‘profane examples’. This language of the accountant, moreover, sits uneasily on such an ancient rite, in which Bataille, in contrast, saw the expression of a principle of loss freed from all selfish calculation. But given that Bataille derived this principle from the essay Mauss himself wrote a quarter of a century after the essay on sacrifice, we might ask whether there is a difference between the conception of the gift in the ‘Essai sur le sacrifice’ and that in the ‘Essai sur le don’.62 In resurrecting Tylor’s gift-theory, do Hubert and Mauss fall back on the principle of utility Mauss would attack in his later essay? Or does the difference lie, in fact, between the ‘obligation to reciprocate’ Mauss saw in the phenomenon of the gift, and the ‘notion of expenditure’ Bataille saw in the purely destructive form of *potlatch*? Perhaps, as has been suggested, the sociology of reciprocity Mauss developed in these works is not so distant from the essentially bourgeois ideals which he and Durkheim, despite their forays into radical politics, never surrendered.63 What is not in doubt, however, is that the conclusions Mauss draws in the ‘Essai sur le don’, and the kind of liberal society he advocates in its conclusion, are a world away from Bataille’s formulation of a general economy


founded on a principle of loss.\textsuperscript{64}

Because what Hubert and Mauss do make clear in their study is that sacrifice, in their opinion, is never without its selfish aspect. If the sacrifier is there to give, they argue, he is also there to receive, and he can only do so if he gives up not himself but something of himself. From this comes the importance of the role of the victim, who dies in his place. When the force of the sacred reaches a certain level of intensity, it cannot be concentrated in a profane object without destroying it. If the sacrifier is to survive his own destruction, therefore, if he is to accrue the benefits of sacrifice, he must interpose, between himself and his god, a victim who alone penetrates the domain of the sacred. 'He dies there', write Hubert and Mauss, 'and is there in order to die'.\textsuperscript{65} The sacrifier, on the other hand, remains protected — emerging from the sacrifice unscathed if not unchanged. At the same time, however, the sacrifier must remain in some form of contact with the victim, because through this contact the victim, who already represents the gods, comes to represent the sacrifier also. Indeed, their identification is so complete that an ambiguous situation arises. In order to accrue the benefits of sacrifice, the sacrifier must remain united with the victim, but to enjoy those benefits he must survive the victim's fate. This difficulty is resolved by the mediation of the priest, whose regular proximity to the sacred renders more resistant to its contamination. And even then the virulence of the sacred is so great that the priest takes the added precaution of only touching the victim with the instrument of sacrifice. In establishing a communication between the sacred and the profane, therefore, sacrifice must also establish a series of displacements which protect the sacrifier from the victim's fate, allowing him to benefit from the rite. The efficacy of sacrifice, in other words, is dependent upon the victim — or as Hubert and Mauss write: 'with no intermediary, there is no sacrifice'.\textsuperscript{66} What this means, however, is that the very procedure by which they define the unity of the rite is founded on the premise that sacrifice is, in their eyes, 'a useful act', in which 'disinterest is mingled with self-interest'.\textsuperscript{67}

Such a premise, however, is incompatible with Bataille's notion of expenditure, the basis of which, as we have seen, is not self-interest but the gift of the self. It was from this principle, moreover, that Bataille, in 'La mutilation sacrificielle et l'oreille coupée de Van Gogh' (1930), where he first engaged with

\textsuperscript{64} In the few pages he devotes to sacrifice in the 'Essai sur le don' Mauss writes: 'The relationship that exists between these contracts and exchanges among humans and those between men and their gods throw light on a whole aspect of the theory of sacrifice'. As a principle, this is remarkably similar to Tylor's analogy of 'man's dealings with man', and comes to the same conclusions. Mauss goes on to add: 'The purpose of destruction by sacrifice is precisely that it is an act of giving that is necessarily reciprocated'. See Marcel Mauss, \textit{The Gift}, pp. 15-16.

\textsuperscript{65} Hubert and Mauss, \textit{Sacrifice}, p. 98; quoted by Bataille in OC I, 268.

\textsuperscript{66} Hubert and Mauss, \textit{Sacrifice}, p. 100.

\textsuperscript{67} Hubert and Mauss, \textit{Sacrifice}, p. 100.
Hubert and Mauss's theory, set out to resolve the enigma of sacrifice for himself. In this article, which appeared four issues after Hervé's article, and in which his Documents writings reached their culmination, Bataille begins by recounting, detective like, the strange case of the automutilation of Gaston F. This young man, a reader of Nietzsche and dabbler in Hindu mysticism, while walking one day in the Père Lachaise cemetery had begun to stare at the sun — a gesture whose traditional association with insanity was only confirmed when he received from the solar god the command to tear off his left index finger. He managed to carry out this ablation with his teeth before being apprehended by the police. From this association between the sun and automutilation, Bataille went on to compare this narrative to the appearance of the sun in the paintings Van Gogh produced in the asylum at Saint-Rémy in the year following his own automutilation. The fact that an account of this story, which had first appeared in the Annales medico-psychologiques, had been pointed out to Bataille by Adrian Borel, its author and Bataille's future collaborator in the 'Société de psychologie collective', suggests, however, that Bataille saw in the young automutilator a figure comparable not only to Van Gogh but to the Chinese regicide Fou-Tchou-Li: not that he saw both as insane, but because the laceration they both suffered — by their own hands or those of others — constituted, in his eyes, a form of sacrifice. Indeed, this is the question Bataille's article addresses: whether gestures like those of Gaston F. or Van Gogh — gestures which are undeniably linked, he says, to mental disorder — can be viewed as the expression of an institution, as he puts it, 'as clearly defined as sacrifice'. In doing so, however, Bataille not only declared the precise nature of his interest in sacrifice, but linked it to a phrase which would come to dominate his thought during the war years:

In our day, with the custom of sacrifice in full decline, the meaning of the word, to the extent that it still expresses a drive revealed by an inner experience, is still as closely linked as possible to the notion of a spirit of sacrifice of which the automutilation of madmen is only the most absurd and terrible example. (OC I, 264)

If we accept the existence of this spirit of sacrifice, Bataille argues, it can no longer be claimed that what he calls the 'demented part' of the sacrificial domain — the only one that remains to us, he says, to the extent that it belongs to our own pathology — is opposed to religious sacrifice. On the contrary, this

68. See Georges Bataille, 'La mutilation sacrificielle et l'oreille coupée de Van Gogh', Documents, no. 8 (1930); collected in OC I, 258-270.

69. See H. Claude, A. Borel, and G. Robin, 'Une automutilation révélatrice d'un état schizomaniaque', Annales médico-psychologiques, vol. 1 (1924), pp. 331-339. It is also more than likely that Bataille identified with all three himself. It should be recalled that when Bataille first went to Borel, one of his pastimes was Russian roulette.
opposition exists within religious practice itself, which confronts classic sacrifice with the most varied forms of automutilation. The irrationality of these practices — their resistance to functionalist theories — has made them the object of numerous interpretations. The circumcision rite, for instance, still practiced throughout the world, has long been regarded in popular perception as a concern for hygiene rather than an initiation rite marked by an automutilation which in other cultures has taken the form of the tearing out of a tooth or the ablation of a finger. The importance of this association is crucial to Bataille, who locates the ‘mechanism’ of sacrifice not, as Hubert and Mauss had, in its procedure, but in the impulse this mutilation reveals. While acknowledging, therefore, the various functions that different forms of sacrifice have served in various cultures and at different times, ‘the necessity of throwing oneself or something of oneself out of the self [hors de soi]’, he writes, ‘remains the principle of a psychological or physiological mechanism [mécanisme] which in certain cases can have no other end than death’ (OC I, 265). It was in formulating this principle that Bataille departed from Hubert and Mauss, for whom rites of auto-mutilation do not conform to the procedural unity by which they defined the rite. What he takes from them, however, is his understanding that the ablated finger, ear, tooth, eye or foreskin is a substitute for the self. If this association is accepted, Bataille writes, ‘the use of the sacrificial mechanism for various ends, such as propitiation or expiation, would be seen as secondary, and one would only retain the elementary fact of the radical altercation [altération] of the person’ (OC I, 269).

Bataille had first introduced this notion of ‘altercation’ in the previous issue of Documents, in his article on ‘L’Art primitif’. ‘The term altercation’, he had written, ‘has the double interest of expressing a partial decomposition analogous to that of corpses, and at the same time the passage to a perfectly heterogeneous state corresponding to what the protestant professor Otto calls the completely other [tout autre], that is to say, the sacred’ (OC I, 251). It is not by chance that this was also the first time Bataille referred to the ‘heterogeneous’ and ‘the sacred’: these are the terms he would use in the article on sacrificial mutilation to describe the movement of sacrifice itself — which is to say, the psychological and physiological mechanism of altercation. ‘Such an action’, Bataille writes, ‘would be characterised by the fact that it would have the power to liberate heterogeneous elements and to rupture the habitual homogeneity of the person: in the same way’, he adds, ‘that vomiting would oppose itself to its opposite, the communal eating of food’ (OC I, 269). Because Bataille saw in this expulsion what he calls the ‘essential phase’ of sacrifice — which he formulates here, in direct opposition to the importance Robertson Smith accorded to commensality, as the drive to expel what has been appropriated by either the person or the group — ‘the sacred things’, he writes, ‘that intervene at the end of the operation — the victim struck down in a pool of blood, the severed finger or ear, the torn-out eye — do not appreciably differ from vomited food’ (OC I, 269).

This does not mean, however, that the sacred is subsumed into the category
of the heterogeneous — that the sacrifice of the bull of Seyfou Tchenger, in other words, can be reduced to the abattoirs of Villette. In this respect, we might compare Lotar’s photographs of the abattoir with what Leiris said about the various uses to which the carcass of the bull of Seyfou Tchenger was put following its slaughter. On the face of it, Leiris’s account seems to conform to what Hubert and Mauss say about the role of the victim in transmitting the substance of the sacred to the sacrifier. For Bataille, however, because the sacred only enters the profane world as a moment of communication, it cannot be made substantial, and therefore can never reside in either an object or a person. If this sense of the sacred was subsequently lost, this was precisely because of the economic attentuation to which the rite was subjected. ‘The weakness of sacrifice’, Bataille writes in Théorie de la religion, ‘was that it eventually lost its virtue and finally established an order of sacred things, no less servile than that of real objects’ (OC VII, 328). This is why he shies away from Hubert and Mauss’s idea that the sacred is first contained within then conveyed through the consecrated body of the victim — the ‘sacred things’, as he says here, that intervene at the end of the sacrifice. Where he does agree with them, however, is with this emphasis on the moment of sacrifice, which in his view gives the sacred its transitory, fleeting and insubstantial character. Whatever rites of transubstantiation follow, therefore, can only be incidental to the focal point of the rite, which Bataille believed to be the spectacle of the death of another living being. It is only as such, moreover, that Bataille could wrench the sacred away not only from the transcendent being or beings of organised religion, but from the functionalist theories of French sociology, and locate it instead in relation to man’s experience of his finitude. Since the sacred, for Bataille, is the communication of the continuity of being between discontinuous beings, it can only be experienced in the representations which force the sacred, as it were, to manifest itself in the profane world. To the extent that it is bound to communication, therefore, the sacred must remain in the realm of the spectacle. It can never reside, even in residual form, in the things of the profane world, because the sacred, as Bataille made clear, is precisely the destruction of the

70. This is the view, to which I have already referred, of Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss. Because Bois and Krauss mis-attribute Bataille’s first use of the term ‘heterogeneous’ to the article on ‘La mutilation sacrificielle’, rather than the previous article on ‘L’Art primitif’ (which they nevertheless cite), they do not make the link between Bataille’s use of the term ‘alteration’ in both articles. Intentional or not, this allows them to separate what Bataille says about sacrifice in the latter article from what he says about the sacred in the former, and therefore to propose that the principle of this movement of alteration is not the need to ‘throw oneself or something of oneself out of the self’, but what they call ‘de-sublimation’ (a concept familiar to readers of October). This has profoundly distorting repercussions for their understanding of Bataille’s relation to representation, which they re-orientate around the notion of the ‘formless [informe]’. To this end, Bois and Krauss, who relate Bataille’s remarks to the photographs by Lotar of the abattoirs of Villette, always reproduce those showing the remains of the carcass, and never the one which most demonstrates the sacrificial character of the slaughter, and to which the accompanying article relates the abattoir. See Bois and Krauss, Formless: A User’s Guide, pp. 43-51.
thing, which belongs to the order of utility, and which sacrifice returns to immanence. When we encounter what we respond to as a sacred object, therefore — whether a holy relic, a sanctified place, the ‘sacred things’ that intervene at the end of a sacrifice, or the bloody carcass of a slaughtered animal — what we respond to is not their ‘sacredness’, or even their ‘heterogeneity’, but the transgression of the profane sphere in which we are enclosed. If afterwards a quality of ‘sacredness’ is perceived to emanate from the objects associated with this moment, this can never be more than the displacement of what originally produced them. The sacred, however, can only enter the sphere of the profane as a moment of transgression, for the simple reason that the sacred does not exist except as this relation to the profane.

Given which, we might be forgiven for asking to what extent, if at all, Bataille’s notion of a spirit of sacrifice drew on the theory elaborated by Hubert and Mauss. Over a decade after he published his article, in the table of references he appended to Théorie de la religion, Bataille, referring to their study as ‘the magisterial elaboration of the historical data on ancient sacrifice’, cited it as one of the works that led him to his own position (OC VII, 359). And yet despite this, he never explicitly aligned himself with either their theory or their rebuttal of Robertson Smith. On the contrary, in ‘La mutilation sacrificielle’, Bataille writes that he ‘must recall’ that Freud had referred to the work of Robertson Smith in Totem und Tabu, where he had discounted Hubert and Mauss’s objections as ‘negligible’ (OC I, 268). Of course, Bataille didn’t hold Freud’s book in high esteem, particularly in its grasp of ethnographical data, and he was just as unlikely to align himself with his position. What Bataille does say, however, is that the general argument in Hubert and Mauss’s essay is ‘noticeably different’ from the one he sketches out in his own article — before adding: ‘it is to this work, nevertheless, that an effort at interpretation refers’ (OC I, 268). This is ambiguous enough, but late in his life, in an autobiographical note from 1958 in which he speaks of the ‘decisive influence’ the work of Mauss had on him, Bataille nevertheless adds that he had ‘always kept his distance’ (OC VII, 615).

Indeed, on the question of the history of sacrifice Bataille implicitly adopted certain aspects of the chronology offered by Robertson Smith which Hubert and Mauss had rejected — and specifically the thesis that animal sacrifice originally preceded that of humans and only later came to substitute for them. Bataille,

71. Freud’s actual words are that the objections of Hubert and Mauss ‘have not diminished to any important extent the impression produced by Robertson Smith’s hypothesis’ (Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo, p. 201n).

72. In L’Érotisme, Bataille writes that, because of Freud’s ‘superficial knowledge’ of ethnographic data, Totem und Tabu, while having the advantage of linking sacrifice to ‘living compulsions’, nevertheless involves ‘the most fantastic conjecture’ (OC X, 199).

73. In L’Érotisme Bataille writes: ‘Human sacrifice often substitutes for animal sacrifice, no doubt to the extent that man was distanced from animals, the death of which, in part, lost its anguish ing value. Later, inversely, as civilisation affirmed itself, animal victims would sometimes replaced human
however, didn’t consider this as an invalidation, but rather the conformation of his own assertion that the ritual slaughter of a human victim is the most complete form of sacrifice.

Persuasive as it must have been to Bataille, even with its dubious historical credentials, Robertson Smith’s narrative of the movement from nomadic to agricultural society, and the accompanying shift from a cohesive community to one riven by social distinctions, does not fully explain the transformations in the history of sacrifice. If it did, sacrifice could be explained as the expression of man’s desire to engender and unify the community — which it undoubtedly does — and its varying forms related to the changing functions the rite has served in different cultures. But beyond the utilitarian functions to which it has been put, sacrifice, Bataille argues, is first and foremost the expression of a drive which determines not only the human organism (its psychological or physiological mechanism) but what he would formulate after the war as a ‘general economy’ of expenditure. It is only as such, moreover, that sacrifice, as he argued, lays claim to a universal value. His own view of the transformations to which the rite has been subjected, accordingly, are not based on its changing functions as a social rite, but on the attenuations of the drive it expresses.

In this history, therefore, the immolation of human victims is the most complete form of sacrifice not because it claims historical precedence, but because it is the most complete expression of the ‘drive’ which Bataille identified as the spirit of sacrifice. The word Bataille uses here is ‘impulsion’, which seems to derive some of its meaning from the French translation of Freud’s ‘Trieb’ as ‘pulsion’. Freud used this term to designate a dynamic process which directs the organism toward the elimination of a state of psychic tension. The drive itself, however, lies between a somatic and a psychical energy — a distinction Bataille seems to accept when he writes of a ‘psychological or physiological mechanism’. That he saw the principle of this mechanism as the necessity of throwing the self ‘out of the self’ — an impulse, he says, which can only end in the death of the organism — suggests that the drive Bataille had in mind is the one Freud introduced in the final revision of his theory of the instincts. The originality of Bataille’s position in ‘La mutilation sacrificielle’, therefore, is not to see automutilation as a form of sacrifice (Tylor had proposed as much nearly sixty years before), but in his proposal to see in the drive revealed by this mutilation the mechanism of the sacrificial rite, onto which propitiatory or initiatory functions have only later been added.

What becomes clear from this article, therefore, is that Bataille’s fascination with sacrifice was not with its ritual meaning, but in the drive it reveals. This, moreover, is irreducible to the functions the rite has served (although it victims, the sacrifice of which was thought barbarous. Fairly late, the blood sacrifices of the Israelites were felt to be repugnant, and Christians have only ever known symbolic sacrifice” (OC X, 89). See also the concluding paragraphs from ‘Le Sacrifice’ (OC VII, 280).
illuminates the procedures of the rite), but lies, rather, in those aspects of sacrifice which he identified as constituting its enigma — that is to say, in that which drove men to put their own kind to death in religious ceremonies. When Bataille speaks of a 'spirit of sacrifice', therefore, he is speaking of the games — of which sacrifice is the first — which man has played and continues to play with his own death. The attenuations to which this spirit have been subjected — and which, according to Bataille, have determined the course of the rite’s history — find their origin, therefore, in the tension arising from the struggle between man’s instinct for preservation and that which drives him to make of the self the ultimate gift.

This does not mean that Hubert and Mauss were unaware of this dimension of sacrifice. But for them the gift of the self remains a never attained ideal, a model which the rites of men can only ever hope to represent. Its spirit, moreover, is incompatible with what they understood to be the social function of the rite, in which, as they define it, ‘disinterest is mingled with self-interest’. For this reason, when Bataille made his first attempt to engage with the discourse on sacrifice — and with the gift-theory of Hubert and Mauss in particular — these are not the lines he quotes. He chooses, rather, the passage which immediately follows it, in which Hubert and Mauss present this ideal model — the only form of sacrifice, they say, ‘from which all selfish calculation is absent’, and where, moreover, because of this absence of calculation, the idea of sacrifice, they write, ‘attains its highest expression’. This is the sacrifice of the god, in whose form we find Bataille’s true interest in sacrifice, and with whose unreserved economy Hubert and Mauss bring their reflections on sacrifice to a conclusion:

The god who sacrifices himself gives himself without return. This time all intermediaries have disappeared. The god, who is at the same time the sacrifier, is one with the victim and sometimes even with the sacrificer. All the different elements that enter into ordinary sacrifice here collide with each other and become mixed together. But such confusion is only possible for mythical, imaginary or ideal beings.74

III. Sovereignty

*What am I if not a ray from a dead star?*

— Bataille, *Le Coupable* (1944)

Long before their final and decisive meeting in *Les Larmes d’Eros*, the link Bataille saw between his photograph of the *cent morceaux* and the image of Aztec sacrifice was anticipated by his introduction of a vocabulary of torture into the existing discourse on sacrifice. This occurs above all in his repeated use of the
French word ‘supplice’ to describe the scene in his photograph. While specifically designating the public torture and execution of criminals, ‘supplice’ more generally refers to any prolonged torment, mental as well as physical, such as that Bataille himself experienced and, under the heading of this term, positioned at the origin and centre of the writings that make up L’Expérience intérieure. In this conflation of physical and psychological suffering, of public torture and inner torment, Bataille not only identified himself with the Chinese torture victim in his photograph, but also, as the title of his next book would proclaim, with his crime. But if, as Bataille insists, he is one of ‘the guilty [le coupable]’, it is because it is only in committing this crime — the crime of regicide — and in accepting the consequences of his guilt, that he can attain an attitude of ‘joy in the face of death’. This, however, was only the first avatar of what Bataille would come to call ‘sovereignty’ — a term which, although first used by him in the early 1930s, would only assume its full meaning in his thought during the war years. As will become apparent, this is not the attitude of the military leader who rules by the secular power he has over his subjects; the sovereignty Bataille wishes to speak of is that of the consort, criminal and sacrificial victim who, in the brief and fixed period leading up to and culminating in his death, personifies the king and, ultimately, the god in whose sacrifice the wages of sovereignty are payed. It is this multitude of guises that Bataille evoked when he published the first pages of Le Coupable under the pseudonym of Dianus — the lover and consort, in Roman mythology, of Diana, the queen of the wood — who can only succeed to the royal bedchamber by murdering the queen’s former lover and king. In the dark forests of this realm, by the shore of Diana’s mirror, Bataille, standing over the body of his dead father, sets light to a golden bough and cries: ‘I’m the king of the wood, Zeus, a criminal...’ (OC V, 364).

The Dying God

Bataille’s allusion here is to the work of James Frazer, and the figure around whom he structured the twelve volumes of The Golden Bough. Contemporary with the theories of Robertson Smith, and in the view of Hubert and Mauss

75. See, for example: ‘A Chinese man who must have been tortured [supplicié] in my lifetime’ (OC V, 139); ‘When an image of torture [image de supplice] falls before my eyes’ (OC V, 272); ‘While the executioner tortures [supplicie] him’ (OC V, 283); ‘I repress an image of torture [image de supplice]’ (OC V, 514); ‘Like the torture victim [supplicié] I have the image of’ (OC IV, 165); ‘The world bound to this overt image of a torture victim [supplicié] photographed, several times, during his torture [supplice]’ (OC X, 626).

76. Frazer’s magnum opus first appeared in a two-volume edition in 1890, was revised and re-issued as a three-volume edition in 1900, before being expanded to a twelve-volume edition (the last being an index and bibliography) between 1911 and 1915. Later still, in 1922, it was abridged by Frazer himself to a one-volume edition. Unless otherwise stated, future references will be to this edition. See James Frazer, The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion, abridged edition, with an introduction by George W. Stocking, Jr. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1998).
dependent upon them, the theory of sacrifice Frazer developed in this work is, they write, the ‘theological exaggeration’ of Robertson Smith’s doctrine.  

Certainly Frazer placed totemism at the heart of his theory of religion; and like Robertson Smith he argued that sacrifice, although it came to serve expiatory ends, originated in communion.  

What Frazer did contribute, however, was a fuller explanation of the phenomenon — which Bataille accuses Hubert and Mauss of ‘neglecting’ — of the sacrifice of the god. It is in this form alone, Bataille writes, that the sacrificial rite ‘loses its character of performance [simagrée]’ (OC I, 268). In pursuing this form of sacrifice, therefore, in which, as Hubert and Mauss say, the gift is offered ‘without return [sans retour]’, Bataille turned to Frazer’s theory, which he had developed in part three of The Golden Bough, of ‘the dying god’.

To the extent that human sacrifice, according to Robertson Smith, was a product of agricultural society, Frazer believed that it was originally directed toward the growth of crops. He began, therefore, by showing how the totemic communion meal had developed into an agrarian sacrifice which commemorated and re-enacted a drama in which the god was the victim. In doing so, however, he introduced the figure who would come to dominate his thinking about sacrifice. This is the divine king who not only personified the god, but, in order to ally himself with the spirit of the fields, was put to death at the end of his annual reign. Ancient kings, Frazer argues, were revered not only as priests — that is to say, as intercessors between man and his gods — but as divinities in their own right, on whose life the welfare of the community and even the course of nature in general depended. The title of king, therefore, designated the individual in whom the collective desire was concentrated, and who was

77. Frazer had attended Robertson Smith’s lectures while working on The Golden Bough, which he then dedicated to him ‘in gratitude and admiration’. In the second edition of his work, however, responding to Hubert and Mauss’ claim that his theories were a supplement and completion of Robertson Smith’s, Frazer pointed out that the former’s approach, unlike his own, took its point of departure from the emotional response of the devotee, his ecstatic identification with the victim. Robertson Smith’s approach, Frazer argues, was a religious one, whereas his own, as the subtitle of the first edition of his work foregrounds, was ‘a study in comparative religion’. See Robert Fraser, The Making of the Golden Bough: The Origins and Growth of an Argument (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 101.

78. The notion that totemism was a system with a certain generality was first argued by James Ferguson McLennan in a series of articles published in the Fortnightly Review. At the invitation of Robertson Smith, Frazer assembled the information on totemism for the article on ‘Totemism’ in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. 23 (1887), which he then expanded into a small volume. In a manner which came to characterise British scholarship in general, and that of Frazer in particular, this was later still expanded into a monumental four volume version. See James Frazer, Totemism and Exogamy: A Treatise on Certain Early Forms of Superstition and Society, 4 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1910).

responsible, because of this, not only for averting catastrophes, but for the success of hunts, the breeding of stock and for favourable harvests. When this power ceased to be effective, however, the king in which it was embodied would be put to death. By giving up his life in the fullness of his youth, it was believed that the divine energies that would have diminished if the god had been allowed to die a natural death were transferred to the king’s successor. This sacrifice happened either periodically — typically at the winter solstice, when the sun with whom the god came to be identified was at its lowest — or as occasion demanded. As the embodiment of the ‘dying god’, therefore, the office of king was less to be envied than feared and dreaded.®

While Bataille recognised that Frazer’s theory of sacrifice, like that of Robertson Smith, had come to be discredited in anthropological circles, and although he himself rejected the view that sacrifice was an agrarian rite, and therefore served purposes similar to those of labour, Frazer’s image of the divine king was nevertheless crucial to Bataille’s notion of sovereignty. The most likely source for Bataille’s use of this term is the comment by Mauss in the conclusion to the ‘Essai sur le don’, in which he sought to demonstrate that even purely sumptuary forms of consumption — acts of destruction, lavish expenditure, childish prodigality — are not without self-interest. ‘To give’, Mauss wrote, ‘is to show one’s superiority’.® When Bataille first used the term ‘sovereignty’, however, it was not in relation to Mauss, but in Sacrifices, the text he wrote in the summer of 1933 to accompany André Masson’s five etchings on Frazer’s theme (which provided its subtitle) of the ‘dying god’.®

In this dense and speculative text Bataille argued that in man’s consciousness of his own finitude there appears a structure of the I entirely different from the ‘abstract I’ of metaphysics. And although he makes reference to neither Mauss nor Frazer, it was in describing this structure that Bataille tentatively formulated his first notion of sovereignty. ‘The I only accedes to its specificity and its integral transcendence’, he writes, ‘in the form of the “dying I [moi qui meurt]”’ (OC I, 91-92). The ‘dying I’, however, does not appear to consciousness each time a simple death is revealed to it: ‘it supposes’, Bataille writes, ‘the imperative completion and the sovereignty of being at the moment it is projected into the unreal time of death’ (OC I, 92). From the first, therefore, sovereignty was articulated in relation to the gift of the self, and therefore to an unreserved expenditure distinct from the economy of reciprocity Mauss saw in the gift. This is what linked the term in Bataille’s mind to the sacrifice of the god.


® See André Masson, Sacrifices (Les dieux qui meurent), avec un texte de Georges Bataille (Paris: Editions G.L.M., 1936); text reprinted in OC I, 87-96. Unable to find a publisher, this work only saw publication in December 1936, when it was finally issued by the publishers of Acéphale.
and therefore to Frazer: because in the return to the continuity of being, Bataille says, the 'dying I' accedes to what he calls the 'lacerating subversion of the dying god [dieu qui meurt]'. By sovereignty of being, therefore, Bataille did not mean a metaphysical alteration — that is to say, an alteration in substance — but a moment of identification with the 'dying god' that can only be produced, he writes, 'as the absorption of a life greedy for imperative joy in the heavy animality of death' (OC I, 92).

It is in this light, therefore, that we should view Masson’s etchings on the theme of the ‘dying god’. Drawn from Persian, Egyptian, Greek and Christian mythology, these etchings depict Mithra, Orpheus, the Crucified, the Minotaur, and Osiris (plates 6-10). That this was Frazer’s theme is supported by the fact that the iconography in the images is clearly drawn from the analysis of these myths in The Golden Bough, where Frazer relates them to his analysis of the role of sacrifice in agrarian rites. Particularly revealing in this respect is the etching of Mithra, who Masson depicts slaying a bull. According to Frazer, when the corn-spirit is embodied in animal form it is often supposed to reside in the tail. In the iconography of the Mithraic religion, therefore — in which Mithra is typically shown, as he is here, kneeling on the back of a bull and plunging a knife into its flank — either the tail of the bull ends in three stalks of corn, or, as in Masson’s etching, corn-stalks instead of blood are seen issuing from the wound. This identification of the god with the corn spirit is equally apparent in the etching of Osiris, in which Masson shows the god above a wheat field which three pyramids, appearing in the distance, identify as the plain of Giza. Because Osiris introduced the Egyptians to the cultivation of wheat and barley, Frazer says that he was representative of their transition, so important to this view of sacrifice, to an agricultural society. Osiris, moreover, was represented in Egyptian agrarian rituals by a human victim who, as the embodiment of the corn-spirit, was annually sacrificed and dismembered on the harvest field. The sacrifice itself, however, was also a re-enactment of the life and death of the god. Osiris, so the myth goes, who ruled on earth as king with his sister Isis, was killed by his jealous brother Set, who tore his body into fourteen pieces and scattered them abroad. With the help of her sister Nephthys, however, Isis recovered the pieces of the body and uttered such a lament over them that the sun-god Râ, taking pity on her grief, sent the jackal-headed god Anubis to their aid. Together they pieced together the broken body and swathed it in wrappings, whereupon Osiris came back to life and reigned thereafter as King of the Dead. While this myth determined the Egyptian practice of mummifying their kings, the tradition of death through dismemberment is repeated in sacrifices to the similarly dismembered Orpheus, who Masson shows being torn apart by the Maenads. Like other examples of the 'dying god', therefore, Frazer argues that the tearing apart


and putting back together of Osiris suggests that the putting to death of a victim as a sacrifice to a god is in fact a repetition and commemoration of what was originally a sacrifice of the god.

Certainly this is how Masson viewed these myths, and what united them, in his eyes, to Nietzsche’s proclamation of the ‘death of God’. In his depiction of Mithra, this identification between the god and his victim is shown by representing the bull-slaying deity as himself bull-headed — an identification which is repeated, moreover, in the etching of the Minotaur. This is even more apparent in the etching of Osiris, who is himself shown as the sacrificial victim. In a pose which repeats that of the spread-eagled victim in the image of Aztec sacrifice, the lacerated body of Osiris is shown surrounded by Isis and her siblings who gather and piece together his limbs and organs; his intestines hang free from his body — as does his flaming heart; and his head is lost in a solar conflagration. This last element above all is crucial to the interpretation of these images: because although Frazer considered this association a distortion of the true origins of the god, Osiris has long been identified with the sun. Here, however, no doubt under the influence of Bataille, Masson’s substitution of the sun for the head of Osiris indicates the ‘acephalous’ nature of the god.

In an early article on Picasso, which appeared in Documents under the deliberately obscure title of ‘Soleil pourri’, Bataille had associated the sun with the Mithraic cult of sacrificing a bull. From the human point of view, Bataille says, the sun is the ‘most elevated [plus élevée]’ conception. Because it is impossible to look at, however, it is also the most abstract. Its significance, therefore, is split between that of spiritual elevation in the mind of the person who does not look at it, and a blinding madness in the one who does. This human tendency to distinguish between two suns, Bataille says, has long been expressed in mythology, in which the scrutinised sun is identified with a man who slays the bull of Mithra. But the bull itself, he adds, is also an image of the sun — ‘but only with its throat slit’ (OC I, 232). Because of this, Bataille writes, ‘the sun has also been mythologically expressed by a man slaying his own throat, as well as by an anthropomorphic being deprived of a head’ (OC I, 232). Bataille, of course, would take up this theme of sun-gazing in his article on ‘La mutilation sacrificielle’. Here he again identifies the sun as the most dazzling form of the ideal, with which the sun-gazing Van Gogh — representative here of the real term of the I — maintained relations, Bataille says, analogous to those obtaining at one time between man and his gods. When automutilation would intervene in these relation as a sacrifice, therefore, ‘it would represent’, Bataille writes, ‘the desire to resemble perfectly an ideal term — generally characterised in mythology as a solar god — through the laceration and tearing out of one’s organs’ (OC I, 263).

While Masson, therefore, had clearly drawn on Frazer not only for his

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understanding of the iconography of these myths but for his theory of the ‘dying god’, the etching of Osiris in particular — which is almost an illustration of Bataille’s analysis in this article — suggests that, like Bataille, he saw in Frazer’s theory of the ‘dying god’ the embodiment of a spirit of sacrifice irreducible to the instrumental logic of agrarian rites, but which is, rather, the expression of a very human drive, as Bataille had described it, ‘to throw oneself or something of oneself out of the self’. Certainly this was what the image of the ‘anthropomorphic being deprived of a head’ came to represent for both Masson and Bataille. The strongest evidence for this, however, is that the etching of the headless Osiris would provide the model for the figure that would become so important to Bataille’s notion of sovereignty, and which Masson drew at his request, three years later, in the Spanish village of Tossa de Mar.

Masson had been living in Tossa de Mar for nearly two years when Bataille, fresh from the collapse of Contre-Attaque, came to visit him in April 1936. It was here, according to Bataille, in a little cold house in a village of fisherman, that the two friends drew up the principles of the secret society of Acéphale, which Bataille would launch that June. Years later, on the occasion of Bataille’s death, Masson recalled how, charged by his friend with giving form to their long-cherished project, he rapidly sketched what he calls their ‘Idol’:

I saw him immediately as headless, as becomes him, but where should this cumbersome and doubting head go? Irresistibly it finds its place at the sex, which it masks with a ‘death’s head’. But what to do with his arms? Automatically, one hand (the left!) flourishes a dagger; while the other kneads a flaming heart (a heart that does not belong to the Crucified, but to our master, Dionysus). This head (to return there) continues in the heart of men, and even as far as his genitals. Heart and testicals — twin forms. They have no idea what trick has been played on them! The pectorals starred according to whim. Fine, so far, but what to do with the stomach? Since it is empty, it will be the receptacle for the Labyrinth (which elsewhere had become our rallying sign). This drawing, made on the spot, under the eyes of Georges Bataille, had the fortune to please him. Absolutely.Indeed, it pleased Bataille so much that he reproduced Masson’s drawing on the cover of the first issue of Acéphale, in which his lead article, announcing the formation of ‘the sacred conspiracy’, concluded with his own description of the headless figure:

Man has escaped from his head like the condemned man from his prison. He has found beyond himself not God, who is the prohibition against crime, but a being who ignores the prohibition. Beyond what I am, I encounter a being who makes

me laugh because he is headless, who fills me with anguish because he is made of innocence and crime: he holds a weapon of steel in his left hand, flames like those of a Sacred Heart in his right. He reunites in the same eruption Birth and Death. He is not a man. He is not a god either. He is not me, but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I rediscover myself as him, which is to say, as a monster. (OC I, 445)

The following January, in the pages titled ‘Propositions sur la mort de dieu’ from the second issue of Acéphale, Bataille would include what is probably the most realised of Masson’s drawings of this figure, and the one in which its origins in the etching of Osiris are most apparent: the wheat field falling from the sky as part of a more general inversion of values; the lacerated stomach transformed into the labyrinth of the Minotaur; the disembodied and bleeding heart clutched now in the right hand; the solar head become a volcanic eruption; and the genitals, which occupy as central a point in the etching of Osiris as they do in the image of Aztec sacrifice, displaced by a death’s head (plate 11).

Indeed, Masson wrote to Bataille that he thought of this series of drawings as the ‘adventures of Acéphale’, through which he clearly sought, as he had with the images for Sacrifices, to create a new mythology. What becomes clear from Bataille’s description of this figure, however, is that he saw in this monster a mirror image of that equally grim figure who was at the origin of Frazer’s theory of the ‘dying god’, and with whom Bataille came to identify himself during the war years as the ‘king of the wood’.

Bataille had first referred to this figure in the presentation he gave to the Collège de sociologie in February 1938, when he spoke in Caillois’s place on the subject of power and its relation to sovereignty. In formulating his theory of the ‘dying god’, Bataille recalled, Frazer had taken his point of departure from the practices relating to the ritual slaying of the priest who guarded the sacred grove and sanctuary of Diana, a small temple situated to the south of Rome in the little woodland lake of Nemi. This curious figure was an escaped slave who had succeeded to the priesthood of Nemi by murdering his predecessor. His office,
however, held the title of the ‘king of the wood’ (*Rex Nemorensis*); but he only retained his sovereignty until he himself was slain in ritual combat by a stronger or a craftier rival. Throughout the day, therefore, and far into the night, he could be seen prowling through the wood, a drawn sword in his hand, looking for the man who would sooner or later murder him and rule in his stead. As the titular consort of Diana, moreover, the priest also bore the name of Dianus, in which guise he personified no less a deity than Jupiter himself. This murderous rite of succession to the priesthood at Nemi was not only an example, in Frazer’s eyes, of his theory of the ‘dying god’, but a tragedy in which Bataille came to see the expression of a spirit of sacrifice which later doctrines would betray. For although Frazer placed the practice of killing the divine king at the origin of the sacrifice of the god, such an ambiguous representation of sovereignty couldn’t last.

**The Doctrine of Substitution**

At the heart of Frazer’s theory, and of Bataille’s identification with the divine king, is his proposition that the history of sacrifice is inseparable from the history of the concept of sovereignty. When kings were bound to suffer death — either at their own hands or the hands of others — it was only natural, Frazer says, that they should seek to delegate the painful duty to a substitute. This was usually a slave drawn from the king’s subjects, who along with enjoying some of the privileges of sovereignty would die in his place. When the sacrifice of an innocent victim became revolting to human sentiment, a condemned criminal would be invested with this brief and fatal sovereignty. Out of the unwillingness of the king to give up his life, however, arose the doctrine of substitution, and with it, Frazer argued, the impetus for the changing doctrines of sacrifice.

92. Apropos this identification with the priest at Nemi, in a letter to Caillois dated July 1939, Bataille suggested Dianus and Nemi as possible names for the review in which the Collège intended to publish its research. See Georges Bataille, *Choix de lettres*, p. 170.

93. A narrative account of the prehistory of sovereignty is given by Robert Graves in the introduction to *The Greek Myths* (1955). For Graves, the rise of the military ruler was linked to the shift from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society. Before the arrival of Aryan invaders from the distant North and East, the whole of neo-lithic Europe, he argues, had a remarkably homogenous system of religious ideas based on the worship of an immortal, changeless, and omnipotent Mother-goddess. Since the concept of fatherhood had not been introduced into religious thought, the goddess took her lovers solely for her pleasure, and not to provide her with children. She was identified with the moon, which in early myth inspired the greater fear because unlike the sun it does not grow dimmer as the year wanes, and whose phases, moreover, recalled the matriarch’s three phases of maiden, nymph and crone. She was also, however, identified with the annual course of the sun, and therefore with the seasonal changes in animal and plant life. It was only when the relevance of coition to childbirth was understood, Graves argues, that man’s religious status improved, and the sun became identified with the king. And this is where he draws most heavily on Frazer. ‘The tribal Nymph’, he writes, ‘chose an annual lover from her entourage of young men, a king to be sacrificed when the year ended; making him a symbol of fertility, rather than the object of her erotic pleasure. His sprinkled blood served to fructify trees, crops, and flocks, and his flesh was torn and eaten raw by the Queen’s fellow-
A key example of this substitution, for Frazer, was the Aztec festival of Toxcatl. In Sahagún’s account of this rite, the greatest of the Mexican year, and whose similarities to Catholic ritual had so baffled the Spanish missionaries, Frazer saw the most systematic and tragic expression of what he believed to have once been the universal practice of sacrificing a human representative of the god. Each year a young man was selected from among the captives of war to represent Tezcatlipoca — ‘the god of gods’ — for a period of one year, during which time he was treated in every way as a divinity. He was chosen, Sahagún records, for his personal beauty: he had to be unblemished in body, slim as a reed, straight as a pillar, neither too tall nor too short. He was trained to comport himself with an air of royalty, to move with grace and dignity, to speak both correctly and elegantly, to play the flute, smoke a pipe, and sniff flowers. During his reign he was lodged in a temple where the nobles waited on him like a prince. They dressed him in ornate clothes decorated with gold and hung with bells, and a wreath of flowers like roasted maize crowned his brow. When he passed through the streets of the city the people threw themselves down before him and prayed. Even the king esteemed him like a god. Twenty days before his death, four virgins, each bearing the name of a goddess, were presented to him as brides. In the last five days of his reign, the Aztec king remained in his palace while banquets and dances were held in honour of the young god. On his final day, which fell around Easter time, he was taken across the lake which surrounded the nymphs — priestesses wearing the masks of bitches, mares or sows. Next, in amendment to this practice, the king died as soon as the power of the sun, with which he was identified, began to decline in the summer; and another young man, his twin, or supposed twin . . . then became the Queen’s lover, to be duly sacrificed at mid-winter’. Kingship, accordingly, only developed and acquired power under the tutelage of the queen. And the sun only became a symbol of male fertility once the king was identified with its seasonal course. With the Hellenic invasions of the early second millennium B.C., however, small bands of herdsmen entered Europe, worshipping the Aryan trinity of Indra, Mitra and Varuna. As Frazer had argued, these were accepted as children of the local goddess, and provided her with sacred kings. This, however, led to the reconciliation of a male military aristocracy with a female theocracy. In Graves’ reading, early Greek myths about the gods’ seduction of nymphs refer to these marriages between Hellenic chieftains and local moon-priestesses. When the shortness of the king’s reign proved a barrier to his power, however, the original thirteen month year based on lunar cycles was extended to a great year of one hundred lunations. It was this that led, in Graves’ narrative, to the doctrine of substitution. ‘Since the crops still needed to be fructified’, he writes, ‘the king agreed to suffer an annual mock death and yield his sovereignty for one day . . . to the surrogate boy-king’. A new stage was reached, moreover, when animals came to be substituted for boys at the sacrificial altar, and the king refused death even after his lengthened reign had ended. Throughout these successive stages, however, the sacred king continued to hold his position only by right of marriage to the tribal Nymph. The throne, therefore, remained matrilineal. That was, Graves writes, ‘until some daring king at last decided to commit incest with the heiress, who ranked as his daughter, and thus gain a new title to the throne when his reign needed renewal’. The king now contrived to reign for the term of his natural life, and, towards the close of the second millennium, patrilineal succession became the rule. The compromise between Hellenic and pre-Hellenic views gave birth to the familiar Olympian system, a divine family of six gods and six goddesses. When the short-lived co-sovereignty of Zeus and Hera was dissolved, and Hera became subservient to Zeus, patrilineal descent, succession, and inheritance discouraged further myth-making. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, combined edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 13-20.
city to a small island. There he said farewell to his wives and retired to a small temple at Chalco, more than fifteen miles to the south of Tenochtitlan. As he ascended the steps of the pyramid he broke his flutes before him on each one. On reaching the summit he was suddenly seized by the priests, who held him down on the sacrificial stone, cut his heart out with an obsidian knife, and raised it in dedication to the sun. The body, however, was not thrown down the steps, but carried with great reverence to the foot of the temple, where its head was cut off and placed on a spike. This brought to an end the annual life of the young man who embodied the greatest god in the Aztec pantheon, and the beginning of the reign of his successor. Meanwhile, the Aztec king ruled in safety and perpetuity.\(^{94}\)

This was the narrative that Bataille recounted at some length in the chapter on 'Sacrifices et guerres des Aztèques' from *La Part maudite*, and which led him to the view of Aztec society he expressed there.\(^{95}\) Insofar as it placed as great a premium on consumption as Western society does on production, Aztec society, Bataille argues, was diametrically opposed to our own. He begins, therefore, by situating Aztec sacrifice in relation to the role of consumption in their conception of the world. This is most clearly expressed in an Aztec myth which tells of the creation of the sun. After the collapse of the fourth cosmic order the gods had gathered in the darkness at Teotihuacan to decide who among them would bring light into the universe. The first to volunteer was Tecuciztecatl, greatly favoured among the Aztec gods. Since no other offered, the gods chose the least among them, an ugly god they called *bubusito*. After many penances and offerings, in which the difference in the stature and wealth of the two volunteers was more than apparent, the day of sacrifice arrived. A large fire had been lit and each of the volunteers was asked to throw themselves into the flames. Tecuciztecatl, who took precedence, was to go first, but despite being urged on by his comrades he was unable to summon the courage to throw himself into the flames. Four times he tried, and each time failed. Then it was the turn of the *bubuso*, whose real name was Nanauatzin. Shutting his eyes, Nanauatzin immediately threw himself into the fire. On seeing this, Tecuciztecatl, stricken by shame, followed him into the flames. Having fallen on their knees before this sacrifice, the other gods looked up and saw Nanauatzin rising in the east as the sun. For all its brilliance, however, which blinded the eyes of the gods, the sun was still unable to move. The gods immolated themselves, therefore, and fed the sun with their own flesh and blood. The sun began to move, and when it had completed its circuit of the world, Tecuciztecatl rose as the moon and began his passage. But because he had

94. See Bernardino de Sahagún, *Histoire générale des choses de la Nouvelle-Espagne*, Book II, chapters 5 and 24, pp. 61-62 and 96-104. This narrative is paraphrased by Frazer in his chapter on 'Killing the god in Mexico', *The Golden Bough*, pp. 704-710.

hesitated before the flames, he was struck in the face and his light was forever dimmed.  

Bataille saw in this myth not only the expression of the importance of sacrifice to the Aztec conception of the world, but the confirmation that the origin of sacrifice for the Aztecs was the gift of the self. It also explains, however, the religious character of their wars. For the Aztecs, Bataille argues, war meant consumption, not conquest; its purpose was not to extend their empire but to provide the thousands of victims their gods demanded, and whose hearts were offered, it was said, 'so that the sun might eat'. The importance of warfare to Aztec society, however, brought about a change: a rationality of enterprise was gradually erected against the moral principle of consumption. If this never reached the point where the captured slaves were no longer put to death but kept alive, as they are in Europe, to labour for their masters, an internal and sovereign violence was nevertheless subjected to external and utilitarian ends. This was clearly reflected in the unwillingness of the Aztec king to give up his life, which for Bataille was decisive. 'There can be no possibility of a mistake here', Bataille writes, 'this was a sacrifice of substitution' (OC VII, 60). Such a substitution, however, could only follow from a fundamental shift in Aztec society from the primacy of religion to that of military effectiveness, and the resulting transformation in the concept of sovereignty from the reign of a divine king to the rule of a military leader. While Bataille’s use of the word sovereignty retained aspects of the usual meaning of the word, therefore, it was also meant to lay stress on the historical notion of sovereignty and kingship, and in particular on what Bataille saw as its corruption by the doctrine of substitution. For Bataille, who had referred to this substitution as early as his article on sacrificial mutilation — where he called it 'cowardly' (OC I, 268) — the substitution of the slave for the king represents the betrayal of sovereignty by a will to mastery, and with it the first attenuation of the spirit of sacrifice.

Tylor had identified this doctrine of substitution running through the history of sacrifice, and divided it into four categories: the substitution of a part for the whole, as when the blood, fat, blood or entrails of the animal were offered as the share of the gods and the rest of the carcass was eaten; the substitution by ceremonial mutilation of a part of the worshipper’s body, such as the ablation of a finger joint, a hair-offering or blood-letting; the substitution of a less valued life for another — the primary example of which, in Tylor’s view, was the historical succession of human by animal sacrifice, but which also explains the substitution of a slave for the king; and, finally, in an end to all blood sacrifice, the symbolic substitution of the victim, the key example of which is the Catholic sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, in which a mere commemoration of death substitutes for death itself. Since Bataille, however, accepted Roberston Smith’s argument that

human sacrifice originally succeeded animal sacrifice, a distinction needs to be made between the succession of an animal by a human victim, which only arose from the loss of kinship between man and animal following the shift to an agricultural society, and the subsequent substitutions, categorised here, which originated, Tylor says, in the desire to economise the burden of giving. 97

For Hubert and Mauss, however, who reject Robertson Smith's chronology, it is this doctrine of substitution that distinguishes sacrifice from the rites surrounding the execution of criminals. The similarities between the two, they point out, were sufficient for Robertson Smith to have seen in the latter models of expiatory sacrifice. 98 Because a crime which broke the sacred laws of blood—essentially murder and incest—violated the sanctity of the whole community, the original purpose of an execution, Robertson Smith had argued, was not to punish the offender but to rid the community of the impiety by which it had been contaminated. It was in the interest of that community, nevertheless, to narrow the responsibility for the crime by fixing the guilt on the offender, the public execution of which, accepted as a sacrifice to divine justice, exonerated the community of complicity in the crime. Just as sacrifice was not offered on behalf of the victim, but at the expense of the victim on behalf of the sacrificing community, so the criminal was not executed on his own behalf—that is to say, as a punishment for his crime—but on behalf of the community whose purity his crime had contaminated. Because of this, the execution of a criminal tended to assume the character of an expiatory sacrifice.

The difference between the two, however, is a defining one for Hubert and Mauss. Following their initial definition of sacrifice as an act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the sacrifier, they go on to note that insofar as religious punishment implies a consecration (in that it consists of the destruction that this consecration affects), it follows that between religious punishment and sacrifice there are, they write, 'both analogies and differences'. While acknowledging, however, that the execution of a criminal served to expiate his crime, since expiation, they argue, is as primordial and irreducible a component of sacrifice as communion, sacrifice is distinguished from religious punishment precisely by this doctrine of substitution, which they identified, therefore, as the *sine qua non* of sacrifice:

In the case of punishment, the violent manifestation of consecration is born directly by the subject who has committed the crime and who himself expiates it; in the case of expiatory sacrifice, on the contrary, a substitution takes place, and it is upon the victim, and not upon the guilty, that expiation falls. 99

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To see a sacrifice in a common execution is, of course, the claim that Bataille makes for the torture of the cent morceaux. This is not as far-fetched as it might at first seem: it is the foundation, after all, of Christianity, with whose sacrificial origins Bataille implicitly compared the victim of this torture. And yet among the many analogies between this image and the spectacle of sacrifice, perhaps the most striking is that which relates it to what Hubert and Mauss say about the place of sacrifice. ‘Outside a holy place’, as they remind us, ‘immolation is mere murder’.\(^{100}\) The place of sacrifice, therefore, must itself regulate the physical passage of the victim from the world of the profane (from *profanum*: ‘outside the temple’) into the sacred world. To illustrate this regulation Hubert and Mauss cite the example of the sacrifice of animals by Hindu Brahmin, who consecrate a ‘magic circle’ within which the rite is performed. This circle is itself composed of a series of concentric circles, each of which delineates the boundaries to the space occupied — from the outer circle inwards — by the sacrificer, the priest, the altar, and finally the stake to which the victim is bound. On the perimeter of this circle, where the layman stands on whose behalf the sacrifice is conducted, the religious atmosphere is weak; but as the circle in which it is concentrated grows smaller, this atmosphere is increased. Comparing this description with the scene in Bataille’s photograph, there are numerous similarities to suggest the sacred and virulent character of what is being expiated by this death, and the necessity, therefore, of containing it. This clearly emits from the centre of the image where the Chinese victim, bound to the stake, is enclosed and separated from the participants by what might be thought of as the sacrificial altar. It is a space, in any case, which separates him from those around him, and which is only crossed by the blade of the executioner, who himself occupies the next, clearly demarcated circle. Beyond the executioner are the mandarin officials who, as the ruling class and therefore the most closely akin to the assassinated Prince, are the most offended by the victim’s crime — the most contaminated, it might be said, by its violence — and therefore have the most to gain by its expiation. Finally, outside the sacred circle proper, and forming its periphery, stands the crowd. The analogies do not stop there, however. Parker recalls that during the torture of the cent morceaux baskets of bread were kept nearby to soak up the blood, and these were often sold and later eaten in the belief that they would ‘give courage’ to their purchaser. For the worst criminals, moreover, the heart and liver were torn out and sold at a very high price in order to ‘put heart’, quite literally, into their ingestors.\(^{101}\) Given these similarities, therefore — not only to an expiatory sacrifice, but to what Hubert and Mauss say about the uses to which the consecrated flesh of the victim is put — the only thing which seems to distinguish this execution from their definition of sacrifice is the victim himself, who at least in this case is — in the phrase that Hubert and

\(^{100}\) Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, p. 25.

Mauss use, and which Bataille would make his own — 'the guilty [*le coupable*]'.

Here again, however, the distinction breaks down; because contrary to what Hubert and Mauss say, the doctrine of substitution has not been restricted to the realm of sacrifice, but has also appeared in that other, related area of social laceration which takes the form of the public torture and execution of criminals. Frazer points this out himself in an appendix to *The Dying God*, where, under the heading of 'Chinese Indifference to Death', he quotes a letter dated August 7, 1903 — less than two years, that is, before Bataille's photograph of the *cent morceaux* was taken — from a Mr. Miles W. Lampson, of the Foreign Office, to Lord Avebury, the author of *The Origin of Civilisation*, informing him on the practice of the substitution of victims in executions in China:

Dear Lord Avebury — As the result of enquiries I hear from a Mr. Eames, a lawyer who practised for some years at Shanghai and has considerable knowledge of Chinese matters, that for a small sum a substitute can be found for execution. This is recognised by the Chinese authorities, with certain exceptions, as for instant parricide. It is even asserted that the local Taotai gains pecuniarily by this arrangement, as he is as a rule not above obtaining a substitute for the condemned man for a less sum than was paid him by the latter. It is, I believe, part of the doctrine of Confucius that it is one of the highest virtues to increase the family prosperity at the expense of personal suffering. According to Eames the Chinamen [sic] looks upon execution in another man's stead in this light, and consequently there is quite a competition for such a 'substitution'.

And in a letter dated August 21, 1905 — the very year in which Bataille's photograph was taken — Valentine Chirol, the editor of the foreign department of *The Times*, informed Frazer that:

A friend of mine who has just been here entirely confirms my own belief as to the accuracy of your statement, and tells me he has himself seen several Imperial Decrees in the *Peking Gazette [Ching-pan]*, calling provincial authorities to order for having allowed specific cases of substitution to occur, and ordering the death penalty to be carried out in a more severe form on the original culprits as an extra punishment for obtaining substitutes.

Given the prevalence of this practice in China, we might be forgiven for asking whether the unfortunate Fou-Tchou-Li was in fact the convicted regicide, and if he was, whether he is the man in Bataille's photograph. Given the gravity of his crime, it seems safe to assume that criminal and victim are here one and the same. But since his crime was not only against the person of the prince he had murdered, but had contaminated, as it were, the body of the community, the

success of its expiation was clearly not dependent on the identity of the victim but — as it is for a sacrifice — on his death, which the gravity of the crime had pre-determined. Something like this seemed to obtain in the function this execution served in the Chinese society of the time. This raises the question, however, of what function was served by the spectacle this torture presented to its beneficiaries — which, as Robertson Smith pointed out, was hardly a salutary one, and not to be explained according to modern judicial notions of punishment or deterrence. The answer Bataille gives to this question goes to the heart of his understanding of sacrifice, and why it is bound, in his eyes, to the question of representation.

**The Sacrifice of the God**

According to Frazer, the custom of sacrificing the god dates from so early a period of human history that in later ages, even when the custom continued to be practised, it was liable to be misinterpreted. This began when it came to be believed that the death of the god would purge the community of sickness, death, and sin, and the sacrificial victim fulfilled the role of a scapegoat upon whose life the sins of the community were laid. While it began, therefore, as the practice of killing the god before his energies were weakened, the sacrifice of the divine king came to be represented as an expiatory sacrifice. When the theanthropic character of the victim was forgotten, therefore, under the weight of successive substitutions, it was only natural that he came to be regarded as an ordinary man. This was especially likely to be the case when the victim was chosen from among criminals. Rather than following parallel paths, therefore, as Hubert and Mauss maintained, what began as the sacrifice of the god came to be confounded with the execution of a criminal.104

The most famous example of this, of course, and the figure to whom Bataille turned at the end of his presentation to the Collège, is that of the Crucified, who Masson didn’t shrink from including in his mythology of ‘dying gods’. Having previously spoken of the division of the sacred into its opposed poles, Bataille’s aim in this talk was to describe the dynamic tranformation of the left pole of the sacred into the right — moving, as he says, from ‘the horrible image of a torture victim [supplicié]’ to ‘the majesty of sovereigns’ (OC II, 338). Specifically, he addresses the formation of power constructed on the basis of the Crucifixion. Christianity, Bataille says, which from the beginning placed a high value on the poor, the outcast and the unclean, nevertheless set up a king in the person of Jesus. This king, however, let himself be treated like a criminal and was eventually reduced to the condition of a tortured body — thereby identifying himself with the immediately repulsive pole of the sacred. And yet the instrument of his torture already bore the title of king (*Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*),

signifying that he would rise again and sit by the side of his Father. Like Frazer’s divine king, therefore, the figure of Christ united in his person both the pure and omnipotent sovereign (God the Father) and the sacrificed king (the Crucified Son he forsook). Although he gave himself up as a sacrificial victim, therefore — the son and man who took upon himself the sins of the world — in the guise of God the Father, Christ also took upon himself the crime of executing the king. ‘This strange mythological figure’, Bataille says, ‘was associated with a rite of regicide, endlessly repeated by priests who identified with the victim, living themselves as executed kings, taking in turn upon themselves the crime of the whole world’ (OC II, 344).

From this ambiguity within the notion of sovereignty comes a question which is charged, Bataille says, with all human anguish. At the centre of human society, he argues, is a crime that engenders a sacred that is impure and untouchable, but which gives rise to a force which, although also sacred, is pure and imperious. Since this power is dependent upon the ritual repetition of that crime, however, it is subject to the threat of contamination this crime poses. To this situation two responses have been offered. The Christian solution, which has so far prevailed in the western world, proposes that man identify with the sacrificial victim, with the divine king who is put to death. This has naturally led to a division in sovereignty between the temporal power of the military rulers who refuse this identification, and the purely spiritual and inoperative power presided over by the representatives of God on earth. In both cases, however, insofar as the sacrificial victim has become a military and hieratic sovereign, his power has been emptied of the criminal content in which all religious forms are drenched.105 In opposition to this path, therefore, ‘tragedy’, Bataille says, ‘proposes that man identify himself with the criminal who kills the king’ (OC II, 346). No doubt this is what Caillois had in mind when he voiced his objections to the role Bataille assigned ‘to mysticism, to drama, to madness and death’. But

105. Besides Frazer, the other source for this history of the concept of sovereignty is the work of Georges Dumézil, to which Bataille refers his audience, specifically mentioning Dumézil’s Ouranos-Varuna: Étude de mythologie comparée indo-européene (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1934). In addition to the influence of this work, however, the reason, I imagine, that Bataille resurrected the term ‘sovereignty’ during the Second World War was the publication, in 1940, of Dumézil’s Mitra-Varuna: Essai sur deux représentations indo-européennes de la souveraineté, Bibliothèque de l’École des Hautes Études, Section des Religieuses, vol. LVI (Paris: Leroux, 1940). This had been translated by Derek Coltman from the second, revised edition of 1948 as Mitra-Varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-European Representations of Sovereignty (New York: Zone Books, 1988). Dumézil’s book, which originated as a series of lectures given at the École des Hautes Études in 1938-39, was an investigation into the bipartite notion of sovereignty — in turn both religious and military — that dominated the mythologies of the peoples who spoke Indo-European languages at the time of the earliest documents. Bataille was sufficiently impressed by both these works to cite them in the table of references to his Théorie de la religion, where he writes that the interpretations of Indo-European mythology in the latter work ‘correspond to the construction I have developed’ (OC VII, 358). This, he says, is the ‘consciously Hegelian’ movement in which the forces of pure violence (represented by Varuna), opposed by the guardians of sacred order (embodied in Mitra), find their dialectical resolution, Bataille writes, ‘in the external and efficacious violence of a human and rational military order’ (OC VII, 358).
for Bataille it is imperative that man pleads guilty to this crime, since it is only in sacrificing his god that he can accede to sovereignty.

Although this representation of sacrifice owes its expression to Frazer’s image of the divine king, Bataille’s understanding of its mechanism is nevertheless indebted to what Hubert and Mauss say about the criminality of the sacrificial act. Bataille would return to this in September 1941 when he opened the third section of *Le Coupable* with the question: ‘Is there anyone who hasn’t understood that by proposing sacrifice I’ve proposed sin [le péché]?’ (OC V, 305). In answer to which he quotes the lines in which Hubert and Mauss describe the moment of sacrifice itself, and which for Bataille clearly contain the greatest insight of their study:

> What begins now is a crime, a kind of sacrilege. While the victim was being led to the place of slaughter, therefore, certain rituals prescribed libations and expiations. . . . The instigator of the slaughter was sometimes punished, either by beating or exile. . . . The purifications the sacrificer had to submit to after the sacrifice resembled, moreover, the expiation of a criminal.¹⁰⁶

By reading this text in relation to Frazer’s image of the criminal-king, Bataille was able to argue that rather than the doctrine of substitution, it was the criminality of sacrifice that was the key to its mechanism, since it was through this crime that communication is opened with the sacred. Distinct from Robertson Smith’s view of sacrifice as communion with a benign and beneficent god, therefore, Hubert and Mauss’s insistence that expiation was just as fundamental an aspect of sacrifice emphasised the ambivalent nature of the forces it released.¹⁰⁷ This led them to what they call an ‘important observation’. Since sacrifice, they write, ‘could serve two such contradictory ends as that of inducing a state of sanctity and suppressing a state of sin’, it follows, they argue, that ‘there cannot exist between these two states the clear-cut opposition that is generally seen’.¹⁰⁸ But whereas sacrifice, for Hubert and Mauss, in communicating the beneficent, right-hand pole of the sacred (the power of an omnipotent god), at the same time suppresses its accursed, left-hand pole (the tortured body of his representative), it is this betrayal that Bataille is bent on re-addressing. ‘Sin’, he writes, ‘is sacrifice, communication is sin’, the summit of which, Bataille argues — of both sin and communication — was the inexpiable crime of the Crucifixion (OC V, 305). While Hubert and Mauss, therefore, distinguish between the criminality of the sacrificer and the innocence of the

¹⁰⁶ Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, p. 33; quoted by Bataille in OC V, 305.


¹⁰⁸ Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, p. 58.
victim, no such distinction exists, as we have seen, in the sacrifice of the god. As Masson’s etching of Mithra makes clear, the sacrificer is one with the victim. This was how Bataille viewed the murderous rite of succession to the priesthood at Nemi: as a sacrifice in which the victim is guilty not because he has been chosen from among those who were already guilty of a crime, but because his sovereignty itself begins and ends with the criminality of sacrifice.

What Bataille saw in this guilt was a mode of consciousness which is neither the servitude of the slave who is substituted for the king, nor the mastery of the military ruler who refuses to give up his life, but an embrace of a spirit of sacrifice by which he defined sovereignty. As his identification with the ‘king of the wood’ makes clear, it is only by identifying with the ‘dying god’ that man can accede to sovereignty. This is what Bataille saw in his photograph of the cent morceaux, which was linked, in his eyes, to the priest at Nemi. Both were criminals, both were guilty of the crime of regicide, but both were also victims who in their own deaths acceded to what Bataille called ‘the lacerating subversion of the dying god’. It was this link between sovereignty and sacrifice that Bataille meant to convey when he adopted the name of Dianus for the publication of his meditations on this photograph in the first notebook of what would become Le Coupable. Bataille confirmed as much in a manuscript note written sometime in the next few years: ‘The pseudonym Dianus’, he wrote, ‘seems to me to reunite the flavour of a bearded woman and a dying god, his throat streaming with blood’ (OC V, 437). In adopting this pseudonym, however, Bataille identified himself not only with the bloody fate of this figure but with his crime. Hence the lines with which introduced Le Coupable to his readers: ‘Someone who called himself Dianus wrote these notes and died. He referred to himself (ironically?) as guilty’ (OC V, 239).

What this identification with Frazer’s priest also means, however, is that the notion of sovereignty Bataille first formulated in Sacrifices, and which later became one of the foundation stones of Acéphale, emerged from his reflections on the spirit of sacrifice contained in Frazer’s theory of the ‘dying god’. This is most apparent, perhaps, in another of Masson’s drawings of Acéphale, which Bataille found in Laure’s papers after her death, and where the identification with the ‘king of the wood’ seems complete — the figure itself having become the embodiment of the tree spirit (plate 12). Certainly this was what Bataille came to see in Masson’s drawings of this figure: the condemned being who has escaped from God into the labyrinth of the night; who is not a man but is not a god either; who is both innocent of the interdiction and guilty of breaking it; and in whose features Bataille found the image of himself as a monster. In his ‘Propositions sur la mort de dieu’, next to the image of this monster, Bataille wrote: ‘The Acéphale mythologically expresses a sovereignty committed to destruction, committed to the death of God’ (OC I, 470). The same could be said, however, of Masson’s etching of the Crucified, whose head, like those of the Gnostic gods, is displaced
by that of some animal.\textsuperscript{109} For Bataille, the spirit of sacrifice expressed in this 'acephalic' notion of sovereignty was not only at the origin of the sacrificial rite, but still found its expression in the contemporary spectacles in which the specifically tragic character of sacrifice still survived. Foremost among these, perhaps — and the form which was most closely related, in his eyes, to the sacrifice of the god — is that of the \textit{corrida}. In the 1930s Bataille was among those who, in common with writers like Henri de Montherlant, believed that the modern bullfight could trace its origins back to the cult of Mithra.\textsuperscript{110} The identification between the god and the sacrificial animal in Masson's etching of Mithra, therefore, was precisely what Bataille and Masson — and indeed Leiris and Picasso — saw in the fierce intimacy between the \textit{matador} and the bull he kills in the arena.\textsuperscript{111} It was this, moreover, to which Bataille referred when, in the caption to the photograph of the Spanish \textit{matador} Villalta in his article on 'Le Sacré', he wrote that 'because of its ritual enactment and tragic character, the modern bullfight represents a form close to ancient sacred games' (OC I, plate XXVIII).

It could be argued, of course, that these images cannot be justified through reference to Frazer alone.\textsuperscript{112} In terms of their iconography, no doubt this is true. Masson's etchings are as far from being illustrations of Frazer's descriptions as they are of Bataille's text. Indeed, Masson told Bataille that although he admired and comprehended the first part of his text for \textit{Sacrifices}, he had understood nothing of its second part (to which Bataille characteristically responded: 'me

109. Although the head in this etching appears to be that of a jackal, which would link it to the myth of Osiris, the source of this displacement could have been an image known as the 'blasphemous crucifix'. This was discovered during excavations on the Palatine Hill in Rome, near the church of St. Anastasia. The image depicted a figure with the body of a man and the head of an ass hanging on a cross. At the feet of this figure stood an adoring slave, and an inscription reading 'Alexamenus worships [his] God'. The image is thought to belong to the ante-Nicene age. It is supposed that a heathen, having heard that Christians worshipped a crucified god, and being familiar with the common calumny that they worshipped the head of ass, combined the two ideas. See the article on 'Crucifix' in William E. Addis and Thomas Arnold, \textit{A Catholic Dictionary}, containing some account of the doctrine, discipline, rites, ceremonies, councils, and religious orders of the Catholic Church (1883); twelfth edition, revised, with additions, by T. B. Scannell (London: Virtue and Co. Ltd., 1928), pp. 244-245.


111. It is significant that one of Masson's drawings for \textit{Acéphale} titled 'La Grèce tragique', which shows a bull-headed god based on the figure of \textit{Acéphale}, was later used as one of the illustrations for Leiris's \textit{Miroir de la tauromachie}.

112. This is the position of Françoise Levaillant in her catalogue essay, 'Masson, Bataille, ou l'incongruité des signes (1928-1937)', in \textit{André Masson} (Nîmes: Musée des Beaux Arts, 1985), p. 41. Levaillant, however, does not engage either with Frazer's theory of the dying god, or with the ways in which it informed Masson's etchings beyond their iconography. She certainly doesn't read these images as representations of Bataille's notion of sovereignty.
neither'). And then of course there is the profound influence of Nietzsche’s proclamation of the ‘death of God’, whose implications for sacrifice I will address in my last chapter. Masson, however, was an avid reader of The Golden Bough, and was aware not only of Frazer’s theory of the ‘dying god’, but presumably of its significance to the notion of sovereignty Bataille announced for the first time in this text. In a letter to Leiris in December 1935, Masson had written that whatever its value from a ‘scientific’ point of view, the mythological value of Frazer’s work had a salvatory power. He even links this value to Nietzsche by recalling that it had saved him during a period of his life when he was, he writes, ‘below good and evil’.

What is not in doubt, in any case, is that both the text and images of Sacrifices had played and would continue to play a defining role in the formation of Acéphale. Indeed, given Masson’s role — which Bataille attests to — in the discussions that led to the creation of Acéphale, it is safe to assume that he not only shared in the formulation of this notion of sovereignty, but that it was this that Bataille set him the task of representing in the figure of Acéphale.

In this respect it is significant that in his description of this drawing, Masson writes that the Sacred Heart the figure holds in his right hand, and which had earlier appeared in the etching of Osiris, was not that of ‘the Crucified’, but of ‘their master, Dionysus’. Frazer had identified the heart of Dionysus as part of a Cretan ritual celebrating the sufferings of this god. When Dionysus was torn apart by the Titans which the jealous Juno had sent to kill him, his sister Minerva had kept his heart, which she then gave to their father Jupiter. And just as Râ had pieced together the lacerated body of Osiris and brought him back to life, so Jupiter used this heart to recreate the god. In the Cretan ceremony, therefore, in which Jupiter and Juno were represented by the king and queen of Crete, the worshippers of Dionysus tore a live bull to pieces with their teeth, then roamed the surrounding woods which they filled with their frantic shouts, carrying before them a casket containing the sacred heart. Masson would contribute a drawing of Dionysus to the third issue of Acéphale, in which the god, who is depicted

115. In a text dated February 9, 1937, in which he proposed the constitution of a ‘journal interieure’, Bataille, addressing his fellow conspirators in the secret society, writes that it is ‘necessary to take account’ of two of his texts, the content of which, he says, ‘expresses a state of mind in which we participate’. The first of these is ‘La Notion de dépense’; the second the text of Sacrifices, ‘with the mythological engravings of André Masson that it should accompany’. See Georges Bataille, L’Apprenti sorcier, p. 341.
116. In the passage from ‘La conjuration sacrée’ which immediately follows his description of the figure of Acéphale, Bataille pointedly writes: ‘What I have thought and represented, I have not thought or represented alone’ (OC I, 445). He then gives a description of the scene at Tossa de Mar remarkably similar to the one Masson would recall twenty-seven years later.
headless, is shown plunging a knife into his heart. Beyond its conventional symbolism of Christ Crucified, therefore, the Sacred Heart in the hand of Acéphale links this figure to Frazer's pantheon of 'dying gods', signifying that, like Dionysus, Mithra, Osiris, and the Crucified, he is not only a victim of sacrifice but also its perpetrator.

This, of course, is what Bataille had drawn attention to in his article on 'La mutilation sacrificelle', when he quoted Hubert and Mauss's lines about the sacrifice of the god being without intermediaries — since the god, 'who is at the same time the sacrificer, is one with the victim and sometimes even the sacrifier'. Citing as another example of this confusion of identities the identification between Prometheus and the eagle who tore out his liver, Bataille argues that in the drive expressed in this automutilation there is revealed what he calls the 'essential phase' of sacrifice. This is the moment in which the sacrificer does not identify — as Hubert and Mauss would have it — with the alteration in the substance of the victim, but with his violent death:

The sacrificer is free — free to let himself go in a similar disgorging, free, continuously identifying with the victim, to vomit his own being, just as if he had vomited a piece of himself or a bull, which is to say, free to throw himself suddenly out of the self. (OC I, 269-270)

It is only because Hubert and Mauss, as Bataille says, 'neglect' examples of the sacrifice of the god — which they could have taken, he says, from cases of automutilation — that they fail to fully engage with the form in which sacrifice, as they themselves admit, attains its 'highest [plus haut]' expression, its 'most complete [plus achevé]' form (terms which Bataille himself used to speak of the sacrifice of the human representative of the god). Indeed, their initial definition of sacrifice begins by excluding all forms of automutilation from what they propose is the unity of the sacrificial system. While recognising, therefore, that in this form sacrifice reaches the 'ideal limit of abnegation' — which is, they say, 'without reserve' — they nevertheless fail to recognise that it is in just such acts of automutilation that the unreserved economy expressed in the sacrifice of the god breaks free from the imaginary sphere of religion to which they confine it, and becomes the expression of a drive irreducible to the economy of reciprocity on which their definition of sacrifice is predicated.

The freedom from all reserve expressed in the sacrifice of the god, however, is at the limit of the efforts to remain outside sacrifice. Although Frazer, therefore, linked the origin of this sacrifice to agrarian rites, Bataille's interest was in the loss incurred in such a death — in the wages, as it were, of sovereignty. From this he derived his notion of a general economy of expenditure which is expressed on the phenomenological plane as an attitude of 'joy in the

118. Hubert and Mauss, Sacrifice, p. 77.
face of death’, and which he proposed as a corrective to the economy of the gift. For Bataille, therefore, the only sacrifice ‘without trickery’ — the only sacrifice, in other words, in which this economy finds its unattenuated expression — is that in which man gives himself unreservedly — which is to say, ‘like a god’. Which is why sovereignty can only be attained in those fleeting moments in which the finite being of man is thrown, as Bataille says, ‘into the unreal time of death’. Contrary to what Hubert and Mauss argue, therefore, substitution is not the defining characteristic of sacrifice but the mechanism arising from the attenuation of its spirit. As they themselves acknowledge, this mechanism is not peculiar to the expiatory functions of sacrifice, since it applies equally to the execution of a criminal. What it defines, rather, are the various practices by which the burden of giving has been economised. These only emerged, however, when the original conception of sovereignty had been lost. Rather than defining the unity of the sacrificial system, therefore, substitution represents the first attentuation of its spirit. For this reason, Bataille sought the meaning of sacrifice not in the changing functions the rite has served, but in the notion of sovereignty by which he defined this spirit. This is why he argued that human sacrifice, in which the theanthropic character of the victim is most apparent, is its most complete form, its most elevated expression: not because it is the origin of sacrifice, but because it is close to being the only sacrifice without trickery. Since this form is the sacrifice of the god, this could only be, he says, ‘the ecstatic loss of oneself’.

From the unrestrained economy of this loss, however, comes the paradox on which Bataille’s notion of sovereignty depends, and without which its significance for sacrifice disappears: because Bataille writes that human sacrifice is ‘close to being [se rapproche] the only sacrifice without trickery’, not that it ever is without trickery, since such a sacrifice, he writes, ‘could only be [ne pourrait être] the ecstatic loss of oneself’. Short of the death to which this conditional tense points, however, this is impossible for the finite beings that we are. This has nothing to do with the sacrifier accruing the benefits of sacrifice; but until we become those ‘mythical, imaginary, ideal beings’, sacrifice will never lose its ‘character of performance’. And while it remains in the realm of the spectacle, of the representation of what remains inaccessible to the living, sacrifice will remain a subterfuge. Indeed, sacrifice is this subterfuge. Although the sacrifice of animals preceded that of humans, it is more than likely that what their deaths revealed to the participants in this spectacle was the same. But when man no longer recognised his kindred with animals — the death of which, therefore, lost its anguishing value — human sacrifice was simply the closest man could come to his own death. We return, therefore, to the spectacle of sacrifice, and to the question of what occurred in the minds of the men who first put living beings ritually to death. This is why Bataille sought the answer to this enigma in the equally fundamental question of representation — and why he pursued both in an image of torture. Like his introduction of a vocabulary of torture into the discourse on sacrifice, Bataille’s deliberate conflation of an image of torture with
one of sacrifice introduces what, in the theories formulated to account for this ritual, has been passed over in silence. Between April and May of 1940 — less than a year, that is, since the image of Aztec sacrifice had appeared in ‘Le Sacré’, and immediately following his first meditations, in ‘L’Amitié’, on the photograph of the cent morceaux — Bataille, in the eventually abandoned manuscript of ‘Le Sacrifice’, stated what is at stake in this silence in the clearest of terms:

The question of sacrifice must be stated as the ultimate question. Correspondingly, it is clear that any attempt to answer the ultimate question must, at the same time, resolve the enigma of sacrifice. A discourse on being, a metaphysics, is meaningless if it ignores the game life is obliged to play with death. (OC VII, 264)

The Image of Sacrifice

Because of his unshakeable belief in the importance of this game, in man’s fascination and horror with the spectacle of death, Bataille approached the ultimate question of being through what he proposed were the other forms of communication in which life is brought into play with death. Sacrifice is perhaps the first of these — it is certainly the richest in meaning, the most diverse in form; but there are other forms of communication, Bataille argues, in which the spirit of sacrifice is expressed, and which he would soon begin to speak of under the rubric of ‘sovereign moments’. Circuitous as this route may be (it has already led us through a considerable regress), Bataille was certain of this approach, which lies, he says, outside the scope of academic method, and which led him to address the enigma of sacrifice through the most common form of communication, and precisely that one which has proved most resistant to discursive investigation — laughter. Given its place in the hierarchy of sovereign states, his reason for this is simple. ‘While we have never known the Mexican’s emotion when faced with a man dying at the hands of a priest’, Bataille writes, ‘we have all laughed at the sight of a fellow man’s fall’ (OC VII, 272). This recourse to a phenomenology of laughter, however, only poses a second enigma, in which the terms of the first are shifted. ‘What happens’, Bataille asks, ‘to those who, upon seeing a fellow human being take a fall, burst into laughter? Can it be that his misfortune brings them such joy?’ (OC VII, 272). Bataille’s answer to this should be clear by now. ‘The man who unwittingly falls’, he says, ‘is the substitute for the victim who is put to death; and the shared joy of laughter is that of a sacred communication’ (OC VII, 272). While we can say nothing more about the reason for our laughter, therefore, than the Mexican could of his own experience of sacrifice, what is revealed in this convulsive laughter, Bataille proposes, is the fundamental identity between ecstasy and an impulse to self-destruction. When we laugh, we are bound not only to those who share our laughter, but to the human being whose fall was its precipitate. It is this that returns us to a lost intimacy, sweeping through the sphere of individual being like waves in an ocean. And yet, although we identify with his misfortune — if only
because we recognise in it our own precarious grasp on the world — the cause of our laughter is not the anguish we experience at this fall, but our joy at escaping a similar fate, which exceeds our anguish and at the same time is heightened by it. This doesn’t mean that in consenting to another’s loss we somehow profit by it, but that in that consent our anguish is lifted. From this comes its import for sacrifice. ‘In such moments’, Bataille writes, ‘could he only sustain them, a man might feel that he becomes god’ (OC VII, 279). As we have seen, however, finite being cannot, but must return to a state of suspension between laughter and anguish. Our consciousness of sacrifice, however, is a lingering attachment to death. If laughter is an impulse by which our anguish is dispelled, Bataille concludes, sacrifice is the communication of that anguish through the death of another being. To answer the enigma of sacrifice, therefore, we must address what is revealed in the spectacle of this death.

Although unfinished, the manuscript of ‘Le Sacrifice’ is one of Bataille’s most important texts, not least because it is here that the ‘ultimate question of being’ he had posed at his final presentation to the Collège received its first answer, echoes of which would reverberate throughout the war writings and beyond. It wasn’t until L’Érotisme, however, where this approach to sacrifice was spelt out more clearly than anywhere else, that Bataille finally gave his answer to the enigma. Without waiting to argue the point in the body of his text, Bataille states this immediately in the introduction. Taking his point of departure from the definition of the sacred he announced at the final meeting of the Collège, Bataille argues that since the continuity of being is at the origin of the particular, finite being of man, death does not affect it: indeed, this continuity is independent of death, and is even, to the contrary, revealed by it. ‘This thought, it appears to me’, Bataille writes, ‘must be the basis to the interpretation of religious sacrifice’ (OC X, 27). While the death of the victim, therefore, is as much the focus of the rite for Bataille as it was for Hubert and Mauss, the sacrifier is not there, as they had argued, to profit from his consecration, but to experience what his death reveals:

The victim dies, but the participants share in an element that his death reveals. This element is what it is possible to call, with the historians of religions, the sacred. The sacred is precisely the continuity of being revealed to those who focus their attention, in a solemn rite, on the death of a discontinuous being. (OC X, 27)

This passage has a lot in common with Bataille’s previous assertion, at the end of his article on ‘Le Sacré’, that the sacred is the convulsive communication ‘of what ordinarily is stifled’. What it clarifies, however, particularly in relation

119. This introduction began as a presentation Bataille gave at the ‘Cercle ouvert’ in February 1957. See Georges Bataille, ‘L’érotisme et la fascination de la mort’ (12 February, 1957); collected in OC X, 690-695. Among Bataille’s audience that evening were Hans Bellmer, André Breton, and André Masson.
to the phrase about the sacred being 'the most elusive of what has been produced between men [ce qui se produit de plus insaisissable entre les hommes]', is that for Bataille sacrifice cannot be reduced to a rite by which profane things are made sacred, but must be seen, first and foremost, and beyond the functions it subsequently came to serve, as a spectacle in which, through the ritual putting to death of a living being, the sacred is revealed to the consciousness of man. Rather than being instrumental to the consecration of the victim, therefore, the spectacle of this violent death is its own end:

There is, in a violent death, a rupture in the discontinuity of a being: what remains, and which, in the silence that falls, is experienced by the anxious minds of the participants, is the continuity of being, to which the victim has now returned. Only a spectacular death, carried out under conditions which determine the gravity and the collectivity of religion, is capable of revealing what normally escapes our attention. (OC X, 27)

These lines would provide Bataille with the caption to the reproduction in L'Érotisme of another photograph by Pierre Verger, taken from the same series as the photographs he would later include in Les Larmes d'Eros, and also showing the sacrifice of a ram by a Voodoo cult. That Bataille would go on to pair these images with the photographs of the cent morceaux, with which they make up the 'compelling figures' he concluded his final book with, suggests that they had a similar relation in this work to the image of Aztec sacrifice from the Codex Vaticanus. Both demonstrate the importance of the spectacle of death in sacrifice, and why this spectacle is inseparable from the notion of sovereignty Bataille formulated in Sacrifices. If the I only accedes to its 'specificity' and its 'intégral transcendence' — that is to say, to the particularity and continuity of being — in the form of the 'dying I', Bataille is clear that this form is only 'revealed to consciousness' at the moment when being, as he says, 'is projected into the unreal time of death'. This, moreover, is what he had meant when he stated in the notes to Laure's book that if the sacred is communication not only between men, but between men and a universe in whose formlessness he saw the continuity of being, this implies an identity between what is brought into play by sacrifice and what is apprehended in mystical experience. It is in this light, therefore, that we should read another of Bataille's captions in L'Érotisme, this one accompanying the reproduction of the image of Aztec sacrifice:

It is the general role of sacrifice to bring life and death into harmony, to give death the sudden upsurge of life, life the weight, the vertigo and the opening of death. In sacrifice, life is bound to death, but at the same moment death is a sign of life, an opening onto the infinite. (OC X, plate XI)

120. See Georges Bataille, L'Érotisme, plates III and IV; reproduced in OC X, plates III and IV.
These, however, were not Bataille's final thoughts on sacrifice. They would only appear in the final pages of *Les Larmes d'Eros*, where this image was at last united with the photograph of the cent morceaux it had so long displaced. As I argued at the beginning of this chapter, it was Bataille's meditations on this photograph that led him to the image of sacrifice he arrived at in his last book, and in the context of which, therefore, his relation to the image must be seen.

We left Bataille in September 1939, waiting for war. Deserted by his friends, he sits beneath a once sacred tree in the forest at Saint-Nom-le-Brêeteche, the chance to perform one final and bloody gesture having been denied him. It was from this impasse, however, when all his efforts to found a community proved to be in vain, that Bataille began to write — 'in complete solitude' — the first pages of what would become *Le Coupable*. A month later he was back in the wood, but alone. His evenings are spent in long walks trying to shake off the intense sexual feelings by which he is assaulted. The anniversary of Laure's death approaches. At night he can hear her hand on the latch of his bedroom window. Terrified, he takes refuge in meditation: not to escape his horror, he assures us, but to intensify its representations. Then one night he turns to his photograph, and finds in this tortured body an 'object' of meditation. In contemplating it, moreover, he discovers that he reaches the 'point' of his ecstasy. When he refers to his photograph, therefore, in *L'Expérience intérieure*, he does so under the title 'Première digression sur l'extase devant un objet: le point':

I have had recourse to overwhelming images [*images bouleversantes*]. In particular, I would stare at the photographic image — or at times the memory I had of it — of a Chinese man who must have been tortured in my lifetime. Of this torture, I have had in the past a series of successive representations. In the end, the patient writhed, his chest flayed, arms and legs cut off at the elbows and knees. His hair standing on end, hideous, hagard, striped with blood, beautiful as a wasp.

Bataille is speaking here of the role of mental representations in meditative practice, and specifically of his recourse to this photograph in evoking these representations. Bataille spoke of this as an initial phase in his mystical training, and one subsequently surpassed by what he described as 'l'extase dans le vide'. It is in this initial recourse, however, that Bataille's relation to the image is, perhaps, most clearly betrayed — betrayed, because the images he chose are always unavowable, and this image above all others, which gnawed at him throughout his life. Strictly speaking — which is to say, speaking of its 'beauty' — this image is unseeable, blinding, lacerating, Icarian: because what it opens onto is the violence and the horror at the heart of the sacred. It is this, however, that brings Bataille to the 'point' of his ecstasy. Bataille would go on to describe this point as the 'optical form' experience takes in the wake of the failure of discourse to grasp its object — at which point, he writes 'the mind is an eye' (OC V, 138). But if acceding to this point describes a movement from the steady articulation of speech to the rapid and convulsive movements of the eye, from the
professorial discourse of Dumas to the ecstatic vision of Saint Teresa, this eye and this vision are always blinded by the horror of what they see there. ‘I write "beautiful"!...’, Bataille continues, ‘and something escapes me, flees me, fear robs me of myself, and, as if I had wanted to stare at the sun, my eyes slide away.’ (OC V, 139).

When Bataille first referred to this image, therefore, it was in the pages from ‘L’Amitié’ that he would subsequently subtitle ‘Le point d’extase’, where he spoke of the path he had taken to reach this point. Bataille introduces his photograph in the context of the role the image played in his method of meditation, which he understood, as his reference to the sun indicates, in terms of sacrifice:

Method in meditation is similar to the technique of sacrifice. The point of ecstasy is laid bare if I shatter internally the particularity which encloses me in myself: in the same way, the sacred substitutes for the animal at the moment the priest kills it, destroys it.

If an image of torture falls before my eyes, I can, in my fright, turn away. But if I look at it, I’m thrown out of myself... The hideous sight of torture opens the sphere in which I am enclosed (limited) by my own particularity, opens it violently, and lacerates it. (OC V, 272)

What becomes clear from this comparison, revealing itself as the basis to the decisive role this image played in his life, is that Bataille saw in the violent death of the victim of sacrifice a moment analogous to the point of ecstasy he reached during his meditations on this photograph: both shatter the sphere of particularity in which finite being is enclosed by the profane world, throw man out of himself, and in doing so open his consciousness to the continuity of being. In pursuing this analogy, however, Bataille implicitly compared his own relation to this victim of torture to that of the executioner. Just as the sacrifier, in order to shatter the sphere of his particularity, participates as a spectator in the ritual death of another being, Bataille, in order to lay bare the point of ecstasy, viewed this image through the eyes of the executioner:

I am haunted by the image of the Chinese executioner in my photograph, working to cut off the victim’s leg at the knee: the victim bound to a stake, the eyes rolled up [révulsés], the head thrown back, the grimace of the lips revealing the teeth. The blade enters the flesh at the knee: who could accept that so great a horror would faithfully express ‘what he is’, his nature laid bare? (OC V, 275-76)

Following these lines in the original journal entry, Bataille wrote a passage which was suppressed in both ‘L’Amitié’ and Le Coupable, but which he included over a decade later, and with only a few modifications, among the texts that made
In this description of himself during meditation it is hard not to hear an echo of the drawing by Masson of the figure of Acéphale that Bataille found in Laure’s papers after her death, when he was experimenting with meditative practices. Facing this text, moreover, Bataille was to have reproduced his photograph of the cent morceaux. This was the second time he thought of publishing it, but in a repeat of its suppression in ‘Le Sacré’, neither the text nor the image were ever published. In reading this passage, however, which was to have opened the pages titled ‘La Méditation’, it becomes clear that by adopting the role of the executioner, Bataille, like the sacrificer, sought to identify with the victim of this torture, and thereby attain the ‘ecstatic loss of self’ which he compares in this text to erotic effusion:

During the days when I first meditated, I entered as usual into a state of torpor, when I suddenly felt myself becoming an erect penis. The intensity of my conviction made this difficult to challenge. The previous day, in the same manner, I had had the violent feeling of being a tree — and, without being able to stop myself, my arms had stretched out like branches in the darkness. The idea that my head, my very body, was an enormous cock was so insane that I wanted to laugh. The comic idea occurred to me that so hard an erection — my whole body was as stiff as a hard-on — could only end in ejaculation! It was, moreover, impossible to laugh at the point I had reached: like the torture victim I have the image of, my eyes, I believe, were rolled up [réculsés] in their sockets, my head was thrown back [renversée], and my lips were parted. In this unexpected state the memory of this photograph came to mind without, however, provoking the usual depression: a jet of horror, a burst of light, shot through me from bottom to top. Nothing any longer can exceed the feeling that is inspired in me by torture. (OC IV, 165)

The relationship between torturer and victim is, of course, one of identification — from which the maxim of the father beating his son: ‘This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you’; or: ‘I must be cruel only to be kind’. Bataille knew this side of the coin, on which he always found the blind smile of his father. ‘Something like three years old, my legs naked on my father’s knees and my penis bloody like the sun. This for playing with a hoop. My father slaps me and I see the sun’ (OC II, 10). This, moreover, was how the Aztecs, according to Sahagún, characterised the relationship between the warrior and his captive. Bataille, referring to this in the chapter on Aztec sacrifice from La Part maudite under the title ‘Intimité des bourreaux et des victimes’, recalls that Sahagún, in the course of describing the ‘gladiatorial’ sacrifice depicted in the image from ‘Le Sacré’, recorded that the warrior, having taken the flayed and dismembered body of the sacrificed captive home, distributed the flesh to his family and friends, who ate it at their feasts. ‘But the captor’, Sahagún writes, ‘could not eat the flesh of his captive. He said: “Shall I perchance eat my very self?”’ For when he took the
captive, he had said: "He is as my beloved son". And the captive had said: "He is my beloved father". The torturer, no one more so, lends an unparalleled tenderness to his labour, bestows a care he otherwise reserves only for himself (it is his 'own flesh and blood' he punishes), because only through the intimacy of the bond between himself and his victim can he shatter the limits of his particularity, and thereby attain, in the death of the victim, the point of ecstasy.

In order to emphasise this intimacy, however, Bataille, in the initial transcription of his meditations on this photograph in *L’Expérience intérieure*, was eager to distinguish what bound him to this victim from the bond that is commonly understood to exist between the sadist and the object of his desire:

> The young and seductive Chinese man of whom I have spoken, left to the work of the executioner — I loved him with a love in which the sadistic instinct had no part: he communicated his pain to me, or rather the excess of his pain, and it was precisely that for which I was searching, not to take pleasure in it, but to ruin in me that which is opposed to ruin. (OC V, 140).

Five years later, however, in the discussion following a paper he gave at Club Maintenant in February 1948, Bataille, referring to Blanchot’s recent study on Sade, spoke of the violent pleasure of the sadist as fundamental to the moment of sacrifice, insofar as in his ecstatic identification with his victim the distinction between subject and object is suppressed, dissolved in the movement of their communication:

> Sadism is comprehensible from the moment one perceives that what is at stake in Sade’s conception is really complete destruction, not only of the object of sadism, but of the subject. Sadism is only conceivable on the condition that for him the tortures that he inflicts on others, and which cause them the most unbearable pain, are transformed for him, if he experiences them in his turn, into delights. What, then, is the life of the mystic if not a moral transposition of the character of Sade such as Blanchot defines him? The mystic is fundamentally a man for whom tortures become delights. (OC VII, 404-05)

Bataille would reaffirm this again in *Les Larmes d’Eros*, when he wrote that he discerned in the violence of this image an ‘infinite value of reversal’, and that it was this that brought him to the point of ecstasy. It was at this point — when, as he says here, ‘tortures become delights’, and the horrors of sacrifice are indistinguishable from religious ecstasy — that Bataille saw the movement of


communication between torturer and victim, of their complete identification with each other, and — as occurs in the sacrifice of the god — the collapse of their distinction as separate entities: the torturer as subject, the victim as object. What distinguishes this movement from sadism is that the sadist begins by suppressing the object, while mystical experience begins with the suppression of the subject. This, moreover, is what distinguishes the object of this experience from the transcendental being or beings of organised religion — either a god, as Bataille said, or what resembles one: because if the subject is destroyed in mystical experience, the object of meditation, as it is in sacrifice, is its victim. In the closing pages of 'L’Amitié' Bataille writes:

I did not choose God as an object, but humanly, the young condemned Chinese man who the photographs show streaming with blood, while the executioner tortures him (the blade has entered the bone of the knee). I was bound to this unhappy being by bonds of horror and friendship. But if I look at this image to the point of harmony, it suppresses in me the necessity of being only myself: at the same time this object that I have chosen disintegrates into an immensity, is lost in the tempest of pain. (OC V, 283)

It is in this moment of collapse in the distinction between subject and object, when life and death — as Bataille said of sacrifice — are brought into harmony with each other, that what is implicit in Bataille’s meditations on this photograph become apparent: that he saw in this victim of torture the embodiment of a spirit of sacrifice, or rather — since he was clearly among those for whom the community is the occasion for sacrifice (Acéphale being the expression of this) — a god to support it. Religion in its entirety, Bataille argues, was founded on sacrifice; but only an interminable detour through its history allows us to reach that instant where the religious ecstasy revealed in sacrifice is bound to the horrors of torture. As Dumas’s attempts to describe it indicate, what this image opens onto cannot be contained within the projected aims of discourse, but shatters — 'like a bolt of lightning' — the sphere of particularity in which individual being is enclosed by this discursive relation to the world. The experience of this moment, therefore, poses what is, perhaps, the fundamental question of representation. It goes to the heart of the role it has played — or, to give it a greater urgency, of the demands to which it has responded — in the game man has played, from his earliest days, with the image of his own death. It is not by chance, then, that a book that concludes with the photograph of the cent morceaux opened with the famous image from the bottom of the pit in the cave of Lascaux, an image which shows a bird-headed man, his penis erect, fallen, or at least lying, before a bison that he himself has just killed, and to whom he is united, Bataille says, 'by the approach of death' (OC X, 587).

And yet, despite this affirmation, it is hard to avoid the feeling that Bataille’s recourse to images, no matter how overwhelming, was a poor substitute for the sacrifice of the king. While an older and somewhat chastened Bataille,
looking back on Acéphale after the war, called it ‘untenable’ and ‘stupefying’ (OC VI, 369), he never quite shook off a lingering nostalgia for the encounter in the forest. Certainly Bataille later expressed irritation at the time he had spent, during the 1930s, forcing himself to reach his fellow human beings; but this, he pointedly adds, was a price he had to pay. ‘Ecstasy itself is empty’, he writes, ‘when envisaged as a private exercise, of importance for one alone. . . . If I took refuge in solitude’, Bataille finally concedes, ‘I was compelled to’ (OC V, 109).

The same could be said about the image. In his original journal entries on this photograph as they were first published in ‘L’Amitié’, having proposed the analogy between meditation and sacrifice, Bataille went on to write at considerably greater length — and with far less certainty — about the relative resources of the image in answering the demands of communication:

I repress an image of torture and by this repression I close myself; this repression is one of the doors with the help of which my particularity is closed. If I place the image before me again, it opens the door, or rather, it tears it off. It does not necessarily follow from this, however, that I reach the outside. Lacerating images (in the precise sense of the word) continually form on the surface of the sphere that encloses me. But I only reach the tears — only manage to glimpse the possibility of escape: then the wounds close over. . . . These images make a glimmer appear in a painful and elusive reality, they provoke our nostalgia: but they do not permit us to reach the point where lightning strikes. (OC VI, 301-302)

Bataille would go on to argue that silence alone answers the demands of communication. But if he found this in the face of the torture victim, he never again encountered that headless being who made him laugh. In its place he discovered sovereignty. At the end of Le Coupable, in the pages titled ‘Le roi du bois’, Bataille writes: ‘In the wood my madness reigns as sovereign... Who could suppress death? I set fire to the wood, and flames of laughter flicker within’ (OC V, 365).
3 From Anguish to Ecstasy

One day, man will certainly attain the One, the day when he will cease to exist, that is to say, the day when Being will no longer be revealed by Speech, when God, deprived of the Logos, once more becomes the opaque and mute sphere of the radical paganism of Parmenides. But as long as man lives as a being speaking of Being, he can never surpass the irreducible Trinity that he is and which is Spirit. As for the Duality, it is the malign Spirit of the perpetual temptation for the discursive renunciation of Knowledge, that is to say, of the discourse which necessarily encloses itself in itself in order to maintain itself in its truth. What can one say in response? That Hegelianism and Christianity are at heart two irreducible forms of faith: the one the faith of Saint Paul in the resurrection, the other the down to earth faith one calls good sense? Or that Hegelianism is a 'Gnostic' heresy which, being trinitary, unduly attributes the primacy of the Holy Spirit? Whatever the case, the pages which follow are situated beyond the circular Hegelian discourse. It remains to be seen whether they contain a discourse (which would have, in any case, the value of a refutation) or whether it is a verbal form of contemplative Silence that is to be found in them. For if there is only one way to say the Truth, yet there are innumerable ways to leave it unspoken.

— Alexandre Kojève, 'Préface à l’oeuvre de Georges Bataille' (1950)
I. The Dance

Mark the day when you read by a pebble of fire, you who have paled over the texts of philosophers! How should he who would silence them express himself, if not in a manner which to them is inconceivable?

— Bataille, 'Préface de Madame Edwarda' (1956)

Bataille’s assertion — ‘I am not a philosopher, but a saint, perhaps a madman’ (OC V, 218) — was not entirely a choice on his part. As he himself admitted, he acquired the ‘requisite knowledge’ too late in life (although this phrase is poignantly absurd when applied to the after-hours research of this particular archivist at the Bibliothèque Nationale). And besides — as he often complained — his head ached. One feels — I feel — afraid for him when, on the 5th of March 1944, at one of the soirées Marcel Moré had been holding at his apartment throughout the war, this autodidact remnant of the gay Surrealist years (as he had just been labelled) puts himself on trial before the austere, professional scholars who question him so closely, with such proprietorial concern for the space of discourse. What they want to know, in short, is this: are you one of us (that is, a philosopher), or are you simply trespassing? In any case, Jean-Paul Sartre, although curious enough to turn up, isn’t persuaded: ‘and still . . .’. (And my head, too, aches. The discipline of art history is not an obvious point from which to undertake a study of Bataille; and yet its ‘amateur’ status, precisely because it mirrors Bataille’s own, is perhaps uniquely poised to receive the taste of Bataille’s sweat — the sweat that trickled down his nose that evening. ‘My ideas are too new!’ (he cries). Isn’t that the real object of this study, and isn’t the amateurism of art history — its innocence, that faint half-scent of dilettantism — ideally placed to reflect its breath?) To which Bataille replies (this is from Le Coupable, which Bataille published that month, and I transcribe it here only to evoke the ‘gossamer-like’ thread on which his thought hung during those years):

I grasp the object of my desire: I bind myself to this object, live in it. It’s as sure as light: and like the first hesitant star in the night, it’s a marvel. In order to know this object with me, one would have to accommodate my darkness. This distant object is strange, and yet familiar too: every flowery exhalation of a young girl, the hectic flush of her cheeks touches it. But its transparency is such that a breath will tarnish it, a word dissipate it. (OC V, 313)

The Divinity of Laughter

Two weeks later, on March 19, Picasso’s play, Le Désir attrapé par la queue, is given its inaugural reading at the apartment of Michel and Zette Leiris, where le tout Paris gathers to pay its respects to the great man. (Or nearly all. Paris is several years into its occupation, and liberation, only five months away, is already
too late for some. Picasso’s old friend, Max Jacob, forced to wear the yellow star since the previous May, had just been arrested by the Gestapo. As had Robert Desnos. According to Yuki some friends had phoned them in the middle of the night, but instead of bolting in his pyjamas, Desnos had begun to get dressed. He was just pulling on his shoes on when the ring at the door came. In the audience that evening are Georges and Marcelle Braque, Armand and Lucienne Salacrou, Jaime Sabates, Jean-Louis Barrault, Jacques Lacan and Sylvia Bataille (an item since 1939), Bataille himself, Georges Limbour, Valentine Hugo, Paul and his daughter Cécile Eliard, and an unnamed Argentine Millionaire and his wife — who, to the great joy of the ration-starved Parisians, bring an enormous chocolate cake. The play, unfortunately, is a slightly *jejune* Surrealist drama, more reminiscent of the avant-garde gambits of the 1920s (Picasso cited Jarry’s *Ubu cocu* as his inspiration), than the *engagé* theatre of Sartre’s wartime productions (*Les Mouches*, to the disgust of many, was in repertory at the time). Undeterred, however, everyone does their best to make it a success. Albert Camus takes it upon himself to direct, describing the scenes and introducing the characters from the wings, and Georges Hugnet provides the musical accompaniment (which includes, at the end of act one, Saint-Saëns’ *Danse macabre*); Leiris — no doubt because of his talent for speaking automatist texts — casts himself in the lead role of ‘Big Foot’, and his wife, Zette, plays the ‘Two Toutous’; Dora Maar and Germaine Hugnet are ‘Thin’ and ‘Fat Anguish’ (although there is some confusion over who played which); Jean Aubier’s new wife, the pretty Zanie, is ‘The Tart’, and Aubier himself is ‘The Curtains’; Raymond Queneau is ‘The Onion’, Jacques-Laurent Bost ‘Silence’, Sartre is ‘Round End’, and, in the role of the prudish ‘Cousin’, a still-youthful Simone de Beauvoir — who, years later, would recall the event at some length in *La Force de l’âge* (1962), the second volume of her four-volume autobiography. This was de Beauvoir’s first encounter with Bataille, and she confines her atypically brief comments on him to the observation that she had found ‘certain parts’ of his recently published book ‘irritating’ — ‘though others’, she adds, ‘had moved me deeply’. The book in question was *L’Expérience intérieure*, which Sartre had himself finished pulling apart in typically muscular fashion only a few months earlier. And yet despite this potentially awkward situation, Bataille was no Breton, and the evening, de Beauvoir recalls, was such a success that two days later its central characters re-assembled to commemorate the occasion with a group photograph taken by Brassai in the rue des Grands-Augustins. This had been the setting, nearly ten years before, for the Contre-Attaque meetings organised by Bataille, and was now

1. Despite surviving the camp at Terezine, Desnos died of typhus on June 8, 1945, shortly after its liberation. Jacob, on the other hand, had rapidly fallen to pneumonia in the Drancy camp. On the morning of the 21st of March, only two days after this evening, Leiris attended a religious service to his memory at the Église Saint-Roch. See the diary entry in his *Journal*, p. 386.

Picasso’s studio. Over the next few months this unlikely congregation would endeavour to repeat the flavour of this evening in what Leiris quickly and characteristically dubbed their ‘fêtes’; the next, appropriately enough, held in Bataille’s studio (which he shared with Balthus) overlooking the cour de Rohan, where, to judge by de Beauvoir’s blushing account, they seem to have excelled themselves, prompting her lengthy analysis of their ‘fête-like’ character:

Caillois, in *Le Mythe de la fête* [sic], and Georges Bataille, in *La Part du diable* [sic], have analysed this problem far more exhaustively; I only suggest here what significance it had for me personally. . . . For me, then, the fête is above all an impassioned apotheosis of the present, in the face of disquiet for the future. When the days pass smoothly and happily, there is no stimulus towards a fête: but if hope is rekindled in the very midst of despair, if you regain your hold upon the world and the times — then the instant catches fire, and you can plunge into it and be consumed in it: that is a fête. The distant horizon is uncertain still, half threatening, half promising, which is why every fête has a quality of pathos about it: it confronts this uncertainty, and doesn’t evade it. Nocturnal fêtes for young loves, enormous fêtes on a day of victory: at the heart of the drunken revels there is always a faint taste of death, but for one resplendent moment death is reduced to nothing . . . An impassable zone of silence and night — impossible either to enter or to leave — isolated us from everyone . . . We became a sort of fraternity, unleashing its secret rites away from the shelter of the world. And the truth is we had to invent our spells . . . there exist certain magical conductors that abolish the distances across space and time: the emotions. And with them we summoned up a vast collective emotion which fulfilled all our longings without delay . . . We employed the most well-worn devices to spark off this flame. To begin with, we let rip on the food and drink. Every fête plays havoc with one’s normal economy for an orgy of consumption; and so, at a modest level, it was with us. It required great care and severe self-restraint to amass the provisions and bottles with which we stacked the buffet; then, suddenly, we found ourselves eating and drinking all we could put away. Abundance, so nauseating when cultivated for the mere show of the thing, becomes exalting when it caters to famished stomachs; and we stayed our pangs of hunger with shameless zest. Casual love-making played a very small part in these Saturnalias. It was above all drink which aided our break with the daily humdrum round: when it came to alcohol, we never held back, and none of us had any objection to getting drunk; some even regarded it as a duty. Leiris, among others, set about the task enthusiastically and made a most admirable job of it. I can see him now, bumping down the staircase at Taverny on his bottom, a hilarious expression on his face as he bounced from step to step, yet never losing his somewhat formally dignified appearance. Each of us turned himself, more or less deliberately, into some sort of clown for the other’s benefit, and there was no shortage of attractions: we constituted a sort of carnival, with its ham actors, its confidence-men, its clowns, and its parades. Dora Maar used to mime a bullfight; Sartre conducted an orchestra from the bottom of a cupboard; Limbour carved up a ham as though he were a cannibal; Queneau and Bataille fought a duel with bottles instead of swords; Camus and Lemarchand played military marches on
saucepan lids, while those who knew how to sing, sang. So did those who didn’t. . . . We put on records and danced; some of us, such as Olga, Wanda, and Camus, very well; others less expertly.

This was de Beauvoir’s first and slightly startled entry into the forming post-war intelligentsia of Paris — a bizarre mix of ex-Surrealists, members of the former Collège de sociologie, and the newly emerging leaders of Existentialism — and although la notion de dépense was obviously in the air, the ‘dutiful daughter’ hadn’t quite assimilated its spirit. The flame in which she views this moment — although tentatively illuminating an economy of orgiastic consumption (‘so nauseating’ when cultivated for its own sake) — quickly becomes, in her hands, so much kindling for future hopes. The secret rituals of the fête, moreover (it is clear she had heard something of Bataille’s pre-war antics), far from communicating the disquiet of an uncertain future, are put, instead, in the service of dispelling the ‘faint taste of death’ in the wine — reducing it to nothing. Excess, for de Beauvoir, remains an expression of hunger, drunkenness a duty, the carnival an act of deliberation, dancing a matter of expertise, and ‘casual love-making’ (even when indulged in) hardly central to the proceedings. Bataille, needless to say, was something less than an expert at the social transactions of expenditure. His own diary from this period recalls a very different evening:

Happiness, remembering the night where I drank and danced — danced alone, like a peasant, like a faun, among couples. Alone? To tell the truth, we danced face to face, in a potlatch of absurdity, the philosopher — Sartre — and I. I remember dancing in whirling circles. Jumping, stomping down the floorboards. In a sentiment of defiance, of comic madness. This dance — before Sartre — is connected for me with the memory of a painting (Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon [sic]). The third figure was a mannequin made out of a horse’s head and a flowing dressing gown, striped yellow and mauve. The sad canopy of a gothic bed presided over the romps. A five month nightmare ended in carnival. (OC VI, 90)

Whatever the differences between these two accounts of the same event — and it is the fundamental difference between their respective economies of the moment that I wish to consider in this chapter — what they both share is a remarkable lapse in memory when identifying the works under whose sign they wish to place this night. As Denis Hollier has pointed out, the text to which de Beauvoir is presumably referring here — and to which Bataille himself would refer throughout his life whenever he attempted to analyse the festival — is Caillois’s ‘Le Sacré de transgression: théorie de la fête’. This had originally been presented at a meeting of the Collège de sociologie in May 1939, and first

appeared, under this title, as chapter four of Caillois’s *L’Homme et le sacré*, before being reprinted separately in the December 1939-January 1940 issue of *La Nouvelle revue française*. As for *La Part du diable*, it was written by Denis de Rougemont, another member of the Collège; while *La Part maudite* would not be published for another five years. Bataille’s memory, however, is equally at fault. The painting to which he connects his dance with Sartre, and which he remembers — possibly because Picasso referred to it in his play — as *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907), is far more likely to have been Picasso’s *La Danse* (1925), a work to which Bataille had far closer connections (plate 13). In 1930, he had included a reproduction of this painting at the head of his early article on Picasso, ‘Soleil pourri’, in which, as we have seen, Bataille made his first attempt to link painting with sacrifice (and specifically the Mithraic cult). When it was first reproduced, moreover, in the fourth issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* (the first time Bataille was likely to have seen the painting), it had appeared there only a few pages after a reproduction of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (also being reproduced for the first time). In any case, the subject of *Les Trois danseuses* — as the painting is also known — certainly makes it more appropriate to the scene of Bataille dancing with Sartre, and seems to explain his reference to a ‘third figure’, whose role that night was played by a draped horse’s skull. Leiris remembers this skull as a feature of the ‘unhealthy’ attic Bataille shared with Balthus that year; and, significantly, it had appeared as one of the images in the original list of illustrations to Bataille’s article on ‘Le Sacré’. This, however, only suggests what Bataille’s reference to the *potlatch* confirms: that he saw his dance that evening in terms of a sacrifice.

Leiris, of course, who was especially fond of jazz (during his association with *Documents* he had regularly dragged Bataille off to see the ‘Black Birds’ revue), had long ago identified the trance-like dance it induced as the sacred element in any festive gathering. ‘Jazz’, he had written in a brief entry in *Documents*, ‘represents the true sacred music of today (which is to say, that which is the most capable of putting a crowd “into a trance”’). And in *L’Âge d’homme* he had spoken in terms remarkably similar to those used by de Beauvoir of how jazz, in the celebrations that followed the end of the Great War, had captured what he called ‘the colour of the moment’. It was the influence of Jazz, which he compares to ‘a kind of possession’, that gave these celebrations their true meaning: ‘a religious meaning’, Leiris writes, ‘with communion by dance, latent or manifest eroticism, and drinks, the most effective means of bridging the gap that separates individuals from each other at any kind of gathering’. More revealing still, however, of how Bataille saw the link between the religious significance of this dance — with or without Sartre, and whose sacrificial character Picasso’s painting expressed so well — and the experience in which, as

de Beauvoir says, 'the instant catches fire', is his description of his dance that evening as 'en tournoyant' — 'in whirling circles': a term which, appearing as it eventually would in a book on Nietzsche, cannot but be read in relation to his vision of the eternal return of the same.\(^7\)

For Bataille, who was somewhat ambivalent about what Nietzsche called 'the greatest weight', the eternal return was, first and foremost, an ecstatic experience of losing oneself in the moment: when the subject, no longer entwined in the unfolding continuum of time — which is to say, in the movement of its becoming — is absorbed, without attachment to either the future or the past, in the instant.\(^8\) De Beauvoir had recognised something of this when she spoke of the festival as an abolition of the 'distances of space and time'. Because of this, Bataille was particularly drawn to Nietzsche's account of the moment when he had experienced his 'vision' of the eternal return for the first time. Although he alluded to it on numerous occasions, the most complete account of this moment appears in *Ecce Homo*, where Nietzsche recalls staying in the village of Sils-Maria in the Swiss alps during the summer of 1881. 'I was that day', he writes, 'walking through the woods beside the lake of Silvaplana; I stopped beside a mighty pyramidal block of stone which reared up not far from Surlej. Then this idea came to me'.\(^9\) And while Bataille, in the few pages on Nietzsche from *L'Expérience intérieure*, insisted that he had not found in this idea 'anything that might move me in my turn', and indeed, that he was 'indifferent' to its intellectual content, (OC V, 177), he nevertheless identified closely with this experience of Nietzsche's, in which he saw, rather, an apotheosis of the present over the future. The importance of this to Bataille was that in the vision (rather than the idea) of the eternal return he saw a moment in which Nietzsche had experienced the opposed and seemingly contradictory poles of existence as identical. This was not an imposition on Bataille's part, but was confirmed by Nietzsche's own descriptions of his experience, in Sils-Maria and elsewhere, of what Bataille did not hesitate to call ecstatic states. In a letter to Peter Gast that

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same month, Nietzsche wrote that during his walks in the Alps, the intensity of his feelings made him weep and laugh at the same time: 'not sentimental tears, mind you', he adds, 'but tears of joy . . . filled to the brim with my new vision'. It was these tears that Bataille, who quoted these lines on several occasions, identified with, seeing in them the clearest expression of what Nietzsche had experienced in his vision of the eternal return. When he refers to these lines, therefore, in *L'Expérience intérieure*, Bataille limits himself to adding: 'I imagine myself arriving at the shore of the lake, and, imagining it, I weep' (OC V, 177).

Bataille, of course, had known these tears of joy all his life. In 1927, to accompany W.-C. (his first and subsequently destroyed novel), he had made a drawing of a landscape in which a path, winding its way from a distant horizon, passed through a guillotine. Between the blades of this guillotine there appeared, in place of the setting sun, a solitary eye — 'solar', he writes, 'and bristling with eyelashes' (OC III, 59). Bataille titled this drawing 'l'éternel retour', and although he does not say so, its source was clearly Nietzsche's vision of the return as it is described in book three of *Also sprach Zarathustra*, where, in the section titled 'Of the Vision and the Riddle', the moment is shown as cutting into the continuum of time like the blade of a guillotine into the neck of its victim. Mirroring his own experience at lake Silvaplana, Nietzsche's description of the vision of the eternal return appearing to Zarathustra takes on the character of an epiphany:

Behold this gateway . . . it has two aspects. Two paths come together here: no one has ever reached their end. This long lane behind us: it goes on for eternity. And that long lane ahead of us — that is another eternity. They are in opposition to one another, these paths; they abut on one another: and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is written above it: 'Moment'.

The object of this vision, however — what made Nietzsche laugh and tremble at the same time — was not, Bataille says, the idea of the eternal return

11. Nietzsche communicates the vision of the eternal return on three occasions in his published works: at the end of the fourth book of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882), §341: 'The greatest weight'; at the beginning of book three of *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1884): 'Of the Vision and the Riddle'; and in part three of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (1886), §56, under the rubric of 'circulus vitiosus deus'. On these divisions, see the lectures delivered by Martin Heidegger at the University of Freiburg-im-Breisgau in the summer semester of 1937; collected in his *Nietzsche*, vol. 1 (Pfullingen: Günther Neske, 1961); translated and edited by David Farrell Krell as *Nietzsche*, vol. 2. *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984; HarperCollins reprint, 1991).
itself, but what it 'laid bare', which he calls, somewhat elliptically, 'the impossible depth of things' (OC V, 178). This, however, is only another way of speaking of the night in which being is lost at the sovereign moment. What the vision of the eternal return lays bare, therefore, and which distinguishes it, for Bataille, from the idea it represents, is the colour — as Leiris might have said — of this moment. In another passage from Ecce Homo, which follows only a few pages on from his account of the vision at Surlej, and which Bataille would quote in Sur Nietzsche, Nietzsche speaks in terms remarkably similar to Bataille about his experience of the seemingly contradictory character of such moments, among which he includes his own experience of the eternal return. 'It's an abyss of happiness', he writes, 'in which horror and the most extreme suffering no longer appear as its contrary, but as the condition and result, as the necessary colour at the bottom of this excess of light'.13 Implicit in this vision of the return, therefore, and the point to which I will return at the end of this chapter, is what Bataille understood it to have shared with mystical experience. It is this that gives it its colour of totality — and of violence. For the moment, however, it is enough to recognise that when Bataille recalled his 'happiness, remembering the night when I drank and danced...', he was raising his voice in what Nietzsche, at the end of Zarathustra, called 'The Drunken Song': because it is here that the connection between the ecstatic experience of the eternal return and what de Beauvoir called the 'apotheosis of the present' is spelled out in all its contradictions:

Did you ever say Yes to one joy? O my friends, then you said Yes to all woe as well. All things are chained and entwined together, all things are in love; if ever you wanted one moment twice, if ever you said: 'You please me, happiness, instant, moment!' then you wanted everything to return!.14

I will come back to the 'necessary colour' of this moment. For the present I merely want to signal that Bataille's first encounter with Sartre took place under the sign of Nietzsche and his reading of the eternal return. I want to return, however, to the circumstances that led Bataille to describe this dance with Sartre as a 'potlatch of absurdity': partly, no doubt, because this dance offers an irresistible image of the tensions that existed between the inter- and post-war generations of the Parisian intelligentsia (which leaves de Beauvoir, who I have been unfairly singling out, looking slightly ludicrous), but more particularly because it seems to me that it is this episode of the fêtes that is at the origin of Bataille's difficult and one-sided relationship with Sartre (who is my real focus). Sartre, after all, apart from recently publishing the imposing L'Être et le temps (1943) — the work which had launched him, at only thirty-eight, as the

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, pp. 331-332.
recognised leader of French Existentialism — had also, between October and
December of the previous year, published 'Un nouveau mystique', his
unremittingly harsh review of L'Expérience intérieure — which, it should be
remembered, was not only Bataille's first book, but his own attempt, at the rather
riper age of forty-seven, at recognition. And like de Beauvoir, Sartre hadn't
liked it. For his part, Bataille had come to regard his own terminal lack of
recognition with a slightly bitter, but in any case Hegelian irony — which isn't
to say, however, that Sartre's emerging excess of it wouldn't have contributed to
the sentiment of defiance Bataille felt toward the little man who, as he danced (no
doubt expertly) before him, seemed to embody the very face of philosophy.

Having finished writing Le Coupable, Bataille had returned from Vézelay
to Paris in October 1943 just in time to read the first instalment of Sartre's attack
on him in Cahiers du sud. Although not a well man at the time (he was still
suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis), Bataille stayed in Paris long enough to
see his latest book through to publication, before a relapse the following April
forced him to leave for Samois in Seine-et-Marne. It is during this brief stay in
Paris that Bataille, from around February 1944 onwards, began to write the last
instalment of his wartime trilogy, Sur Nietzsche: volonté de chance (1945) —
beginning with the text he read at Moré's that March under the provocative title
'Conférence sur le bien et le mal'. Moré had been introduced to Bataille by Leiris
around 1935, and had grown close enough to him to have been present at Laure's
death. Bataille had told him he was interested in contributing a paper to the
discussion groups, but on the condition that it was devoted to the question of
sin. Moré agreed, and as chance would have it, it was also Bataille's
opportunity to answer Sartre's many criticisms of his book. But in the discussion
which followed his talk he couldn't resist the opportunity to respond to an
accusation which had clearly irritated him as none of the other, more considered
points had quite managed. Sartre, in his review, had written that Bataille's
laughter was hollow — 'yellow', was his word for it — and when, the following
year, Bataille's included his presentation, under its new title of 'Le Sommet et le
déclin', as the centrepiece of Sur Nietzsche, his book was littered with this
reproach and Bataille's assertions to the contrary. Indeed, under the weight of
Sartre's attack the 'colour' of Bataille's laughter came to constitute a point of
contention that was always, and on both sides, more than merely polemical.

There was a line of Nietzsche's that Bataille liked to quote: 'To see tragic
natures founder and be able to laugh at it, despite the profound understanding,

17. See, in particular, the diary entries during his stay in Paris (OC VI, 74 and 81-82).
emotion and sympathy that one feels, that is divine'. For Bataille, laughter was a point both of his rupture with philosophy — first with Bergson, but later embodied in the figure of Sartre ('the philosopher and I') — but also, and more particularly for him, of his identification with Nietzsche, who, in his book, he had memorably called (with a few exceptions) 'my only company on this earth' (OC VI, 27). Because of this, it is tempting to see in Bataille's dance — this peasant dance of a faun, 'jumping, stomping down the floorboards in a sentiment of defiance, of comic madness' — a re-affirmation of the colour of his laughter, which, in the discussion following his presentation, and with direct reference to Sartre's accusation, he compared to that of Nietzsche. Recalling this line of Nietzsche's, Bataille remarked: 'One thinks, à propos Nietzschean laughter, of sniggering [ricanement]. I have spoken of laughter, and I have been depicted as having a yellow laughter... this kind of laughter is the most foreign to my own. ... . I can only speak of a laughter of great happiness, of great puerility' (OC VI, 356). This is a description I would extend to this 'whirling' dance with philosophy — 'face to face', as Leiris would recall him, with Sartre — which Bataille would go on to describe as 'the dance of wartime'. Near the end of the war, with liberation imminent, Bataille wrote in his journal: 'preparing to greet those who fell with bursts of laughter. Is this clarity or cruelness? Clarity. Since immanence is freedom — laughter' (OC VI, 175). Tragedy, as we have seen, was linked in Bataille's mind to the death of the sovereign, and in the preface to his book — in which he again quotes Nietzsche's words about the divinity of this laughter, of being able to laugh precisely at the tragic — he laid down the challenge implicit in this laughter: 'Would we dare to apply this proposition to current events?', he writes, 'instead of committing ourselves to new moral transcendences... ' (OC VI, 24).

The target of this laughter, however — and perhaps this is why he was so mistaken about its colour — was clearly Sartre, who had concluded his review

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, Volonté de puissance, traduit par Geneviève Bianquis (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1935), p. 380. Although this fragment, from 1882-84, appears in this French translation of Der Wille zur Macht (the edition to which Bataille generally referred), this was a translation of Friedrich Würzbach's contentious 1940 German edition, which includes many notes not included in Kaufmann's English translation. See Kaufmann's comments on this edition in Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale; and edited, with a commentary, by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. xviii. In the last few years Bataille had quoted this phrase in his 1942 article 'Le rire de Nietzsche' (OC VI, 311); in the opening page of L'Expérience intérieure (OC V, 9); in both the preface and the second appendix to Sur Nietzsche (OC VI, 24n and 189); and in Mémoirandum (OC VI, 264). He would quote it again, no doubt with Sartre in mind (who had drawn attention to its implications in his review), in his 1947 article, 'Baudelaire "mis à nu": l'analyse de Sartre et l'essence de la poésie' (OC IX, 202); and finally in a lecture he gave in February 1953 on 'Non-savoir, rire et larmes' (OC VIII, 225).

19. In an interview published in Libération following Sartre's death in 1980, Leiris commented: 'In the course of one of the fiestas of the Spring of 1943, about which Simone de Beauvoir spoke, I recall that Sartre and Bataille performed a kind of dance together, a little like one does today, standing face to face'. See Michel Leiris, 'Sur le Collège de sociologie', Libération (18 May, 1980).
of *L'Expérience intérieure* with a declaration that uncannily presaged de Beauvoir’s own attempt to subsume the orgiastic expenditure of the fête to useful ends:

But the joys to which M. Bataille invites us, if they refer only to themselves, if they cannot be integrated into a framework of new endeavours, or contribute to forming a new humanity that will supersede itself [se dépassera] toward new ends, have no more value than the pleasure of drinking a glass of alcohol or feeling the warmth of the sun at the beach.²⁰

To which Bataille, who quotes these lines in an appendix to *Sur Nietzsche*, responds: ‘That is true, but I insist: it is precisely because that is what they are — leaving me empty — that these pleasures are prolonged within me in the perspective of anguish’ (OC VI, 199). Bataille, to be fair, would later accuse himself of a certain deafness in his relations with Sartre — but the compliment could just as well be returned. The tone of this particular exchange, however — in which, certainly, Bataille had more invested than Sartre — is not merely a question of a terminology which Sartre had already accused him of misusing (of laughter, certainly, but also of anguish, and most poignantly of the relationship between the two): it stems, more simply, from the meeting of discursive thought and a glass of alcohol. It is hardly necessary to recall, therefore, that Jean Hyppolite had recently established ‘dépasser’ as the standard equivalent of Hegel’s ‘aufheben’ [to sublate].²¹ Sartre, as Bataille would later remind him, has already said too much when he talks of subsuming the pleasures of the moment within a framework of ‘endeavours’ in which they ‘supersede’ themselves in the movement toward ever new ‘ends’.

There is a distinction to be made here, and which Sartre himself makes, between the ‘moment’ in the Hegelian sense of the word — which is to say, as a constitutive element elicited by consciousness in the dialectic of human becoming — and the flame which consumes itself, like laughter, in a moment of time which Bataille, in order to clarify this distinction, would sometimes call the ‘instant’. Laughter, peculiar to this humanity Sartre is so keen to supersede, has no goal, serves no ends, and cannot be integrated into a world of projects — which is precisely why Bataille saw in it the key to this humanity. The expenditure of energy released in a burst of laughter — its negativity — is not subsumed within but, on the contrary, arrests the movement of time, which is prolonged within it, as Bataille says here, ‘in the perspective of anguish’. This is

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Un nouveau mystique’, p. 174; quoted by Bataille in ‘Réponse à Jean-Paul Sartre (Défense de L’Expérience intérieure)’, appendix four of *Sur Nietzsche* (OC VI, 199).

why Bataille, as he says in the preface to *Sur Nietzsche*, believed it necessary to 'reverse' the idea of the eternal return:

It is not by the promise of infinite repetitions that we are lacerated, but by this: that the instants grasped within the immanence of the return suddenly appear as ends. Remember that in *every system* those instants are envisaged and assigned as means: every morality says: 'let each instant of your life be *motivated*'. The return *de-motivates* the instant, frees life from an end and is, thereby, first of all its downfall. The return is the dramatic mode and the mask of the whole man: it is the desert of a man whose every instant is henceforth unmotivated. (OC VI, 23)

Although Sartre had not yet outlined his program of *littérature engagée*, it is clear that this is precisely the sort of morality Bataille has in mind. For this reason, as Bataille will say in *Méthode de méditation* (1947), he takes his point of departure not, as Heidegger had, from the anguish of a 'being-toward-death [Sein-zum-Tode]', but from the collective laughter in which that anguish is dispelled (OC V, 217).22 This, however, was a laughter that Sartre, the student of Heidegger, couldn't hear. Because of which — because of this deafness which presides over the exchanges between Bataille and Sartre — the debate between them would turn on the colour of Bataille's laughter, in which it is possible to hear the echoes of Nietzsche's madman proclaiming the 'death of God' ('I am not a philosopher, but a saint, perhaps a madman'). This, ultimately, was the truth of the eternal return for Bataille, and what linked it, in his eyes, to its ecstatic vision. In his 1938 article 'L'Obélisque', in the lines he titled 'The Pyramid of Surlej', Bataille wrote:

What Nietzsche experienced when his thoughts suddenly resulted in the ecstatic vision of the eternal return cannot be compared to the feelings habitually linked to what passes for profound reflection. For the object of the intellect exceeds here the categories in which it can be represented, to the point where, as soon as it appears, it becomes an object of ecstasy — an object of tears, an object of laughter. (OC I, 510)23

The ecstatic character of the return is so important to Nietzsche's vision, Bataille says, that if it were set aside, even for a moment, its formal content

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22. See Martin Heidegger, *Was ist Metaphysik?* (Bonn: Friedrich Cohen, 1929); translated by Henri Corbin as *Qu'est-ce que c'est la métaphysique?*, suivi d'extraits sur l'être et le temps (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1937); and by David Farrell Krell as *What is Metaphysics?*, in *Basic Writings*; revised and expanded edition; edited, with a general introduction, and an introduction to each section, by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 89-110. For a discussion of the differences between Bataille's position and that of Heidegger, and of Sartre's attempt to reduce the former to the latter, see Rebecca Comay, 'Gifts without Presents: Economies of "Experience" in Bataille and Heidegger', in Allan Stoekl, ed., 'On Bataille', *Yale French Studies*, no. 78 (1990), pp. 66-89.

would risk appearing empty. This, however, raises the question of its appearance within discursive thought — which is where the vision of the eternal return takes on its true meaning for Bataille. 'In order to represent the decisive break that occurred', he writes, 'it is necessary to link the lacerating [déchirante] appearance of the "return" to what Nietzsche experienced when he reflected on the explosive vision of Heraclitus, and to what he experienced later in his own vision of the "death of God" (OC I, 510). It is this link, I believe, that Bataille saw in Picasso’s painting of La Danse, whose cruciform composition leaves no doubt about the sacrificial character of this dance. He had already seen this ecstatic embrace of death in both the image and description, in the Codex Vaticanus, of the dancing victims of Aztec sacrifice. But for Bataille, this dance represented not only a sacrificial identification with the ‘dying god’, but the vertiginous joy into which man is propelled by the ‘death of God’. As Zarathustra himself had sang (and when I imagine these words in Bataille’s mouth I can think of no better epithet to Picasso’s painting): ‘I would only believe in a God who knew how to dance’.24

A Discussion on Sin

Much has been made of the fact that while he was working on La Danse, Picasso received news that a close friend of his youth, the Catalan painter Raymond Pichot, had died.25 Since it was over Pichot’s wife, Germaine Pichot, that another of Picasso’s friends from his Barcelona days, Carlos Casagemas, had committed suicide nearly a quarter of a century before, it has been claimed that Picasso’s strong emotional response to this earlier death — which is borne out by the many paintings that bore its traces at the time — was revived by the news of Pichot’s death. Picasso himself commented that the painting should have been called ‘The Death of Pichot’, whose latent ‘presence’ in the painting, he said, accounted for the black profile of a face behind the dancer on the right, which he added at a later stage of the work.26 Drawing on this identification, it has been argued that the painting’s left-hand figure, which was also extensively reworked from a less convulsed attitude, can be seen as a depiction of the promiscuous, volatile Germaine — whom Picasso apparently held responsible for the death of Casagemas — or perhaps even of Olga Kokhlova, the dancer with Diaghilev’s company who Picasso had married seven years earlier, and with whom he was

24. Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, p. 68.
becoming increasingly disenchanted at the time. To the extent they attempt to fix the referent of this image, these anecdotes tell us little about this painting. I recall them here, however, since they suggest the events that might have led to Picasso’s engagement— which is usually dated to this painting, and which he would pursue over the next few years— with an aesthetics of convulsiveness and an iconography of the Crucifixion that has more to do with Surrealism and Nietzsche than the contingencies of his private life. The Dionysian energy of this painting is as opposed to the classicism of Picasso’s contemporary studies of the dancers in Diaghilev’s company as the rhythms of Jazz were opposed to the controlled movements of the Ballet Russes, and it is with these oppositions, which had characterised Picasso’s works of the previous years, that this painting grapples. Rather than seeing the painting’s three figures as some combination of Pichot, Casegemas, Germaine and Olga, therefore, I want to approach them as the constitutive elements of a trinity structure that Picasso had already used several times previously, and which, as the representation of an antithesis which finds its unity in a central figure, is a trope of western art.

Because of this, the image with which Picasso’s painting bears closest comparison among the images to appear in Bataille’s books is Matthias Grünewald’s Christus am Kreuze (c. 1526) (plate 14). Picasso, who in 1932 began a series of pen and ink variations on the Crucifixion, seven of which were published in the first issue of Minotaure, was an admirer of Grünewald; and although it is unlikely that he had specific images in mind when he painted La Danse, it has been argued that the way in which the central figure in this painting

27. Alley has provided the comparison of a small oil sketch that Picasso had completed two years earlier, in which the postures of the three figures match those of the larger painting before Picasso reworked the left hand figure. As the thickened and crumbled surface of the painting clearly reveals, the curious head of this figure was originally placed high in the frame of the left window, considerably reducing the arch of its back. See Ronald Alley, Picasso: The Three Dancers, p. 14 (fig. 16).


is flanked on one side by a comparatively calm male presence and on the other by an ecstatic, or at least anguished, woman is reminiscent of the famous Crucifixion scene from the central panel of Grünewald’s Isenheimer Altar (1515).\(^{30}\) It was a reproduction of the later and less famous work, however, that Bataille, many years later, included in L’Érotisme, in the same chapter as the image of Aztec sacrifice from the Codex Vaticanus. I will come back to why he chose this particular image later on; but Bataille relates it here to the disavowal, during the Catholic rite of mass, of the ‘sin’ of the Crucifixion. Bataille attributes this to the blindness of the original perpetrators of the deed, for whom the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth was nothing more than the execution of a criminal. And while Saint Augustine would come to recognise the necessity of this death — which he calls the ‘happy fault [felix culpa]’ — the difference between this point of view and that of earliest man lies precisely in the deliberate nature of ancient sacrifice. Because consciousness of the necessity of sin is at odds with the logic of the Christian doctrine, which closes its eyes, because of this, to the true nature of its sacrificial origins, ‘misunderstanding of the sanctity of transgression’, Bataille writes, ‘is one of the foundations of Christianity’ (OC X, 91). It was in order to redress this misunderstanding that Bataille, in his presentation at More’s, addressed the problem of sin.

Bataille’s audience at his talk was an impressive, if heterodox and somewhat imposing roll-call of Parisian intellectuals, writers, academics, Christians, Hegelians, ex-Surrealists and future Existentialists — including, among others: Arthur Adamov, Blanchot, Jean Bruno, Pierre Burgeлин, Camus, R.P. [Révérend Père] Jean Daniélou, R.P. Dominique Dubarle, Maurice de Gandillac, Hypollite, Klossowski, Leiris, Jacques Madaule, Gabriel Marcel, Louis Massignon, R.P. Augustin Maydieu, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Moré, Jean Paulhan, Pierre Prévost, and of course, de Beauvoir and Sartre. Following Bataille’s presentation, a long discussion ensued which was later published, preceded by Klossowski’s summary of Bataille’s presentation, as ‘Discussion sur le péché’.\(^{31}\) The discussion itself, chaired by de Gandillac, opened with a question whose lack of clarification haunted the proceedings. Klossowski, by now a practising Catholic, attempted to situate Bataille’s deliberately provocative terminology of sin and guilt within an implicitly Kierkegaardian framework (‘To be guilty or not to be’, he says, ‘there is the dilemma’); whereupon various objections were raised and definitions proposed by the Catholic contingent of Daniélou, Maydieu and Burgeлин.\(^{32}\) In the middle of this largely theological discussion, however,

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30. See John Golding, ‘Picasso and Surrealism’, p. 84.
31. See ‘Discussion sur le péché’, Dieu vivant, no. 4 (1945); collected in OC VI, 315-359.
32. Klossowski would repeat the terms of this dilemma word for word in his post-war article on Bataille, in which he argued that Bataille’s experience is in fact a nostalgic state of faith. See Pierre Klossowski, ‘Le Corps du néant: L’expérience de la Mort de Dieu chez Nietzsche et la nostalgie d’une expérience authentique chez Georges Bataille’, in Sade mon prochain, collection ‘Pierres Vives’ (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1947), p. 178. For a discussion of this text in the context of Klossowski’s
Adamov makes an observation which, like a lightning flash of recognition in the general obscurity that, despite his best attempts (of which this was one), continued to enshroud Bataille, is so responsive to the demands of his talk that it receives almost unanimous approval (the exception, again, is Sartre) — he praises the authenticity of Bataille's voice. 'What struck me the most in the discussion', Adamov says, 'is Bataille's tone of voice: it seems to me to be absolutely authentic. The Egyptians were right to make the "right intonation of the voice" the preliminary condition to the enunciation of any truth. It is very rare, in our day, simply to hear a man speak with an intonation that is truly his, one which translates a personal experience' (OC VI, 331). This is immediately echoed by Massignon: 'I have been very struck by the tone of simplicity, of direct avowal, of M. Bataille. He has spoken like a man, like a man who has had an experience' (OC VI, 334); and repeated by de Gandillac: 'I now feel more at ease with you because we have all been convinced by your tone. As Adamov said, if there are among us those who were at times capable of doubting the profoundly authentic character of your experience and of your entire book, this suspicion has been absolutely dismissed by the very tone of our conversation' (OC VI, 355). Even Hyppolite, who enters the discussion later, is finally won over by this 'tone' — won over, that is, not to Bataille's position, with which he remains in fundamental disagreement, but by a sense of what those who knew Bataille best found most unique in him — his friendship. 'I do not know you', Hyppolite says near the end of the discussion, 'but in truth I have arrived at a better understanding of your position here than through your book — to the extent that you will agree that I have arrived. We have wanted to enclose you in a system too logical for you' (OC VI, 357). Indeed, so won over is Hyppolite that the only 'sin' he accuses Bataille of is intellectual eclecticism: of attempting to cement — no doubt under the exigency of an inner intellectual sincerity — philosophically incompatible sources whose internal rigour, he implies, Bataille hasn't understood. Above all, the ambiguity with which Bataille employs certain philosophical terms raises very particular ontological questions for Hyppolite about the place Bataille reserves in his terminology for the word 'nothingness [néant]'

As Hyppolite points out, and as the etymology of the word suggests, the states of ecstasy (from ekstasis) to which Bataille refers in describing his inner experience suggest a movement 'beyond the self', and therefore a negation of the limits of that self. This raises the question, however, of whether the nothingness of this beyond is, as Hyppolite suggests, in desire itself — that is to say, in the negativity through which man, by his actions, manifests this nothingness in being — or whether nothingness is something which, on the ontological level, is beyond the limits of being. Alert to where this representation of the beyond is leading relationship to his old friend, see Jane Gallop, 'Whoring among Friends: Klossowski on Sade', in *Intersections: A Reading of Sade with Bataille, Blanchot, and Klossowski* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), pp. 67-112.
him, Bataille responds by stating that being, for him, designates the particular being of man, and nothingness, therefore, the absence of this particularity. It is toward this nothingness, he says, that desire turns in order to escape from the limits of the self: not as if toward an object — 'since this object', he says, 'is nothing [rien]' (OC VI, 337) — but toward a region across which the being of the other appears. 'Nothingness', Bataille concludes, 'is always the annihilation of being, the point where being annihilates itself' (OC VI, 338).

Although clearly not happy with Bataille’s interpretation of these terms, Hyppolite generously concedes that their disagreement comes down to ‘very different valorisations of the beyond’ — to which Bataille grudgingly acquiesces. Sartre, however, who until now has kept quiet, when he finally enters the discussion does so by criticising precisely this ambiguity in Bataille’s deployment of philosophical language — in which, he says, he hears a ‘fault [faute]’ and not a sin. For Sartre, this putting in play of terms is strictly a question of discourse — and of the inadequacy of Bataille’s to attain its object — rather than of being and the inadequacy of language (what Bataille regarded as its limits) to articulate a silence beyond it. Such a stance, Sartre observes, makes Bataille’s position ‘fairly delicate’ — to which Bataille, of course, agrees: ‘It makes my position perfectly weak’, he answers, ‘perfectly fragile. And it is precisely in this sense that I have spoken of an end to the other. I have spoken only of an untenable position’. Sartre, however, will have none of this: ‘You have already said "when I speak"’, he cuts in, ‘and you have played it beautifully to make the fault fall on language. But there is, on the one hand, the exposition that you make and, on the other hand, your concrete research. It is this research alone which interests me. If its language is distorted, then you are at fault. We are at fault in listening to you’ (OC VI, 345).

Harsh words, certainly, and to the point; but for Sartre, the recent exponent of a ‘phenomenological ontology’, the nothingness of which Bataille speaks, and which he posits as the beyond of individual being, if it is not carried within the self as negation — that is to say, as desire itself — cannot be manifested in a being which would therefore be replete, and therefore cannot be posited as an equally full and inaccessible beyond which would be, in a sense, nothing. ‘There are two possible positions’, Sartre snaps: ‘either we are plenitudes and what we search for is nothingness, or we are voids [vides] and what we search for is being’ (OC VI, 339). Bataille, his hand suitably slapped, accepts this, but only with the proviso that the beyond for which the being of man searches is not the nothingness of metaphysics, but that of another being, with which it seeks to communicate. This other being, however, can only be reached across a nothingness that, in the moment in which the other is attained, coincides with the annihilation of individual being: because at this moment the being of this desire, in its perception of the other, is made aware of what Bataille calls the ‘weariness [ennui]’ of individual being, and in this weariness, he says, there is already contained the ‘feeling of the void [sentiment du vide]’ that drives being beyond
itself (OC VI, 340).

Despite this willingness on Bataille’s part to respond to the proddings of Hyppolite, the challenges of Sartre, little was clarified by these exchanges. In a sense Sartre was right: they were speaking different languages with a shared vocabulary, and Bataille, as he often said, wasn’t a philosopher. This, however, didn’t stop him from playing with their terms, much as he had with those of Dumas, precisely in order to designate the limits of their discourse. As Hyppolite said, their differences came down to different valorisations of the beyond, which for Bataille rested on the continuity of being. This isn’t to say, however, that Bataille did not try to convey the sense of this beyond. On the contrary, it was this that led him to take up the distinction — the importance of which will become crucial to his description of this beyond — between the ‘weariness’ of individual being and the ‘feeling of the void’. When it came to publishing the ‘Discussion sur le péché’, Bataille had prefaced it with a letter indicating the points at which his presentation, as it had appeared in Sur Nietzsche, differed from the original text he had read at Moré’s. In response to the criticisms of Sartre, Bataille wrote, he had added to the text of ‘Le Sommet et le déclin’ the idea of the ‘nothingness of weariness [ennui]’ (OC VI, 315). Comparing the printed text with Klossowski’s summary of his talk, it is clear that these additions have primarily been made to the third thesis of Bataille’s paper, in which he clarifies the distinction between the nothingness that being finds in itself — and which is experienced as the weariness of enclosed being — and the nothingness that is beyond this enclosed self, and toward which individual being, in a state of ‘temptation’, is driven by its desire to communicate with other beings. Without this desire, the being of man would remain trapped in the loop of identity, isolated in its nothingness. But for being to go beyond itself — for it to propel itself out of the weariness of individual being into the anguish of its beyond — a ‘transposition’ must occur, Bataille says, between its inner nothingness and the nothingness that is beyond it. It is this ‘ecstatic’ movement, in which the limits of the individual self are shattered, that provided Bataille with his metaphor of ‘summit and decline’ in which the notion of sin, which was so confusing to Sartre, played so important a part.

It has been argued that since the term ‘transgression’ makes only a late appearance in Bataille’s writing, its importance to his thought has been greatly exaggerated. And while the second part of this claim fails to take account of the notion of the sacred Bataille held from at least 1930 onwards, and of the understanding of sacrifice on which it rested, it is true that Bataille only rarely used the term itself before L’Érotisme. Until then he preferred to speak of transgression, as he had at Moré’s, under the more emotive term of sin. This was to be the cause of much confusion to his audience, and not least for Sartre; but

it was deliberate on Bataille's part, I believe, insofar as he wished to link the 'sin' of the Crucifixion to the 'moment' of communication. Years later, in an article on Sartre written in 1952, Bataille would write: 'I remember a discussion following a lecture, in the course of which Sartre, ironically, reproached me for my use of the word "sin": I was not a believer, and, in his eyes, my use of the word was unintelligible' (OC IX, 299n). And strange though it may seem, Sartre's inability to understand this link, I want to argue, was related to his deafness — unique, perhaps, among Bataille's audience that evening — to what the others had praised as the tone of Bataille's voice.

It is this voice, of course, that Blanchot, whose ear was perhaps the most attuned to its timbre, has commented upon so eloquently, resolving none of its ambiguities (and in this resides the attentiveness of his commentary), and linking it instead to the most tender of words: 'friendship'. This word occupies an important place in the overlapping lexicon of these two writers, whose meeting in 1940 had been accompanied by what Bataille recalls as a 'complete accord and admiration on both sides' (OC VII, 462). 'L'Amitié', it will be remembered, was regarded by Bataille not only as the most important part of the Somme athéologique, but as the writing that most resembled him. Blanchot, moreover, who recognised this before anyone else, would use 'L'Amitié' as the title for both the essay he wrote, twenty years later, on the death of his friend, and the collection of texts in which it later appeared. And although Blanchot, who was at the discussion, did not ask the question, the possibility and recognition of friendship was raised, rather clumsily, in another mistaken exchange which took place toward the end of the discussion, when Bataille attempted to distance what he meant by sin from its meaning within the framework of Christian morality. In response to de Gandillac enquiring whether friendship was possible for him, Bataille, mistaking the import of the question, brusquely answered: 'Certainly not. Friendship on the level of which you speak is not possible. My relations with Christianity cannot be relations of friendship; they are, purely and simply, relations of hostility'. De Gandillac, somewhat chastened, answers that he was speaking of friendship 'in a far more general sense'; to which Bataille, a little contrite at his outburst, responds: 'Why not? A little friendship in the


consciousness of a complicity’ (OC VI, 358).

Bataille had said something like this before. In the pages from ‘L’Amitié’ he later subtitled ‘Le complice’, Bataille wrote: ‘The friendship I give is of an accomplice’ (OC V, 278). And elsewhere in the same book he speaks of recognising his friends by the shame he feels at the thought that they might read what he has written there. Friendship, for Bataille, is the mutual recognition — and by recognition Bataille means, as always, in the Hegelian sense — of a shared guilt (Bataille’s original title for Le Coupable was to be L’Amitié). As it was by Freud before him, the social bond, in Bataille’s eyes, is founded on the guilt we feel at this recognition — in the other, by the other — of a crime we have committed in common. For psychoanalysis this is the murder of the father; for Christianity it is the Crucifixion of Christ; and for Nietzsche, who recognised the full implications of this crime before anyone else, it is the ‘death of God’.

‘Who will wipe this blood off us?’, demands Nietzsche’s madman, ‘What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?’ What is revealed, in each instance, is what Bataille, in his talk, called ‘the attraction of sin’, which, to the extent that it is the basis to his understanding of sacrifice, is fundamental, he says, to the human condition.

Bataille had begun his talk by defining his terms, which are not those of ‘good and evil’, as the original title of his talk suggested, but those of ‘summit and decline’. The summit, Bataille says, corresponds to excess, to a measureless expenditure of energy which, to the extent it is irrecuperable, constitutes a violation of and rupture in the integrity of individual being. It is, therefore, closer to evil than to good. The decline, by contrast, corresponds to the preservation of that integrity, the concern for which, Bataille says, determines the rules of morality — or what he calls ‘modalities of the good’ (OC VI, 42). From these initial postulates Bataille extrapolates the terms of what he means by communication: not only between man and his god but, in the absence of God, between man and the beyond of his self. The summit of evil, Bataille says, and the greatest sin committed, was the crucifixion of Christ. Referring himself, however, to Hubert and Mauss’s lines about the criminality of sacrifice, Bataille points out that this sin was carried out by his executioners — however unwittingly — as a sacrifice: which is to say, as an act through which mortal man communicates with his god by putting him to death. Despite the unintentional nature of this sacrifice, therefore, its effects have devolved upon all of us as a wound in the integrity of our being, as an absence or lack that drives us to communicate with the beyond of our individual selves. As is clearly expressed by the sacrifice of the mass, and as Masson graphically illustrated in his etching of Le Crucifié, the Christian God, wounded by man, and man, wounded by his guilt, communicate with each other through the wounds in the bleeding body of Christ. Communication, in other words, cannot take place between full and intact beings,

but is dependent upon the crime that puts individual being in play at the limits of
dearth — suspended, as it were, over the nothingness of its beyond. It is only in
this destruction of the integrity of individual being that man accedes to what
Bataille calls the 'moral summit', which he implicitly situates, in relation to
Nietzsche, 'beyond good and evil'.

Given this drive to communicate, the desire we feel for another being —
which, Bataille agrees with Hegel, is the desire for recognition by the other — is
revealed as the desire for the recognition of the open and lacerating wound that
sin has opened in being — and hence the desire for that wound. 'There is no
greater desire', Bataille wrote in Le Coupable, 'than that of the wounded for
another wound' (OC V, 267). When Bataille spoke of friendship being 'the
consciousness of a complicity', therefore, he was speaking of the communication
between two open beings of the insufficiency at the heart of individual being.
Communication, for Bataille, is the mutual recognition of this wound in those
forms of expenditure in which the principle of loss at the heart of this
insufficiency is revealed — in those 'sacred games' that Nietzsche, with his
customary prescience, had foreseen us playing. In place of the dialectic, therefore,
in which Hegel saw the mutual recognition between two self-consciousnesses who
exist in and for themselves by the fact that they both exist for each other, Bataille,
I want to argue, saw the lacerating moment of communication in which two open
and incomplete beings perceive the unsurpassable insufficiency of being. What
they recognise, in each other and in themselves, is the wound that binds them
together: in the spectacle of sacrifice, in erotic union, in shared tears, in poetry,
in waves of horror, in nights of drunken dancing, of course, and above all,
perhaps, in bursts of laughter — Bataille’s laughter. 'It's the laughter of
Zarathustra' Hyppolite finally offers. 'If you like', Bataille responds wearily. 'A
laugh in any case which I am surprised anyone can find so bitter' (OC VI,
358).

Sartre, however, had foreseen this shift in terms by Bataille, which he had
already attacked in 'Un nouveau mystique'. 'There remains "communication"', he
had written at the end of his article: 'which is to say that night absorbs
everything. What M. Bataille forgets is that with his own hands he has
constructed a universal object: night. And it is time to apply to our author what
Hegel said of Schelling’s absolute: "At night, all cows are black"'. This phrase
of Hegel’s comes from his criticism of Schelling in the preface to the
Phänomenologie des Geistes (1807), where he quotes from an old Yiddish
proverb: 'Absolute as the night in which, as we say, all cows are black'.

39. George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Phänomenologie des Geistes (1807), Philosophische
Bibliothek, Bd. 414; edited by Hans-Friedrich Wessels and Heinrich Clairmont, with an introduction
English, with an introduction and notes, by James Baillie, as The Phenomenology of Mind (1910),
revised second edition, Muirhead Library of Philosophy, edited by H. D. Lewis (London: Georges
Hegel’s target here is Schelling’s view of the absolute as an undifferentiated unity in which differences are dissolved in an essentially Parmenidean conception of being as identity, rather than the movement of Heraclitean becoming. Hyppolite himself would use this proverb in his own discussion of Hegel’s critique of immediate knowledge. ‘The feeling of the ineffable’, he writes, ‘can appear infinitely profound and infinitely rich to itself, but it can give no proofs and it cannot even test itself lest it give up its immediateness. This intuition in which “all cows are black”, this depth, is always what is most superficial’. Like the earlier remark about his laughter, this comment of Sartre’s would continue to rankle in Bataille’s ears, and several years later, in *Méthode de méditation* (1947), he felt it necessary to address its easy dismissal of his terminology. Speaking of his irritation with the professorial works of philosophers — which are a hindrance, he says, rather than an aid to the ‘sovereign operation’ — Bataille refers to this comment of Hegel’s — but by implication Sartre’s also — as no less ‘gênante’ (OC V, 202): which is to say, as no less irritating, annoying, awkward or embarrassing, but in any case what is a peculiar term for a writer one of whose favourite images was of a fly buzzing in the philosopher’s ear. Perhaps, as in Lautréamont’s inversion, it is the philosopher who was buzzing in his.

Derrida has spoken of Sartre’s position in the intellectual life of post-war France, and of the generosity he feels in proximity to a man he never knew, but whom he accuses of mis-reading, and of disseminating his mis-readings, of almost all the great texts of his day: Marx, Freud, Heidegger, Blanchot, and above all Bataille. It was Bataille’s great misfortune — and his ‘bafflement’ — to be not only misunderstood but dismissed by the leaders of the most important intellectual movements of the inter-war and post-war decades. First, and most famously, by Breton in the *Second manifeste du surréalisme*; and then by Sartre: first, as we have seen, in ‘Un nouveau mystique’; and then again, after the war, in ‘Qu’est-ce que la littérature?’ (1947). In June 1946, Bataille had founded *Critique*, and no doubt sensitive to the threat this posed to the place he wished *Les Temps modernes* to assume in post-war France, Sartre, in this latter text, having first consigned Breton and Surrealism to the dustbin of history, makes the immortal observation that ‘Georges Bataille’s glosses on the impossible do not have the value of the slightest Surrealist tract’ — to which he adds, perhaps more revealingly: ‘his theory of expenditure is a feeble echo of great fêtes which are


past'. Sartre, certainly, doth protest too much; but whereas the exchange of insults with Breton — whom Bataille, in spite of himself, admired but did not particularly respect (that at least is how Leiris saw their relationship) — did not really bother him at the time, this over-hasty dismissal at the hands of the young Sartre — with whom Bataille shared almost nothing of what bound him, despite everything, to Breton, but whom he recognised as the pre-eminent intellectual of his day (a recognition that was, moreover, a response to his own relative and inexplicable anonymity, his own inability to be ‘recognised’) — this dismissal cut Bataille to the bone (like the blade of the Chinese executioner).

Sartre, no doubt, must have felt a certain anxiety when *L’Expérience intérieure* appeared. *L’Être et le néant*, after all, was about to be published, and he obviously felt it necessary to distinguish his own position from what he labelled — pejoratively, in his eyes — this ‘new mystic’. In his review of Bataille’s book, therefore, Sartre undertook the absurdly pedantic exercise of searching for a source of origin for almost every aspect of Bataille’s work, which he begins by placing in the category of the ‘martyr-essay’, and whose genealogy he traces from Pascal’s *Pensées*, Rousseau’s *Confessions* and Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo*, to the works of the Surrealists: Breton’s *Nadja* and *L’Amour fou*, Aragon’s *Traité du style*, and Leiris’s *L’Âge d’homme*. Bataille’s vocabulary he attributes to Jean Wahl’s translation of Jaspers, to Henri Corbin’s translation of Heidegger, and more generally, and proprietorially, to ‘Existentialism’. His methodology he owes to Durkheim, his philosophy to Hegel and its inversion to Spinoza; his anguish to Kierkegaard, his bad faith to his passion; his ecstasy he takes from the mystics, his *jouissance* from Gide, his reminiscences from Proust and his laughter — although this, as we have seen, unsuccessfully — from Nietzsche. His negativity he owes to Dada, and his voice to Surrealism. What Sartre does at least accord him is an ‘often magnificent eloquence’; and, as for ‘the rest’ (at this point Sartre draws the limits of literary critique), it is ‘an affair for psychoanalysis’ (but not Freud). In other words, a decade and a half after Breton had labelled him an ‘obsessive’, Bataille found himself, beneath the pen of the pretender to Breton’s throne, dismissed once more to the waiting rooms of the medical profession. In this, at least, both men were right. Isn’t it from beyond the limits of ‘literary criticism’ that Bataille’s laughter echoes? Isn’t it precisely at the limits of language that he looked to write? Certainly — and in this he experienced the same difficulties as Surrealism in clarifying his position — it is this ‘beyond’ and


43. Leiris’s comments on Bataille’s relationship to Breton were made in an interview with Bernard-Henri Lévy. See Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Adventures on the Freedom Road*, pp. 198-208.

this ‘limit’ that Bataille struggled to rescue, as he struggled at Moré’s, from the grasp of both philosophical and theological thought. What is perhaps most surprising, then, is that in his struggle with Sartre, which he would pursue over the next decade, Bataille would repeatedly enlist the authority of Breton, who at the time was almost without authority.

II. The Point of Ecstasy

Give my regards to André Breton, and tell him — at least if you want to — that I feel no less distant from him — nor less close — than Saint John of the Cross to Saint Teresa (there’s no disguised insult in this).

— Bataille, Letter to André Masson (February 1942)

It is a commonplace by now to characterise Bataille’s relation to Surrealism as he himself characterised it with the often quoted phrase that he was Surrealism’s ‘old enemy from within’. What is less often noted is that Bataille did not make this declaration during the 1930s — when he was more an enemy to than within the Surrealist movement — but after the Second World War, when Breton had just returned from the United States to find a Paris recovering from its post-Liberation swoon, and grudgingly hostile to a public figure who was widely perceived, with a little help from his old friends, to have abandoned France in the hour of her greatest need. In this climate of guilt, shame, retribution, and a distinct loss of virility, Surrealism, if not what was left of the group, found its unlikeliest champion in Bataille, who not only went about defending Surrealism against the vehement attacks of Sartre, but also attempted, in no uncertain terms, to rescue it from the waning authority of Breton himself. ‘This much is clear’, Bataille announced in 1946: ‘Surrealism is defined by the possibility that I, its old enemy from within, can have of defining it conclusively’ (OC XI, 31). And define it he did. During the inter-war period, Bataille goes on to say (the article is ‘À propos d’assoupissements’) Surrealism had been faced with two paths: one had led to the creation and establishment of works, and soon sacrificed its principles to the necessities of producing them. This, to its eternal shame, was the path the Surrealist group took under Breton’s leadership, and in doing so betrayed its spirit of revolt (nothing would confirm this more, if evidence were still needed, than what Sartre would call the ‘pretty lollipop’ of the 1947

45. In an appendix to Sur Nietzsche, where he speaks of ‘the debt I owe to Surrealism’, Bataille had said something similar: ‘Perhaps the movement expressed by Surrealism is now no longer in the objects. It is, if you like, within my books (if I must say it myself, since who would see it otherwise?)’ (OC VI, 205).

46. See Georges Bataille, ‘À propos d’assoupissements’, Troisième convoi, no. 2 (January 1946); collected in OC XI, 31-33.
exhibition).\textsuperscript{47} The other path, however — an ‘arduous path’, Bataille writes — ‘led to the heart of being’, and ‘it was here’, he says — where only the slightest attention could be paid to the attraction of works — ‘that the enquiry began into being in the night’ (OC XI, 33). Bataille doesn’t say as much, but it is clear that this is the path he sees himself having taken, particularly during the war years — and it is only by following him, he implies, that Surrealism could hope to regain its energy and its relevance to the post-war era. ‘Although Surrealism may seem dead’, Bataille concludes, ‘in spite of the confectionary and poverty of the work in which it has ended, . . . in terms of man’s interrogation of himself, there is Surrealism and nothing’ (OC XI, 51).

\textit{A Certain Point of the Mind}

Seven years earlier, in June 1939, as Europe had held its collective breath for the coming disaster, Bataille, in his article on ‘La pratique de la joie devant la mort’, transcribed a litany of meditations on what appeared, at the time, to be his own imminent death. From these the following lines are taken:

"I fix a point before me and I imagine this point as the geometric locus of all existence and all unity, of all separation and all anguish, of all unsatisfied desire and all possible death.

"I adhere to this point and a profound love of what I find there burns me, until I refuse to be alive for any reason other than for what is there — for this point which, being both the life and death of the loved being, has the burst of a cataract." (OC I, 556)

As we have seen, these lines, and their very particular form of expression, are the first fruit of Bataille’s initiation, the previous year, as he watched Laure die, into what he called a mysticism of ‘joy in the face of death’. As such they also mark the beginning of Bataille’s mystical training, which he would pursue through the war years to the publication, in 1947, of \textit{Méthode de méditation} — the final text and culmination of the \textit{Somme athéologique}.\textsuperscript{48} At this stage, however, Bataille, while tentatively conceding that it is appropriate to use the word ‘mysticism’ when speaking of this attitude of ‘joy in the face of death’ — which he would later call, with more confidence, a ‘conscious mysticism’ — insists that its practice can have no other object than ‘immediate life’. The point to which these exercises refer, therefore, and which they seek to attain, can only be reached by someone for whom there is neither an intellectual nor a moral beyond — ‘either a God, or what resembles one’. Indeed, it is the absence of God, as we have seen,

\textsuperscript{47} Jean-Paul Sartre, \textit{Qu’est-ce que la littérature?}, p. 298.

\textsuperscript{48} Bataille’s experimentation with meditation, however, seems to date to the founding of Acéphale. See Georges Bataille, ‘[Méditation]’ (September 1937), in \textit{L’Apprenti sorcier}, pp. 407-409.
that determines the ecstatic character of this point. ‘No term’, Bataille writes, ‘is clear enough to express the happy disdain of the one who "dances with the time that kills him"’ (OC I, 554). Expressed in these terms, Bataille is looking forward here to the evening — still five long years away — in which he would dance ‘face to face’ with Sartre; but he is already weeping tears of joy in Nietzsche’s vertiginous mountain paths. ‘He alone is happy’, he writes, ‘who, having experienced vertigo to the point of trembling in his bones, to the point of being incapable of measuring the extent of his fall, suddenly finds the unhoped-for strength to make of his agony a joy capable of freezing and transfiguring those who encounter it’ (OC I, 553). This attitude, which Bataille would pursue through the war years, ‘is the only intellectually honest path’, he concludes, ‘in the search for ecstasy’ (OC I, 554). It is also the path that led him to his reappraisal of Surrealism.

Four years — and a lifetime — later, Bataille would quote these particular ‘exercises’ — the only ones to refer to this ‘point’ — in the pages from L’Expérience intérieure titled ‘Première digression sur l’extase devant un objet: le point’ (in which they appear, with some minor alterations, only a few paragraphs after the passage in which Bataille first referred to his ‘recourse’, during meditation, to the image of the cent morceaux). By now Bataille makes it clear that in form if not content, these lines have something in common with the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola — to whom he refers several times in his book. It was in following the method of meditation contained in these exercises, and above all the technique known as ‘dramatisation’, that the Saint’s followers, Bataille claims, hoped to attain just such a point of ecstasy. The appearance of Bataille’s version of these meditations, however, in the section of his book titled ‘Post-scriptum au supplice (ou la nouvelle théologie mystique)’, also places them in relation to the Theologia Mystica of Pseudo-Dionysius. Quite apart from the enormous influence of this work on western mysticism, it is also one of the foundation stones of negative theology, according to which, in the words of Meister Eckhart (who Bataille quotes): ‘God is nothingness’ (OC V, 16). Bataille’s point in making these connections between his own thought and some of the key texts of western mysticism (to which he pays ample homage in his book) is that the equivalence within negative theology between ‘God’ and ‘nothingness’ is the key to the economy by which Bataille defined this attitude of ‘joy in the face of death’. The key, perhaps, but not what it opens. In the same month that his article appeared in Acéphale, Bataille, as we have seen, spoke at the Collège de sociologie on the subject of ‘joy in the face of death’, and in some manuscript pages from this period had made explicit the link he saw between mystical experience and sacrifice. ‘Joy before death would be an imposture’, he writes, ‘if it were not bound to the commotion of a union’. To which he adds: ‘One must have experienced this excess of joy at least once in order to know at what point the fertile prodigality of sacrifice is expressed in it’ (OC II, 247). By proposing this link, which he had first suggested in the notes to Laure’s book,
between what is apprehended in mystical experience and what is put in play by the rites of the community, Bataille was attempting to distinguish this attitude from the contemplative individualism of the ascetic, and reposition it, instead, in relation to the collective movement of communication by which he had come to define the sacred. I have already suggested that this shift was dictated more by circumstance than choice. It remains to be seen, however, what implications Bataille’s mysticism had for the formulation of sovereignty that this attitude of ‘joy in the face of death’ would lead him to.

I want to turn, therefore, to Bataille’s formulation of this ‘point’, which — although clearly responding to the face of the dying Laure, and having recourse, as we have seen, to the image of the cent morceaux — owes its terms to a very different and unexpected source. Unexpected, perhaps, but undeniable, for its source is clearly the celebrated and much maligned passage from Breton’s Second Manifeste du surréalisme, in which there appeared, at the very beginning of his text, what quickly became the classic exposition of Surrealism (these are familiar phrases by now, but they bear repeating, I hope, because it seems to me that Surrealism, at least in Bataille’s eyes — and Sartre’s too — stands or falls by their propositions):

Everything leads us to believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived in contradiction. Now, search as one may, one will never find any other motive in Surrealist activity than the hope of determining this point. From this it becomes obvious how absurd it would be to give to this activity an exclusively destructive or constructive meaning: the point to which we are referring is a fortiori that point where construction and destruction can no longer be brandished the one against the other. It is clear, moreover, that Surrealism is not interested in giving serious consideration to what is produced alongside it under the pretext of art or indeed anti-art, of philosophy or anti-philosophy, in a word, to anything which does not have as its goal the annihilation of being into an interior and blind radiance which would be no more the soul of ice than that of fire.49

Bataille would return to this passage, or parts of it, many times in his life, beginning with the unpublished text from 1930, ‘La "vieille taupe" et le préfix sur dans les mots surhomme et surréaliste’, in which he responded not only to Breton’s manifesto but to the insults hurled at him at the end of it.50 Engulfed as he was at the time in his own private vendetta with Breton, Bataille was highly


50. See Georges Bataille, ‘La "vieille taupe" et le préfix sur dans les mots surhomme et surréaliste’ (c.1930); collected in OC II, 93-109.
critical in this text of the idealism implicit in a point which, existing even potentially only in the mind, would be reached by the surpassing of Hegelian and therefore merely abstract oppositions.\(^5\) And while acknowledging this influence — which he attributes to Breton’s admittedly ‘intuited’ appropriation of Hegel — he nevertheless considered Breton’s description of this point as indicative of Surrealism’s constant flight from the base materiality of the world. For Bataille, therefore, Breton’s formulation of this point was yet another example of what he calls Surrealism’s ‘Icarian flight’ into ‘the brilliant immensity of the sky’, and not, as Breton’s text would like to imply, ‘the void of Hegelian being-nothingness’ (OC II, 107).

These are harsh judgements in an exchange of insults Bataille would later regret adding his voice to. But the distance separating Bataille from Breton was certainly not as wide as Bataille had every interest in making it at the time. Like Bataille, Breton speaks of a ‘blind radiance [brillant aveugle]’, and of the ‘annihilation of being’ — which, as Bataille conceded when he next quoted this passage — in those pages of L’Expérience intérieure devoted to the formulation of his ‘nouvelle théologie mystique’ — had a ‘promising’ outlook (OC V, 171). It is significant, moreover, that to Breton’s notorious assertion, also from the Manifeste, that ‘the simplest Surrealist act consists of descending into the street, revolver in hand, and shooting at random, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd’, Bataille had responded as he himself had been treated: that Breton’s statement betrays ‘the importance in his pathology of castration reflexes’ (OC I, 103). Significant, that is, because it is just this assertion of Breton’s, in all its marvellous and unrealisable potential, that would later draw Bataille to him.\(^5\)

What is less often remembered about these lines, however, is that Breton goes on to write that ‘anyone who has not, at least once in their life, had such a desire to put an end to the sort of petty system of debasement and crétinisation in force, already has his place marked out in this crowd, his stomach at barrel level’.\(^5\) And this is a fault, because it is here that Breton, who is too often confined


\(^5\) Looking back years later on the Collège de sociologie, Caillois spoke of the similarity between Breton and Bataille with reference to this passage. ‘With Georges Bataille’, he wrote, ‘I ran into the same difficulties I had encountered with André Breton, specifically a similar propensity for badly assessing what are words and what are things — or beings. This time, the conflict — which never broke out — bore on the possibility of conjugating and unleashing energies starting from the ritual execution of a consenting human victim. Bataille’s attitude on this point was just as exasperated as Breton’s definition of the simplest Surrealist act: go into the street with a revolver and shoot haphazardly at passersby’ (Roger Caillois, ‘Divergencies et complicités’, Nouvelle revue française, ‘Hommage à Georges Bataille’ (April 1967), p. 691; quoted in Denis Hollier, ed., The College of Sociology, 1937-39, p. 388).

\(^5\) André Breton, Second manifeste du surréalisme, pp. 782-783.
within the parameters of a queasy pleasure principle, touches the violent heart of sovereignty.

Bataille would affirm as much in his post-war article 'Le Temps de la révolte' (1951), in which he compared this statement of Breton's to the *amok* of Malaysia, a figure whose death, he writes, 'has the significance of a genuine sovereignty':

Tired of enduring the weight of the world, a man would suddenly see red: he would race into the street and stab with a kris those he encountered, by chance, until the moment he succumbed — in his turn — to the blows of the frightened crowd. It is curious that at least one point in the world such an incensed gesture responds to custom; to the extent that it has taken on the value less of criminal madness than of a sacred act. (OC XII, 162)

In this article, which responds to Camus's remarks on Surrealism in *L'Homme révolté* (1951), and to the subsequent attack launched on Camus by Breton, Bataille, who is critical of the impatience with which Breton had clearly misread Camus's book, nevertheless defends the sovereign character of this simplest of Surrealist acts. 'We would search in vain', he writes, 'for a more complete revolt' (OC XII, 162). Indeed, it is in this sentiment of revolt that Bataille recognised his own notion of sovereignty, around which his thought would revolve from the war years on. And as for what he had originally identified in Breton’s attitude as an impulse to castration, the truth of this movement would emerge, beyond the pleasure principle, in the mechanism of the interdiction and its transgression. Referring to Breton’s lines, Bataille writes: 'Perhaps there is no truth that we must more necessarily — more rapidly, but also more easily — supersede [dépasser] than the one which Breton defined in this celebrated passage' (OC XII, 160). Beyond a certain taste for contestation, it was the promise of this act, I imagine, that persuaded Bataille to review his opinion of Surrealism after the war.

To this end, between 1946 and 1957, in a succession of articles devoted to further elaborating on this notion of sovereignty, Bataille would quote Breton’s lines about the point — repeatedly and, it seems, strategically — no less than six times — often with something approaching admiration, but in any case culminating with his 1952 article ‘Jean-Paul Sartre et l’impossible révolte de Jean Genet’. Concluding what was a highly critical review of Sartre’s *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (1952), in which Sartre had compared Genet’s quest for ‘saintliness’ with Breton’s pursuit of this ‘point of the mind’, Bataille makes the statement, decisive in this context, that ‘the point which Breton defined in this
formula' is, he writes, 'one of the best approaches to sovereignty' (OC IX, 315-316).

I will come back to this later on. As if on cue, however, the promise Breton's 'point' held for the distinction Bataille was seeking to make in this article — between, on the one hand, the terms of Sartre's 'pursuit of being' (the subject with which he had opened L'Être et le néant), and, on the other, Surrealism's pursuit of its annihilation — was placed in question that same year when, reflecting on this passage from the Manifeste in his interviews with André Parinaud, Breton, no doubt wishing not only to refute both Sartre's and Camus's accusations, but also to reject Bataille's rapprochement, almost blithely commented (and I want to draw attention to the provisos with which Breton, as always, qualifies his statement):

It goes without saying that this 'point', in which we sought to resolve all the antinomies that gnawed us and drove us to despair, and which in my work, L'Amour fou, I called the 'supreme point' in memory of an admirable site in the Basses-Alpes, can in no way be situated on the mystical plane. It is useless to insist on the 'Hegelian' aspect in the idea of the surpassing [dépassement] of all antinomies. It was undeniably Hegel — and no-one else — who put me in the condition necessary to perceive this point, to strain toward it with all my might, and to make this very tension the object of my life.^^

It is perhaps odd that Breton, who had little time for — or for that matter, knowledge of — the writings of Nietzsche, chose as a metaphor for this point of the mind a site which, according to Marguerite Bonnet, is a well-known spot in the Verdon river gorge which passes near Castellane in South East France, and which Breton had visited in 1931 and again in 1932; because this site, recalled in these terms, inevitably suggests a comparison with — if only to establish its difference from — the 'Zarathustra stone' that marked the site of Nietzsche's vision of the eternal return.^^ Still more so when he was speaking of a point where the past and the future ceased to be perceived in contradiction. But Breton, of course, was merely underlining for the sake of history what was implicit in the Surrealist project: that it 'goes without saying' that this 'point of the mind' — which, on its way to becoming the 'supreme point [point suprême]' it is here, was first understood, in just such elevated terms, as a 'sublime point [point sublime]' (this, at least, is how Breton describes it in L'Amour fou) — is the point where all the antinomies of existence are surpassed.^^ Or at least, that it is 'useless to

56. See André Breton, Oeuvre complètes, vol. 1, p. 1594.
57. In the passage from L'Amour fou to which Breton refers, he writes: 'I have spoken of a certain "sublime point" in the mountains'. See André Breton, L'Amour fou (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1937); collected in Oeuvres complètes, vol. 2, p. 780.
insist [inutile d’insister]’ on the Hegelian dimensions in Surrealism’s attempt to locate this point. 58 And yet for Bataille — and this is the point I wish to argue — the Hegelian dimensions of Breton’s ‘point’ were no less important to his own formulation, and nowhere more so than in its designation of a moment, perhaps, rather than a place, when the opposed and contradictory realities of existence meet. Bataille affirmed as much that same year in his article on ‘La relation de l’expérience mystique à la sensualité’, where he refers to this point as a ‘temple roof’ — ‘from whose heights’, he writes, ‘he who opens his eyes wide, and with no shadow of fear, will perceive the relation between all opposed possibilities’ (OC X, 227).

There is a distinction to be made here, however, between a point at which the relation between these opposed possibilities are perceived (from the vantage point of Bataille’s roof), and one where those oppositions are surpassed. Certainly this is the distinction Philippe Sollers wished to make in his article ‘Le Toit’, where it is this image of ‘the roof’ that he favours as the defining metaphor in Bataille’s thought — distancing him as it does, in his eyes, from Breton, and — through Breton — the contaminating influence of Hegel. Having quoted Bataille’s lines, Sollers, hedging his bets a little, writes:

The ‘roof’ is not reducible to the ideal ‘point’ that Breton designated as the ‘point of the mind at which life and death . . . (etc.) cease to be perceived as contradictions’, in as much as it is not a question, at this moment, of the mind or perception but, in a more material manner, of space and above all of relations. The difference between these two formulations is essential (it undoubtedly permits us to understand how Bataille and Breton assume irreconcilable positions in relation to Hegel). 59

58. Bernard-Paul Robert has convincingly argued for the formative influence of Hegel on Breton’s earliest definition of Surrealism. See Bernard-Paul Robert, ‘Breton, Hegel et le surréel (Première manifeste du Surréalisme)’, Revue de l’Université d’Ottawa, vol. 44, no. 1 (Jan-Mar, 1974), pp. 44-48; reprinted in his Le Surréalisme désocculté (Manifeste du Surréalisme: 1924) (Ottowa: Éditions de l’Université d’Ottawa, 1975), pp. 37-45. Robert argues that when Breton, in the first Manifeste du surréalisme (1924), wrote the famous lines: ‘I believe in the future resolution of these two states, in appearance so contradictory, of dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, or surreality, if one can so speak’, his understanding of Hegel’s philosophy, and in particular the notion of a dialectical synthesis suggested here, was fundamentally influenced by Benedetto Croce’s Ce qui est vivant et ce qui est mort de la Philosophie de Hegel (1910). It is from this text that the following lines are drawn — so close to Breton’s vocabulary of an ‘absolute reality’ and, later, a ‘supreme point’: ‘Such are the antitheses of true and false, of good and evil, beautiful and ugly, value and lack of value, joy and sorrow, activity and passivity, positive and negative, life and death, being and not-being, and so on’. See Benedetto Croce, Ce qui est vivant et ce qui est mort de la Philosophie de Hegel, étude suivie d’un essai de bibliographie hégélienne; traduit de l’italien par Henri Buriot (Paris: V. Giard et E. Brière, 1910); translated by Douglas Ainslie from the third Italian edition of 1912 as What is Living and what is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel (London: MacMillan and Co., 1915), p. 11.

Sollers is certainly right to locate the difference between Bataille and Breton in their relation to Hegel, and even more so to emphasise the importance of the spatial metaphor in Bataille’s image of a limit to experience; because, in contrast to Breton’s image of a point where the very notion of limits is surpassed, the limit Bataille’s ‘temple roof’ marks is first and foremost that drawn by the opposition — fundamental in Bataille’s thought — between the sacred and the profane. The etymology of this opposition even suggests a movement from the outside to the inside of this temple Bataille refers to. Moreover, in his 1957 article on ‘Emily Brontë et le mal’ — collected later that year in La Littérature et le mal — Bataille, quoting in full the contradictions Sollers is too impatient to list, writes: ‘I shall add: good and evil, pain and joy’ (OC IX, 186), but does not add, as Denis Hollier had pointed out, ‘the sacred and the profane’. This has been taken by Hollier as confirmation of the fundamental dualism of these two terms in Bataille’s thought, and therefore as evidence that Bataille was neither Hegelian nor a dialectician. ‘There is no point’, writes Hollier, ‘either in the mind or elsewhere, where the sacred and the profane cease being perceived as contradicting one another . . . Moreover’, he adds, ‘this very point, this instant of the fusion of contraries, defines the sacred as such and distinguishes it from the profane’.  

French sociology, of course, had long pondered the ambiguity in the etymology of the word ‘sacred’, which in its Latin form, as we have seen, means both ‘holy’ and ‘accursed’. However — and before we get carried away by this image of Bataille’s ‘dualist materialism’ — while Hollier concedes that this point designates a moment — he calls it the ‘instant’ — when contraries fuse, it is also clear that he equates the sacred, as Freud did before him, with the unconscious, insofar as it designates a region of experience in which oppositions like holy and accursed cease to be perceived as contradictions. Yet this hardly describes the terrible moment of ‘joy in the face of death’ when Bataille, his eyes opened wide in horror before the ‘death of God’, perceived the relations between all the opposed possibilities of existence. What Hollier also concedes, however — and this somewhat against his will — is that although Bataille was the target of Breton’s manifesto, this, as he says, ‘did not prevent him from often referring to Breton’s formulation’. The question of why, however — why, if Bataille situated this moment within the realm of the sacred, he referred to it as a ‘geometric locus of all existence’ — this question remains answered.

Transgression

So let me make a first attempt at doing so. Bataille’s point — which it seems necessary to recall is a ‘point of ecstasy’ — although configured around the meeting of opposites (and above all of Nietzsche’s ‘tears of joy’), is not the continuously reconfigured moment of Hegel’s dialectical becoming — in which, as Breton said, the gnawing antinomies of existence are surpassed in the movement of the ‘Idea’. The post-structuralists were right about this. What it designates, what Bataille meant by this point — and this is what he spent his life (but spent it utterly) trying to convey — is the moment of ‘transgression’ in which the interdiction separating the world of the sacred from the world of the profane is crossed. And it is here, at this point, that we find the key to Bataille’s thought: because the movement transgression inaugurates, as Bataille would state that same year when he published L’Érotisme, ‘is not the negation of the interdiction’, he writes, ‘but surpasses [dépasse] and completes it’ (OC X, 66).

Now, as if Bataille’s Hegelian vocabulary was not confusing enough — damning enough, even, for the purpose of making clear this distinction, which I have already referred to, between a constituent ‘moment’ in Hegel’s tri-partite structure of becoming, and the blind expenditure of what Bataille called ‘the sovereign operation [opération]’ (by which he meant moments of drunkenness and laughter, of poetic or erotic effusion, of ecstasy, horror and sacrifice — everything, in fact, that falls outside the circle of discursive knowledge) — as if this terminology is not confusing enough. Bataille, in the first chapter of L’Érotisme, opens his discussion of the interdiction and its transgression by commenting, in a five year echo of Breton, that it is ‘useless to insist [inutile d’insister] on the Hegelian character of this operation’: an operation, he goes on to say, ‘which corresponds to the moment of the dialectic described by the untranslatable German verb ‘aufheben’ (to surpass [dépasser] while maintaining [maintenant])’ (OC X, 39n).

What is to be made of this statement, whose resonance in Bataille’s work, it seems to me, is matched only by the silence which greets us where we might expect to hear the qualification of its terms? Does the logic of the Hegelian dialectic really correspond to what Bataille goes on to call the ‘paradoxical lesson [enseignement paradoxal]’ of the interdiction and its transgression — of this movement between what Bataille says are ‘opposed and complementary’ terms (OC X, 194)? Or is it, as Bataille says, merely ‘useless to insist’ on their difference: a phrase which characterises so many of Breton’s texts, but which for Bataille — who, in direct contrast to Sartre (and in this, again, he is closer to Breton) insisted upon maintaining a distinction between a morality of doing and the sovereignty of being, whose eyes were unremittingly drawn to what was always in excess of any process which was achieved at the cost of its suppression, and who for many years had sought out, with all possible delays, ‘the limits of the useful’ — for Bataille, I suspect, this phrase was the first lesson of the law of transgression. Certainly it is difficult to believe that Bataille had forgotten the
lines with which, all those years before, he had opened his article on ‘La Notion de dépense’:

Every time the meaning of a discussion depends on the fundamental value of the word *useful*, every time the essential question touching on the life of human societies is raised, no matter who intervenes and what opinions are expressed — it is possible to affirm that the debate is necessarily distorted and that the fundamental question is eluded. (OC I, 302)

Bataille, certainly, was generous to a fault in acknowledging the genealogy of his thought. Nietzsche’s — as is well known — he claimed as his own, to the point of identification (which, moreover, he considered a condition for understanding it); Hegel’s — and this is what is unacknowledged, or insufficiently acknowledged — he refused to distinguish his own from. But if Bataille’s thought has a legacy of its own, it is in the answer he gave to this question, the specificity of which (both the question and Bataille’s answer) lies in this dialectic of transgression. And yet even here Bataille would always insist on acknowledging his debt. ‘The theory of transgression’, he wrote in *La Littérature et le mal* (in the chapter on Genet — which is to say, in the text where he sites Breton’s ‘point’ as ‘one of the best approaches to sovereignty’), ‘is primarily due to Marcel Mauss . . . But the theory of transgression has been the object of a magisterial study by one of his pupils’ (OC IX, 314n). This was confirmed by Alfred Metraux, a student of Mauss and Bataille’s oldest friend, who, referring to Bataille’s formulation in *L’Érotisme*, which heads the key chapter on transgression — that ‘transgression is not the negation of the interdiction, but surpasses and completes it’ — wrote that this was ‘a paraphrase of one of those profound, often obscure aphorisms that Marcel Mauss pronounced, without worrying about the confusion of his students’.62 The pupil to whom Bataille refers, however, is not Metraux but Caillois, and the study is the text — to which de Beauvoir had referred — on ‘Le Sacré de transgression: théorie de la fête’.63 Bataille, however, has more to


63. Bataille had already acknowledged as much in his lecture on ‘La sainteté, l’érotisme et la solitude’, which he had delivered to the *Collège Philosophique* in the Spring of 1955 (OC X, 251). This was later collected in *L’Érotisme*, in which Bataille would again repeat his acknowledgement in the chapter on transgression: ‘Only Roger Caillois’, he writes, ‘following the teaching and advice of Mauss, has fully examined this aspect of transgression in his “théorie de la fête”’ (OC X, 68). Caillois himself, however, in the 1939 preface to *L’Homme et le sacré*, had been equally generous: ‘Finally’, he writes, ‘I must express my gratitude to Georges Bataille: it seems to me that on this question there was established between us a kind of intellectual osmosis which, on my part, does not permit me to distinguish with certainty, after so many discussions, his contribution from mine in the work that we pursued in common’ (Roger Caillois, *L’Homme et le sacré* p. 19). Years later, in the manuscript to the unpublished *La Souveraineté* (1953-54), Bataille quotes Caillois’ remarks, but adds: ‘There is a good deal of exaggeration in this way of representing things. If it is the case that Caillois owes something to our discussions, whatever this is can only be secondary. At the very root I can say that if Caillois attaches an importance that was not attributed before him to the problem of the ambiguity of the
say than either master or pupil about the dimensions this question assumes — certainly in his own thought. ‘It will soon appear’, he wrote, ‘that whenever it is based on the interdiction which opposes it to animal life, human life, at all times and in every form, is sworn to transgression, which determines the passage from animal to man’ (OC IX, 314n).

Six years later, and nearly forty years ago now — the years that separate us from Bataille’s death — a young Michel Foucault, in his article ‘Préface à la transgression’, reaffirmed both this dimension of Bataille’s thought and the urgency of its recognition. ‘Perhaps one day’, he writes, ‘[the experience of transgression] will appear as decisive for our culture, as much a part of its soil, as the experience of contradiction was at an earlier time for dialectical thought’. Foucault had just published *Histoire de la folie*, and was on the threshold of taking up Bataille’s mantle as Sartre’s most vehement critic; and like Sollers — although Foucault’s article precedes his — he is convinced that the value of Bataille’s thought lies in its proposal of a limit to thought: a limit, that is, imposed by the finitude of being in the wake of Nietzsche’s proclamation of the ‘death of God’, and whose interrogation, he says, ‘replaces the search for totality’. There are echoes here of the old argument, which Foucault had every interest in igniting, between Bataille’s glass of alcohol and Sartre’s framework of endeavours: since in this interrogation of the limit, Foucault writes, ‘the act of transgression replaces the movement of contradictions’. Dialectical thought, need it be said, has no place here — but Foucault says it anyway, just to let us know where he stands in this philosophical lineage. ‘No dialectical movement’, he declares, ‘no analysis of constitutions and of their transcendental ground can serve as a support for thinking such an experience, or even’, he warns us, ‘as access to this experience’. The value of Bataille’s thought, Foucault concludes, lies in thinking the experience of transgression in what he calls — clearly thinking of his own project — ‘the non-dialectical form of philosophical sacred, I could not help but encourage him to do so. Along with ‘Le Sacré de transgression: théorie de la fête’, it is, I believe, one of the most personal parts of his book, to which I don’t think I contributed in any way, but which the whole of my thinking constantly draws upon’ (OC VIII, 250).

It is worth pointing out that these remarks are crossed out in the manuscript, and that in 1951, Bataille had taken the opportunity, in his article ‘La guerre et la philosophie du sacré’ (his review of the third edition of Caillois’ book), to mark the points at which his own approach departs from Caillois’ book.


language'. 67

My target here, however, is neither Foucault nor Sollers, nor any of the other writers responsible for the sudden interest in Bataille’s thought in the 1960s (an interest that was co-extensive with the articulation and formation of their own positions in an intellectual climate dominated by Sartre since the Second World War). What I am aiming at, rather, is their reading of Bataille as a precursor to post-structuralism — which, accurate or not, relied on a collective attempt to distance his thought from the Hegelian problematic. This is nowhere more apparent than in their statements about Bataille’s theory of transgression — which, it seems to me — and despite Foucault’s warnings to the contrary — fly in the face of Bataille’s assertion that the movement transgression inaugurates can only be understood in relation to the dialectic, while at the same time distinguishing itself from its closed economy.

Despite this, the post-structuralist Bataille has been taken up more recently in the field of art history by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, who have done so through the now familiar attempt to oppose Bataille to Breton, and through him Hegel. In the catalogue of their exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou, titled L’Informe: mode d’emploi (1996) — a title that should alert us to its distance from the unemployed negativity at the heart of Bataille’s conception of sovereignty — Krauss and Bois attempt nothing less than a rewriting of modernism, with Surrealism writ suitably large, through the appropriation of what they call Bataille’s ‘anti-concept’ of the ‘informe’: a category whose ‘job [besogne]’ they argue, is not to unify contradictions but, on the contrary, to bring about a general declassification of the very oppositions upon which meaning relies. 68 This ‘radical gesture’ — which they derive from Barthes — is for them the transgressive operation par excellence; but it also distinguishes Bataille, in


their eyes, from Breton’s Hegelian aspirations. 'One might believe', they write, 'that this transgression of the law leads back to the dialectic. Not at all: the law (the common measure) simply masks the fact that there are only crimes — or, as Bataille notes in "Les écarts de la nature", that there are only deviations'.

Against this assertion, we should recall Bataille’s warning that ‘transgression differs from a "return-to-nature": it lifts the interdiction’, he writes, ‘without suppressing it’ (OC X, 39). The law — more accurately the regulatory system of interdictions (which, as Bataille says, are made to be broken) — is not merely the occasion for isolated bursts of criminal, deviant, or even liberatory activity. The law, and at no time more than under capitalism, thrives on this show of rebellion, and Sollers correctly calls this ‘pseudo-transgression’. The mechanism of the interdiction and its transgression — in which, it should be recalled, Bataille locates no lesser narrative than the passage from animal to man — does so by regulating the division between the sacred and the profane, which is both the condition and the result of this movement. But this division, as Sollers says, is a question of space, of relations, but also, and perhaps most importantly for Bataille, a question of time: the time of labour (a productive and recuperated expenditure of energy in which interdictions are respected) from the time of the festival (an unproductive and irrecoverable loss of energy in which these interdictions are transgressed). More importantly, that is, because this division of man’s activity — which is to say, following Hegel, his negativity — between profane and sacred time emphasises the economic principles on which Bataille situates the moment in which transgression does not ‘negate’, but ‘surpasses and completes’ the interdiction.

This is why Krauss and Bois, who understand Bataille’s notion of the sacred so poorly, fail to understand the mechanism of transgression. They are not alone in this. It stems above all from their celebration of the transgressive qualities of a left-hand sacred — appearing under the various avatars of a ‘de-sublimatory’ formlessness — at the expense of its right-hand pole. Because of this they fail to account for the ambiguity and movement between the two poles which Bataille identified at the heart of the notion of the sacred. And this is a


71. ‘The sacred’, they say at one point, ‘is only another name for what one rejects as excremental’ (Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, Formless: A User’s Guide, p. 51).

fault, because it is in that movement that an accursed, left-hand sacred is transmuted through the central nucleus of a social agglomeration into the purified, right-hand pole. To this, too, we owe the banality of the view, currently much in vogue, that the 'work of art' — in their eyes a privileged site of transgression — has a 'job' to do. This, clearly, is a conception of the work of art as distant as possible from Bataille's sustained critique of instrumental thought and the principle of utility. In these muddied waters one thing, in any case, is certain: such an understanding of transgression would only have met with laughter from Bataille — the sniggering laughter of Zarathustra. For this reason, Bataille's fundamental statement that transgression does not negate the interdiction, but 'surpasses and completes it', means nothing to them. How could it? So they are forced back onto the notion of 'the young Bataille'; or as Bois says: 'Bataille is not Hegelian; but is he dialectical? And, more precisely, is he so at the time of _Documents_ or a little later, when he develops the notion of heterology? We think not'.

Foucault, therefore, although overhasty to dismiss the dialectical dimension of transgression, is right to insist that it does not transform a dialectical or revolutionary world. And he is equally right to insist, as Derrida would after him, that the movement transgression inaugurates is neither negative nor positive, in the sense that it does not sustain its negation — does not ‘convert’ itself, as Hegel would have it, into being. In this, moreover, resides its access to sovereignty. It

73. Much as I admire Krauss' readings, I agree with Tim Clark when, as part of his ongoing polemic with Krauss over Pollock, and with reference to the photographs of Jacques-André Boiffard — some of the most celebrated avatars of the _informe_ — he dryly reminds us that not much of the world is upset by the sight of a toenail in close-up. See T. J. Clark, 'The Unhappy Consciousness', in _Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism_ (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 307.

74. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, _Formless: A User's Guide_, p. 68. These comments on Krauss need qualifying. Let me begin by saying that anyone interested in Surrealism and the image is indebted to Krauss's work. Her article on Giacometti, in particular, represents a watershed in the use of French theory in art history. However, partly because of the ingenuity of her reading, partly because she has reiterated it so many times, her appropriation of the _informe_ — plucked, Derrida-like, from the obscurity of Bataille's text — has become something of an orthodoxy whenever the question of Bataille's relation to the image is raised. A timely corrective to this was Lauren Sedofsky's interview with Krauss and Bois for _Artforum_, which she conducted at the time of the Pompidou show. Pressed by Sedofsky on the question of how faithful their reading is to Bataille, Krauss admitted that they were 'not particularly interested in Bataille as an art critic, or Bataille's tastes in art'. His concept of art, they argued, was too 'traditional' (by which they mean: 'figurative'). 'It's not useful', Bois concludes, to follow Bataille's line on art. See Lauren Sedofsky, 'Down and Dirty: _L'Informe_ at the Centre Georges Pompidou', _Artforum_, vol. 34, no. 10 (Summer 1996), pp. 90-95, 126, 131 and 136. Even allowing for unguarded remarks, this is a little disingenuous. Krauss and Bois are of course free to make what use of Bataille they wish. My concern has been to point out some of the points at which their reading departs from the fundamental premises and, perhaps more importantly, the tone of a thought on whose authority they constantly draw. On this note see Denis Hollier's comments at the conclusion of the round-table discussion on the _informe_, in which he contrasts what he calls the 'discourse of the victor' — by which he means, he says, 'a strong academic voice like Kristeva's' (but which might just as well be extended to Krauss's own voice) — with Bataille's 'dark utopianism'. See 'The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the _Informe_ and the Abject, pp. 20-21.
has more in common, therefore, with Nietzsche’s ‘yes-saying’. And yet Bataille’s overtly Hegelian formula is still there — as annoying as a buzzing fly. Although Foucault opposed the moment of transgression to the dialectical movement between opposites, Bataille himself emphasised that this moment inaugurates a movement which has its own dialectic but which is determined by the mechanism of interdiction and transgression. The question, then, is this: how can the mechanism of this movement be thought, as Bataille obviously thought it must be, within the Hegelian dialectic, without the moment of transgression being subsumed into its economy? How can Bataille, as he says, find himself there ‘dialectically’? Or is it courting confusion, as Foucault clearly thinks it is, to speak of the dialectic when the labour of the negative is so palpably absent from a movement concerned with the limits of thought? Bataille, of course, was well aware of this: ‘The difference between my dialectical thought and that of Hegel is difficult to formulate’, he writes, ‘since contradiction can ceaselessly take up the development of both’ (OC VIII, 403). But how must we understand him when he immediately adds — lest we stray from the path: ‘There is nothing that I do not follow in the overall movement that Hegel’s thought represents in my eyes’? Derrida’s answer, in ‘De l’économie restreinte à l’économie générale: Un hegelianisme sans réserve’ (1967) — an article which focuses precisely on this problem of articulating a general economy of loss within the restricted movement of the Hegelian dialectic — is twofold: first, that Bataille is ‘less Hegelian than he thinks’; and second, that he only uses the ‘empty form’ of the dialectic — and that in an ‘analogical manner’ — ‘in order to designate’, he writes, ‘as was never done before, the transgressive relationship which links the world of meaning to the world of non-meaning [non-sens]’.

Certainly the second part of this answer is closer. But is that all? It seems to me — and perhaps this is what Derrida is suggesting — that the questions posed by transgression will not be answered by assimilating Bataille, against his will, to a post-Hegelian landscape he always declined to occupy. Rather, and to the contrary, it is precisely a question of asking what the movement of Hegel’s thought represented — as he says here — ‘in his eyes’.

So another attempt at the answer. What distinguishes Bataille’s ‘point of ecstasy’ from the point where Breton sees all antinomies ceasing to be perceived


in contradiction, is that whereas Breton’s ‘supreme’ — or more tellingly ‘sublime’ — point remains, ultimately, within the parameters of the Hegelian pursuit of the unity of thought and being (not only the driving force, as Bataille never failed to point out, of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, but the object, as Breton says, of his life), for Bataille this point describes the instant when the distinction between subject and object collapses — not in the unity of ‘absolute knowledge’, but in the ‘absolute laceration’ of what Bataille, drawing on Saint John of the Cross, called ‘the dark night of unknowing’ (OC V, 24). To be fair to Breton, the point toward which he strains — and which Hegel, he says, put him in the position to perceive — is the ‘tension’ arising from Hegel’s antinomies, and not their resolution. Moreover, in the passage from *L'Amour fou* in which he refers to this point as ‘sublime’, he writes: ‘It was never a question of establishing a dwelling at this point. It would, moreover, from then on, have ceased to be sublime and I should, myself, have ceased to be a man’. 77 Certainly this is closer to Bataille’s emphasis on the fleeting attainment of the sovereign moment than to the relentless movement of Hegel’s sage toward absolute knowledge — not to mention the various utopias of Communism in circulation at the time. And yet it is Breton’s residual allegiance to the ‘gnats’ of his own subjectivity that led him, without consideration, to dismiss the question of situating this point of the mind on what he calls the ‘mystical plane’, and therefore of joining Bataille in the night of unknowing. This is what Bataille understood by the experience he used the word ‘mystical’ to describe, and which Pseudo-Dionysius had described so well in a text which describes this point in just these terms:

But then he breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, . . . being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing. 78

It is from this text, I imagine — from the *Theologia Mystica* — and texts like it, that Bataille took his terminology of ‘unknowing [non-savoir]’ when he first began to elaborate his own ‘nouvelle théologie mystique’ during the war. 79 It remains to be seen whether this ‘mystical plane of unknowing’ is the same as

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79. It is because of this link between Bataille’s thought and the language of negative theology that I have chosen to render ‘non-savoir’ as ‘unknowing’ rather than the more literal ‘non-knowledge’ used by some translators.
Derrida’s ‘world of non-meaning’. Hardly surprisingly, Bataille’s mysticism is the least commented upon aspect of his thought. And yet it is in what he understood by the term ‘mystical experience’, and in the economy this experience revealed to him (although reveal is too mild a term for what Bataille saw there), that he himself first learnt — but really learnt, before this point of ecstasy — the ‘paradoxical lesson’ of transgression. This, I believe, is what Bataille meant when he wrote that Surrealism is defined by the possibility that he, its old enemy from within, could have of defining it: that the ‘truth’ of Surrealism, and above all of the point by which Breton defined it — its ‘dialectical’ truth — is the moment of transgression. Isn’t this closer to what Bataille meant when, in L’Expérience intérieure, he wrote: ‘I teach the art of turning anguish to delights’ (OC V, 47)? But until this lesson is learnt — and after more than forty years Bataille’s ‘soon’ and Foucault’s ‘one day’ are both overdue — it really is ‘useless to insist’ on the character, Hegelian or otherwise, of transgression.

III. Angel

To sacrifice God for nothingness — this paradoxical mystery of the ultimate act of cruelty was reserved for the generation which is even now arising: we all know something of it already.

— Nietzsche, Jenseits von Gut und Böse (1886)

When Bataille, after ten years of false starts, finally got around to publishing L’Érotisme, he included among its odd collection of illustrations a photograph of the face of Gianlorenzo Bernini’s famous sculpture, L’Estasi di Santa Teresa d’Avila (1645-52), from the Coronaro Chapel in the Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome (plate 15). Ten years earlier, as an epigraph to La Haine de la poésie (1947), Bataille had quoted a line from the Spanish mystic’s visionary writings in which she expressed the seemingly contradictory character of her ecstasy: ‘During this agony’, she writes, ‘the soul is inundated with inexpressible delights’ (quoted in OC III, 99). The image of Saint Teresa appeared in Bataille’s book in connection with his study on ‘Mystique et sensualité’ — the reprinted version of the article in which he had spoken of the ‘temple roof’ (indeed, it is probable that

80. Recently, however, Peter Tracey Connor has published Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); and Andrew Hussey The Inner Scar: The Mysticism of Georges Bataille, Faux titre, Études de langage et littérature françaises, publiées sous la direction de Keith Busby, M. J. Freeman, Sjef Houpermans, Paul Pelckmans et Co Vet (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Éditions Rodopi, 2000). These are two of the more interesting books on Bataille to have appeared in recent years.
In this study, one of the most important and beautiful of his texts, Bataille begins by addressing a question which has haunted the writings of the mystics, and of Saint Teresa in particular: what relation is there between erotic and mystical experience? No text, of course, suggests this relation — and indeed the conflation of its terms — more than the famous passage that had inspired the Bernini statue, in which the saint describes her visitation by an angel of God:

In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one’s soul then content with anything but God. This is not a physical, but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it — even a considerable share. So gentle is this wooing which takes place between God and the soul that if anyone thinks I am lying, I pray God, in His goodness, to grant him some experience of it.*^  

Despite, or rather because of the fact that these lines have so often been referred to — as they were by Marie Bonaparte, to whom Bataille refers — to substantiate the view that mystical experience is nothing more than a hysterical transposition of repressed sexual drives — and specifically, in the case of Saint Teresa, a violent venereal orgasm — Bataille, who quotes this passage in full, makes his opinion of this position absolutely clear: ‘Nothing is further from my thought’, he writes, ‘than a sexual interpretation of the mystic life’ (OC X, 221).*^ By the same token, however, Bataille is just as wary of attributing a transcendental spirituality to the domain of sexuality, and thereby denying the ‘anguishing darkness’ which, he says, is the key to the relation between both domains. ‘There are glaring similarities’, Bataille writes, ‘even equivalences and exchanges between the systems of erotic and mystical effusion. But these relations

81. See Georges Bataille, ‘La relation de l’expérience mystique a la sensualité’, Critique, no. 60 (May 1952) and no. 63-64 (August-September 1952); reprinted as ‘Mystique et sensualité’ in L’Érotisme (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1957); collected in OC X, 218-245. In El libro de sa Vida (1588), Saint Teresa, describing her states of rapture, had referred to this roof. ‘The soul, then’, she writes, ‘seems to be not in itself but on a house-top or roof, raised above itself and all created things’ (Saint Teresa, The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila; translated and with an introduction by J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 139). Bataille had used this image of the temple roof as a sub-title to one of the sections of La Haine de la poésie (see OC III, 201).  


will only appear sufficiently clear when both kinds of emotion are known through experience’ (OC X, 222). Of course, it is precisely this kind of knowledge that psychiatry is most distant from, with the result that behaviour outside the necessarily limited experience of its practitioners has always been regarded by them as abnormal. ‘Transverberations’ such as those described by Saint Teresa, moreover, are not only the easiest to recognise by the physician, but those which most closely resemble sexual arousal. It is hardly surprising, Bataille concludes, that they have been assimilated to pathological states of exaltation, when the states of mind attained at the limits of mystical experience present none of the symptoms of neuropaths, and can only be known — as Saint Teresa says — through experience.

Bataille’s stance here is primarily directed against the legacy established by Jean Martin Charcot, France’s most brilliant neurologist of the nineteenth century and the director, until his death in 1893, of the Salpêtrière, which became, under his guidance, the most famous psychiatric hospital in the world. The raptures of the female mystic, however, have long been subsumed into an even longer iconography of hysteria. This was the premise of Charcot’s Les Démoniaques dans l’art (1887), a work in which he undertook a retrospective diagnosis of images of demonic possession and religious ecstasy in some of the iconic works of Western art, and in the process established their iconographic equivalence to the symptomology of hysteria he had largely been responsible for establishing. It was this equivalence that led Charcot famously to diagnose both Saint Teresa and Saint Francis as ‘undeniable hysterics’. Bataille’s rejection of this view, however, extends just as much to later views of mystical experience, the most famous of which is that of Jacques Lacan.

Lacan, who had been present at the reading of Picasso’s play, had known Bataille since 1934, and had been involved in many of his more bizarre projects leading up to the war. Nearly thirty years later, however, and ten after Bataille’s death — in the course of his 1972-73 seminar which, when published, like Bataille’s L’Érotisme included a photograph of Bernini’s sculpture on its cover — Lacan, delivering a paper titled ‘Dieu et la jouissance de l’âme’, famously declared: ‘You only have to go and look at Bernini’s statue in Rome, to understand immediately that she’s coming [elle jouit], Saint Teresa, there’s no doubt about it. And what is it that makes her come [jouit-elle]? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but

know nothing about it'. 87 Elisabeth Roudinesco has called these lines 'an act of homage to the Bataillean Madame Edwarda, to the absolute figure of the hatred and love of God'. 88 If this is so — and it might be argued, to the contrary, that the trope Lacan deploys owes more to the Surrealist image of the hysterical than to the figure of Madame Edwarda — it might also be said that Lacan’s choice of Saint Teresa, and still more of Bernini’s statue, is just as indebted to her earlier appearance in L’Érotisme. Deeply influenced as he was by Bataille’s writings, Lacan must have been aware of his criticisms of the reduction of mystical experience to what Lacan calls ‘questions of fucking [affaires de foutre]’, and specifically rejected Charcot’s attempts to do so. 89 The notion of jouissance to which Lacan refers in his paper, moreover, and which he explicitly situates beyond the economy of the pleasure principle — indeed, beyond Freud’s theory of the drives — was deeply indebted to the ideas that Bataille had developed most fully in L’Érotisme — and above all in the study on ‘Mystique et sensualité’ — about the link between eroticism and transgression. 90 In many respects Lacan’s paper can be read as a commentary on Bataille’s study. Lacan, however, while clearly indicating his own ‘mystification’ at the precise aetiology of Saint Teresa’s ecstasy — situating it, as Bataille did, beyond the grasp of discourse — is nevertheless quite certain, as Marie Bonaparte had been, that what she experienced was the transverberation of a violent orgasm. Moreover, because he is speaking as a psychoanalyst — and therefore forced, as Barthes might have said, to utter a discourse — in the course of his paper Lacan goes on to designate what Roudinesco calls a ‘specifically female mode of sexual jouissance whose


90. Lacan’s fullest elaboration of the notion of jouissance is in ‘Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir dans l’inconscient freudien’ (1960), where he writes: ‘But it is not the Law itself that bars the subject’s access to jouissance — rather it creates out of an almost natural barrier a barred subject. For it is pleasure that sets the limits on jouissance, pleasure as that which binds incoherent life together, until another, unchallengeable prohibition arises from the regulation that Freud discovered as the primary process and appropriate law of pleasure’ (Jacques Lacan, ‘The subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious’, in Écrits: A Selection, translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1977), p. 319). It should be noted that Lacan owed this distinction between ‘jouissance’ and ‘pleasure [le plaisir]’ to Alexandre Kojève, whose lectures on Hegel he had attended in the 1930s.
impossibility to be articulated was revealed by the mystics'.

In formulating this answer to Bataille’s question about the relation between mystical and erotic experience, it is significant, as David Macey has pointed out, that by pointing to Bernini’s statue to confirm his analysis, Lacan, who had always insisted that the medium of psychoanalysis is speech, moved into the realm of the spectacle and the spectacular. Not only is the question of female sexuality — the question that had so troubled Freud — situated at the point of a perpetual orgasm, but the answer to the question is reduced to the evidence of a no-doubt beautiful but conveniently mute marble statue. Lacan’s injunction to ‘go and look’ at this statue, moreover, not only aligns him with Charcot and the positivism of the Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière, but does so by casting a new shroud of silence over the hysterics that psychoanalysis had been the first to listen to. In many respects, this is hardly surprising, given that Lacan, who was so closely associated with the Surrealists during the 1930s, clearly saw in this image of the silent and ecstatic saint what Macey calls ‘the perfect icon of convulsive beauty’. Saint Teresa, for Lacan, is yet another in the long line of terrible and marvellous woman in the portrait gallery of Surrealism, which includes the young hysterical Charcot called Augustine, the anarchist assassin Germaine Barton, Breton’s own Nadja, the Papin sisters, Violette Nozière, and Lacan’s own Aimée. As Krauss has remarked, Lacan was simply putting the ‘con’ back into ‘convulsive’. Be that as it may (and no doubt by and large it is true) while Lacan has been roundly criticised for his equation of female sexuality with mystical ecstasy and hysteria, it is clear from his seminar that when he speaks of what he calls ‘a jouissance beyond the phallus’, he does not regard access to this experience as being determined by biology. ‘There are men’, Lacan declares at the end of his seminar (no doubt, by now, with his tongue firmly in his cheek), ‘who are just as good as women. . . . Despite — I won’t say their phallus — despite what encumbers them that goes by that name, they get the idea or sense that there must be a jouissance that is beyond. Those are the ones we call mystics’. Moreover, far from denying the testimony of the mystics as ‘idle chatter’ or ‘empty verbiage’, Lacan not only calls their writings ‘some of the best reading one can find’, but situates his own writings within their legacy. The question, however, is not whether Lacan is a mystic (clearly he isn’t), but whether Bataille’s own image of the mystic — Madame Edwarda, for example — can be equated with Breton’s notion of convulsive beauty. Unlike Bataille, in Le Coupable an elsewhere, Lacan does not turn to the speech of the female mystic.

for a language in which to speak of this 'beyond', but like Breton before him maintains the distance that divides the speaking subject from the object of his discourse. Despite his claims to a mystical writing, therefore, Lacan, as Roudinesco said, ultimately understood mystical experience as a specifically female mode of sexual ecstasy, before which the analyst, in order to sustain his discourse — in order to continue to speak — must stand, no doubt in awe, but at a safe distance, as if before a beautiful but silent statue. It must be said from the start that this was a position Bataille was not willing to adopt. 'If we want to determine the point', he writes in his study, 'where the relation between eroticism and spiritual mysticism is clarified, we must return to the inner view which the religious are almost alone in taking as their point of departure' (OC X, 223).

Bataille’s point of departure for his study, therefore, was a special edition of the religious review Études Carmélitaines devoted to the subject of ‘mysticism and continence’. This issue, compiled from the proceedings of the seventh ‘Congrès international d’Avon’, was edited by Father Bruno de Jésus-Marie, a theologian and Discalced Carmelite who, twenty years before, had written an article, also published in the Études Carmélitaines, titled ‘A propos de la Madeleine de Pierre Janet’ (1931). This was a text written in response to a controversial book by Pierre Janet, France’s most influential psychologist of the first half of the twentieth century, titled De l’angoisse à l’extase (1926-28). The first volume of this work was an account of Janet’s treatment, more than thirty years before, of a patient at the Salpêtière; and although Bataille never once mentions this work in his study, Janet’s book, I want to argue, had a profound influence on his thinking about mystical experience, not least in what it revealed to him about its resistance to discursive thought. Given Bataille’s interest in religious studies, particularly during the war, when he associated closely with the Catholics around Gabriel Marcel, it is more than likely that he knew Father Bruno’s text. He certainly knew Janet’s. And it was this that provided Bataille with the fullest account of that ‘inner view’ he considered to be the key to mystical experience.

From Anguish to Ecstasy

In 1896 Janet was still a relative newcomer to the wards of the Salpêtrière when he received into his care a female patient who was forced to walk on the extreme points of her toes by what had tentatively been diagnosed as a 'hysterical contracture' of the legs. Then aged forty-two, Madeleine — the name Janet's patient had chosen for herself — remained under his observation for nearly seven years, during which time she displayed the symptoms of what Janet, who consistently compared her to Saint Teresa, called an 'extatique'. These included the conviction that she periodically entered into intimate union with God, religious delirium, mystical visions, the belief that she could levitate and was privy to divine revelations, and the appearance on her body of lesions imitating — in the manner of Saint Francis of Assisi — the stigmata of Christ. Although Madeleine had come from a family of practising Catholics, her religious upbringing was neither exceptionally devout nor zealous. Both her childhood and adolescence, however, were extremely unhealthy, and at one time or another she had suffered from scarlet fever, whooping cough, vomiting, intestinal troubles, diarrhoea, eczema, glandular inflammations and numerous other afflictions, all of which contributed to her small stature. From her earliest years she had shown an extreme impressionability to violence or to the suffering of others, to which, significantly, she always preferred her own suffering in their stead. As a child she experienced long periods in which she would remain absolutely immobile, lost in deep reverie, and after an unreciprocated infatuation at age fourteen, she renounced all worldly pleasures, including love, as sinful. Her limited reading included the Old and New Testament, a translation of De Imitatione Christi, a Life of Saint Francis of Assisi, and, around the age of eighteen, Saint Teresa’s The Way of Perfection and Life. That same year Madeleine left her family home to work as a governess in England. A few months later, however, she returned and announced that she was leaving for a life of extreme poverty in Germany, where


101. Having been admitted to the Salpêtrière in February 1896, Madeleine was placed under Janet's care from May 10, 1896, to December 2, 1901; and again between January 2, 1903 and March 5, 1904. In choosing her name, Madeleine identified herself with Mary Magdalene (in French Marie-Madeleine); and since she never divulged her real name to the Parisian authorities, Madeleine used 'Le Bouc' as her surname, suggesting, thereby, that she was both an emissary (of the Lord) and a scapegoat. In 1925, the same year that Janet's book on Madeleine appeared, Frazer's The Scapegoat (part VI of The Golden Bough) appeared in French translation under the title Le Bouc émissaire (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1925). Bataille would refer to this translation in the lecture he gave in Cailloux’ absence at the Collège de sociologie in February 1938; but Bataille had first borrowed Frazer's book in its original English from the Bibliothèque Nationale between December 1934 and February 1935, during which time he also borrowed the first volume of Janet's book (see OC XII, 598-599). Both Bataille and Madeleine, in any case, were well aware of the sacrificial ends to which this particular emissary would be put.
she subsequently lived for several years before being forced to flee the police back to France. At twenty-three she was jailed for six months in the prison at Saint-Lazare for ‘vagabondage’; and a year later she was re-jailed for a further five months for swindling, vagabondage, prostitution, begging, and ‘breaking of rules’. She later met up with and eventually spent nine years in the company of an old woman whom she described as a ‘délirante’. By the age of thirty-seven, after years living in the slums of Paris, the pains she had been experiencing in her legs — brought on partly because of the hard work she was enduring — became intolerable. It was then that she began to walk on the extreme points of her toes, with her heels lifted high off the ground. Madeleine’s own explanation of this walk was that it had begun on a Christmas night, and was caused by a force which, as she said, lifted her above the ground in preparation for her own assumption in the manner of the Virgin Mary (hence her belief in levitation). She also compared her stance to the position of the legs of Christ on the cross. The immediate effect of this posture, however, was to preclude her from work of any kind. This eventually forced her into the Salpêtrière, where, after various failed treatments involving hydrotherapy and magnets, she was referred to Janet.

From the time of her entry into the Salpêtrière, and continuing in a lesser degree on her return to her family, Madeleine kept an auto-observation on the evolution of her spiritual development amounting to more than two thousand pages. She imagined publishing, or at least wanted to publish this journal — much as the great mystics had — as an aid to religious pedagogy, and granted Janet the freedom to make what use of it he wished in his own studies. Janet took advantage of this, and when, many years later, he published De l’angoisse à l’extase, the culmination of his lifelong interest in the relations between religious experience and psychopathological states, the first volume of this work, which was almost entirely devoted to an account of his treatment of Madeleine, and which Janet, with somewhat more generosity than Freud, described as a joint work of analysis, contained long passages of her manuscript. Indeed, it was Madeleine who was responsible for identifying and naming the five principle states of her mental equilibrium, each of which could last from several hours to several weeks or even months, and around which Janet based his study of religious psychology. These were, in their order of succession: Equilibrium: denoting a state of stability and mental health; Temptation: a state marking the onset of anguish, during which Madeleine ‘fell’, as she characterised it, into a state of obsession, interrogation, doubt, and disquiet; Aridity [sécheresse: a word, Janet notes, borrowed from the writings of the mystics]: a state which began with feelings of ‘weariness [ennui]’, and ended with the complete suppression of feelings of any kind, dominated by a religious scepticism which Madeleine characterised as a ‘feeling of the void [sentiment du vide]’; Torture: which was the most terrible state and the lowest point in her trajectory, during which Madeleine experienced profound spiritual pain, a complete abandonment by God, and the most agonising physical tortures (Janet referred to this state as a
‘melancholic delirium’, and compared it, as he did the next state, to the sufferings of Saint Teresa); and finally, Consolation: the most ‘elevated’ state and the inverse of torture, with which, nevertheless, it was in direct correlation. This final state in Madeleine’s trajectory, which immediately preceded her return to mental health, was characterised by a reduction in all exterior activity, and was accompanied by feelings of extreme joy which, at their height, constituted what Janet called ‘ecstasy properly speaking’. It was this point of ecstasy that was, Janet said, ‘one of the principal objects of his studies’.102 It was also what drew Bataille to Janet’s book; searching as he was, at the time, for a language of mystical experience.

According to the list of his borrowings at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Bataille first read De Vangoisse à l’extase in September 1931, then again in January and February of 1935, and finally, and decisively it seems, in May 1942, while he undertook the difficult beginning to L’Expérience intérieure. In the manuscript of this book, in the first draft of the pages titled ‘Critique de la servitude dogmatique (et du mysticisme)’, Bataille, speaking of the scientific attitude to what he calls ‘inner experience’, refers to Janet as a ‘strange case’, whose work ‘in no way conformed’, he writes, ‘to the bookish knowledge to which mystical studies [études mystiques] are usually limited’ (OC V, 429). As evidence of this — both of Janet’s unorthodox approach and, I would say, of his characterisation of this study as mystical — Bataille refers in his notes to an arresting photograph of Madeleine which appears in the opening pages of Janet’s book (plate 16). ‘He had her pose half naked’, Bataille observes, ‘in order to photograph her in ecstasy (in the attitude of crucifixion)’ (OC V, 429). Indeed, to a certain extent it is because of this relationship, not only between Janet and his ‘poor contemporary mystic’ (as he called Madeleine) — which Freud, no doubt, would attribute to counter-transference, and the Surrealists to the need for a reciprocal seduction — but between, as Bataille says, discursive knowledge and mystical experience, that Bataille found this study so compelling — ‘imagining it necessary to use its subtlety’, he recalls, ‘in order to proceed further’ (OC V, 430).

It would be a mistake, however, to overstate Bataille’s estimation of what he would later call this ‘magisterial’ work. Janet’s meticulous methods, at least (‘he observed everything’, Bataille writes, ‘breathing, heart, excretions’) were typical of the methods at the Salpêtrière. And although, when Janet’s book was first published, it was this excessive scientism, encapsulated in the photograph of Madeleine, that branded him an atheist in Catholic circles, Bataille himself attributes this attitude less to a ‘desire to blaspheme’ than to what he describes as a ‘paternal, ironic, and, in a word, infinitely contemptuous benevolence’ (OC V, 429). Janet, like Bataille, had lost his faith while still young, and it is doubtful, as Henri Ellenberger says, that he would have so attentively followed the case of

Madeleine for twenty-five years had it not been for what Ellenberger calls his 'continuous occupation with the lost faith of his youth'. And while there are fundamental differences in their attitudes to Madeleine’s experience, it is possible to see in this shared loss of faith — which marked the beginning of Madeleine’s own fall into the state of ‘temptation’ — both Janet’s and Bataille’s dissatisfaction with either the mystification or the pathologisation of Madeleine’s experience, and indeed the origin of their own attempts to situate it within a new dimension of human experience. And yet despite this shared intent, a decade later, in one of the ‘Conférences sur le non-savoir’ he delivered to the Collège philosophique in the early 1950s, Bataille compared Janet’s study unfavourably to the writings of the mystics, criticising him in particular for studying mystical states ‘like any other object’, he says, ‘and without the least concern for attaining them’. For Saint John of the Cross’, Bataille goes on to say, ‘the study of the mystical moment is in effect the study of the sovereign moment. For Janet’, by contrast, ‘it is a question of situating this moment in a chain [enchaînement] of causes and effects such that, if it is possible, the crises are re-absorbed and the normal state re-established once the elements of disorder have been eliminated’ (OC VIII, 206).

This, essentially, is the criticism Bataille had made of Janet ten years earlier in *L’Expérience intérieure* — which raises the question of why he first earmarked this work as exceptional, and would continue to do so over a twenty-year period. And the answer, I think, lies in this: that despite his criticisms, when he first began to write *L’Expérience intérieure*, it was precisely this chain — not of cause and effects, but of mental states in the movement, as Janet characterised it, ‘from anguish to ecstasy’ — that interested Bataille. And yet his continuing interest in Janet’s book (to which, nevertheless, he only occasionally and sparingly refers) was always mediated through the displacement to which he subjected the economy of this movement. This began with the opening pages of *L’Expérience intérieure*, where he took Janet’s book. Bataille writes in his notes, as the point of departure for his own elaboration of what he calls ‘inner experience’ — a term, he says, by which he means what is usually called ‘mystical experience’ (OC V, 15). This shift from ‘mystical’ to ‘inner’, however, is not merely a question of terminology, but the first and essential displacement to which Bataille subjected both mysticism, as it is understood in religious belief, and the approach of medical science to the states it describes. It was in order to undertake this


104. See Georges Bataille, ‘L’enseignement de la mort’ (8-9 May, 1952); collected in OC VIII, 199-209.
critique, therefore, that Bataille turned to Janet’s unorthodox study — elaborating, he recalls, ‘without writing it down, a development which set out from it’ (OC V, 430). Because he didn’t write it down, it is impossible to be certain exactly what L’Expérience intérieure owed to Janet; but it is significant that Bataille structured his book around his own experience of a state of torture — what he called ‘le supplice’ — and its transposition into a state of ecstasy. It was in the elaboration of this movement that Bataille turned to Janet’s schema, which he had copied out the year before, of the five mental states through which Madeleine passed; and it was here, I want to argue, that he found the terms in which to think the psychic economy of this movement.105

By the time Madeleine entered the walls of the Salpêtrière, Charcot had been dead three years, and the theories of hysteria on which his fame was founded were already being challenged by his former disciples.106 Over the next fifteen years, hysteria — previously the most celebrated medical disorder of the nineteenth century — underwent a radical process of rethinking culminating in its virtual disappearance as a diagnostic category.107 It was during this period of reassessment that Janet, who contributed significantly to its history, had Madeleine in his care. And yet when Janet, many years later, published De l’angoisse à l’extase, although he had by then almost given up his clinical studies for the synthetic philosophical psychology that would occupy him for the rest of his life, his study still retained residues of Charcot’s legacy. By 1926 hysteria was no longer considered a unitary disease entity, and the term, when used at all by the medical profession, was employed in order to designate a pattern of symptom formation that could develop with almost any mental disorder. Although Janet never refers to hysteria in his study, it is in just this manner that it informed his schema of the mental states through which Madeleine passed. There remains a difference between the two, certainly, which derives from Janet’s early theories of hysteria; but it is significant that it was this aspect of Janet’s book that most interested Bataille — that, and the photograph of Madeleine in ecstasy. Because even more than this schema, it is within the field of representations that Charcot deployed in order to structure his theories of hysteria, and to the logic in which

105. See Pierre Janet, De l’angoisse à l’extase, p. 166 (fig. 27). Bataille had copied this schema out the previous year in the notes to the manuscript of La Limite de l’utile; see ‘Plans et Notes, 1939-1941’ (OC VII, 541).

106. For a history of the dismemberment of hysteria as a diagnostic category following Charcot’s death, see Mark S. Micale, ‘On the ”Disappearance” of Hysteria: A Study in the Clinical Deconstruction of a Diagnosis’, Isis, no. 84 (1993), pp. 496-526.

107. The death knell was sounded by Joseph Babinski, formerly one of Charcot’s most loyal students, who in 1909 published a paper announcing the dismemberment of traditional hysteria in favour of the new category of ‘pithiatism’ — a term by which he meant to designate that what was formerly thought of as an organic disease was in fact a result of suggestion or auto-suggestion, and even simulation, but which in any case was an affliction that was easily curable, in his estimation, by persuasion. See Joseph Babinski, ‘Démembrement de l’hystérie traditionnelle: Pithiatisme’, Semaine médicale, no. 89 (1909), pp. 3-8.
they were produced, that this photograph belongs. Because of this legacy of the
Salpêtrière in Janet’s study, I want to turn briefly to Charcot’s theories of hysteria
and ask why Bataille — paradoxically, it would seem — looked to them for a
narrative of mystical experience. For despite his rejection of the pathological
diagnosis of mystical states by medical science, it is to the language of hysteria
that Bataille turned when speaking of mystical experience, not only retaining its
vocabulary of convulsiveness (the prime example is his description of Madame
Edwarda’s delirium), but, more importantly, the idea that, like hysteria, mystical
experience is best understood, as it is in Janet’s schema, as a narrative of
successive states leading from the anguish of temptation to the point of ecstasy.

The history of hysteria is as long as its explanations are varied, and its
histories have been well charted. Although the term is first used in the
Hippocratic corpus of the fifth to fourth century B.C., it is to Charcot, who first
formulated his theories between 1872 and 1878, that the discovery of hysteria is
usually dated. Rejecting its anatomical diagnosis, hysteria, according to Charcot,
was a neurological condition which could be traced to a defect of the nervous
system resulting from either direct physical injury or defective neuropathic
heredity, and which took the form of a pathophysiological alteration of unknown
nature and location in the central nervous system. Because of this ‘problem of the
missing lesion’, as he called it, Charcot was forced to define hysteria according
to its manifestations, and he deployed his considerable skills of visual analysis to
build up a nosographical picture of its symptom formation. These he divided into
two groups: the first constituted by what Charcot called stigmata — by which he
meant the symptoms which afflicted the subject between seizures (including
anesthesia, tremors, paralysis, contractures, swooning, tunnel vision, and the
presence across the body of ‘hysterogenic zones’); the second and more celebrated
group comprised of the symptoms suffered during the hysterical attack itself,
which Charcot characterised as a narrative of successive states distinguished from
each other by the poses or ‘attitudes’ adopted by the hysteric. These attitudes
were organised by Charcot into four successive periods: an epileptoid period,
marked by contractures and spasms; a period of ‘clownisme’ or large movements,
during which the hysteric underwent various contorsions (the most characteristic
of which, the so-called ‘arc de cercle’, which describes the convulsive arching of
the hysteric’s back, is mirrored in the left-hand figure of Picasso’s painting); the
period of ‘attitudes passionnelles’, during which the hysteric was afflicted by

108. The literature on hysteria is vast. See, inter alia, Ilza Veith, Hysteria: The History of a Disease
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); George Frederick Drinka, The Birth of Neurosis: Myth,
Malady, and the Victorians (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984); Martha Noel Evans, Fits and
Starts: A Genealogy of Hysteria in Modern France (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Sander
Gilman, et al., Hysteria Beyond Freud (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Janet
Beizer, Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France (Ithaca: Cornell
University Press, 1994).
auditory and visual hallucinations; and a final period of delirium.\textsuperscript{109} Comparing this with Janet's approach, it is clear that this taxonomy of hysteria informed his own schema of the psychological states through which Madeleine passed. However — and this, I think, is what distinguished his study, in Bataille's eyes at least, from Charcot's positivism — from the outset Janet was unwilling to reduce Madeleine's experience to the original diagnosis of hysteria.

When Janet first arrived at the Salpêtrière and took up the study of hysteria, like Charcot he had approached it as a well-defined psychical disorder requiring explanation in terms of a specific aetiology. By the time he finished his medical thesis on \textit{L'État mental des hystériques} (1893-94), however, Janet had already become critical of Charcot's neurological diagnosis — proposing in its place a purely psychological interpretation.\textsuperscript{110} The origins of hysteria, Janet argued, were not to be found in Charcot's 'missing lesion', but in the subject's constitutional deficiency. He was critical, moreover, of the clinical over-inclusiveness of the disorder, and proposed that in the future the psychopathologies should be divided into either hysteria or psychasthenia — categories, he argued, which although essentially identical in their aetiology, differed in their symptomatology. Whereas hysteria, according to Janet's thesis, manifested the quasi-neurological symptoms so exhaustively recorded by Charcot, psychasthenia, he says, is characterised by purely psychological symptoms such as phobias, depressions, obsessions, fixed ideas and compulsive behaviour. Although this new category was short lived, lasting only a few years in medical circles, it was the notion of psychasthenia which provided the basis for Janet's later model of psychic economy, in particular informing his analysis and schema of Madeleine's mental states. For Janet, each of these states was determined by the economic relation between the quantity of psychic energy available to the subject and the tension at which that energy was maintained. Madeleine, in Janet's diagnosis, was psychasthenic — which is to say, she was lacking in psychic energy: a condition which originated, in her case, from a faulty nervous system most likely damaged in childhood by her chronic cardiac and gastrointestinal diseases. Janet's schema, therefore, charted the dynamic between periodic and successive psychological crises, pathological in origin, through which Madeleine passed in her fall from and return to a state of psychological equilibrium and mental health.

For Bataille, on the other hand, whose interest in mystical experience was precisely in the challenge it presented to this conservative economy (in which, as he says, the 'elements of disorder' are eliminated through their re-absorption into

\textsuperscript{109} See Jean-Martin Charcot and Paul Richer, 'Les "Démoniaques convulsionnaires" d'aujourd'hui', \textit{Les Démoniaques dans l'art}, pp. 91-106; see also the famous 'Tableau synoptique de la grande attaque hystérique' in Paul Richer, \textit{Études cliniques sur la grande hystérie ou hystéro-épilepsie} (Paris, 1881).

a 'chain of causes and effects'), the movement this schema charts follows an open economy, in which the point of ecstasy reached at the height and conclusion of Madeleine’s psychological trajectory is equivalent to what in his own vocabulary he calls the ‘sovereign moment’. It is this general economy of expenditure and loss of self that distanced Bataille from Janet, just as it aligned him with the mystical states he accused Janet of studying ‘like any other object’, rather than experiencing them, as they were by Saint John of the Cross, as sovereign moments. The interest Bataille had in the writings of the mystics, therefore, was not in their claims to have attained access to a transcendental beyond (either a God, or what might resemble one), but — and this is why initially, at least, he dropped the term ‘mystical’ for ‘inner’ — in their value as testimony to an experience in which the instant is not motivated — as it is by Janet, as it is by Sartre, as it is, Bataille reminds us, in all systems of morality — as a means to an end, but de-motivated, made meaningless, set free, as it was by Nietzsche, on that ocean in which, as Bataille says, ‘tortures become delights’ (OC VII, 404).

This, however, did not stop Bataille from turning to Janet’s study as the nearest equivalent to a systematic analysis of this experience. Bataille often lamented the fact that the writings of the mystics, compromised by their belief in a transcendental beyond, failed to give a fuller account of the ‘transverberations’ to which they were subject. In formulating his own narrative of this movement, therefore, Bataille, beginning with his presentation at More’s, had direct recourse to Janet’s (or more accurately Madeleine’s) terminology of the states through which the subject passes in his ascent to the summit. That this was the case is clearly demonstrated in the distinction Janet’s study makes, within the state of ‘aridity [sécheresse]’, between ‘feelings of weariness [ennui]’ and the ‘feeling of the void [vide]’. As we have seen, Bataille proposed that the transition between these two forms of nothingness — from that of individual being enclosed on itself, to the beyond of that being — signals the beginning of the movement from what Bataille, following Janet, called the state of temptation, which immediately precedes aridity, and which drives individual being beyond the limits of the self, to that of torture and ecstasy. The importance of Janet’s schema as a model by which to think the economy of this movement was made clear by Bataille in his article ‘De l’existentialisme au primat de l’économie’ (1947-48), where he declares — decisively, it seems to me: ‘This movement from anguish to ecstasy is the outcome and the key to a general theory of the economy’ (OC XI, 305).  

This not only indicates the importance of Janet’s book to Bataille’s thinking about mystical experience, but suggests that this thinking was dominated by — and articulated around, particularly in opposition to Sartre’s project — economic principles which, as I have suggested, are inseparable from the mechanism of the interdiction and its transgression. Bataille’s interest in Janet’s book, therefore, was

111. See Georges Bataille, ‘De l’existentialisme au primat de l’économie’, Critique, nos. 19 (December 1947) and 21 (February 1948); collected in OC XI, 279-306.
not in its theories about the constitutional or psychological aetiology of this movement, but in Janet’s careful charting of its dynamic — and above all in what he writes about the delirium into which Madeleine would enter at the moment of her transition from the state of torture to that of consolation: because it was in this delirium that Bataille found the truth, as it were, of the sovereign operation.

Madeleine’s delirium, according to Janet, had two forms: the delirium of torture, in which she reached the lowest point in her trajectory, and the delirium of ecstasy, which immediately followed it, and whose heights of exaltation, Janet says, were always in direct proportion to the degree of Madeleine’s prior suffering.\(^{112}\) It was this correlation between the two states that seems to have fascinated Bataille most, not least because it presented itself as a movement from low to high — an image that would find its echo in his own metaphor of summit and decline. In a brief passage which appears just before his schema, Janet refers to this moment of transition between the two forms of delirium in terms sufficiently interesting for Bataille to have copied it out:

> At its highest degree, suffering occurs as a sign of change in the tone of feelings. Thoughts on death begin to be considered as a return to nothingness. When Madeleine speaks too often of this, however, and begins to desire it, these expressions which dwell on the idea of suicide announce the approach of ecstasy.\(^{113}\)

Madeleine herself, although aware of this ‘alliance’, as she called it, ‘of pain and beatitude’, had difficulty explaining to Janet the perversity of this correlation, which has long been one of the enigmas of mystical experience. ‘Is the measure of my sufferings’, she asks, ‘that of my consolations?’\(^{114}\) But toward the end of his study, when he comes to address just this problem, Janet, reviewing previous studies on mystical experience (he mentions William James and Frederick Myers), and the reason for what he sees as their failure to adequately comprehend the phenomenon of ecstasy, attributes this failure to studying the delirium of ecstasy in isolation from that of torture, when the two are, he argues, the necessary complements of a mental state which, far from having access to a higher truth — to a plane of immediacy impenetrable to discursive thinking — signals a return to what he calls a ‘primitive’ form of thought. Indeed, it is this

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113. Pierre Janet, *De l’angoisse à l’extase*, p. 165; quoted by Bataille in OC VII, 541. In another, extraordinary, passage, Madeleine evokes the ‘true death’ of this return to nothingness. ‘Enough struggling’, she writes, ‘all is lost. Even more than the physical agony, my moral pain robs me of all strength. I can no longer bear this anguish. I feel my self dying, I want to die, but let it be the true death, the death after which nothing remains [il ne reste rien]. Though I hardly dare to say it, I desire this death and this nothingness [néant]. Since God has no pity, it would be better to disappear absolutely!’ (Ibid., p. 149).

correlation between what Janet calls 'completely different and even opposed' states — on the one hand this desire to return to nothingness, which he attributes to a drop in psychic energy, on the other the ecstatic expenditure of its surplus — that substantiates his diagnosis of what he calls 'psychasthenic delirium'.

Certainly Janet's foregrounding of this opposition must go some way to explaining why Bataille distinguished his book from the 'bookish knowledge' of other mystical studies. More importantly, however, it also accounts for the appearance in Janet's book of the photograph of Madeleine in the 'attitude of crucifixion'. It was into this attitude that Madeleine would enter at the moment of her transition from the delirium of torture to the delirium of ecstasy, and in which, therefore, this opposition found the expression of its psychic unity.

Joy in the Face of Death

In April 1937, Bataille and Leiris, together with Adrien Borel, René Allendy, Paul Schiff, Daniel Lagache and Georges Duthuit, formed a Société de psychologie collective. Bataille was vice-president of his short lived organisation, and, at their invitation, Janet had accepted the presidency. Although little is known of its activities, the theme of the meetings for 1938 was to be 'attitudes toward death' (OC II, 444). One of these attitudes, undoubtedly, was that of 'joy in the face of death', the title of the text and presentation in which Bataille, the following year, would first begin to develop his ideas about mystical experience and the path to ecstasy. The face that dominated Bataille's thoughts at this time, of course, was that of the dying Laure, which confronted him with the ultimate limit to which his thought could respond. And while Bataille, as I have argued, found the very embodiment of this joyful death in the photograph of the cent morceaux — and above all in its 'infinite value of reversal' — another and crucial image of this attitude, I want to suggest, was the photograph of Madeleine in the attitude of crucifixion.

The photograph appears near the beginning of Janet's book, in the chapter on 'Les états de consolation et les extases'. Dressed only in a slip, with her arms stretched out wide above and to the side of her, Madeleine, as always, is raised up on the points of her toes. The caption states: 'Extase avec attitude de crucifixion'. The photograph is clearly the one Bataille refers to in his notes, and looking at it I imagine him poised over Janet's book, his face close to the page — imagine him examining this closed face, scanning it for an indication of what is transpiring behind these eyelids. When Madeleine entered into this state, Janet tells us, she would remain in this pose immobile as a statue for hours, sometimes one or two days, and once, Janet records, for more than sixty hours. This gave him ample time in which to examine her at great length: to measure her

115. Pierre Janet, De l'angoisse à l'extase, p. 381.
116. Pierre Janet, De l'angoisse à l'extase, p. 43 (fig. 12).
heart beat and respiratory rate, to test her reactions to external stimuli, and to register her response to suggestion. But inevitably it was toward her face that Janet was drawn, not only making a photographic record of it (plate 17), but leaving this detailed description of its expression:

The face, unchanging as a wax mask, is motionless but not without expression, since its features are not relaxed. The eyes are never completely closed; there is a slit between the eyelids through which one sees the pupil, rather than the white of the eyeball. These are eyes which could see if they cared to look. The corners of the eyes are lightly lifted, as if in laughter, and the cheeks are clenched. The corners of the mouth, also, are always raised, with the slightly pursed lips open at the front. It's the expression of a smile and the expression of a kiss.¹¹⁷

When Bataille first saw this face, I imagine it put him in mind of the photograph and description, in Dumas's *Nouveau traité de psychologie*, of the torture of the cent morceaux, and of an expression equally difficult to classify, equally paradoxical. This might be stretching the comparison, but Bataille read both these books pretty much continuously during the 1930s, and I am trying to imagine the pattern of Bataille’s thinking about these two images leading up to and during the war years. Dumas, moreover, was a colleague of Janet’s — one sufficiently close for him to dedicate his book to; and like him, Janet was drawn toward the contradictory emotions which, as they had with Dumas’s ‘patient’, found their expression in the face of the subject under observation. And just as for Dumas it had been a question of why, in the unimaginable pain of this torture, the mouth of the victim seemed to smile, for Janet, too, the face of Madeleine posed the question of what transpired when, like Fou-Tchou-Li, she reached ‘the extreme of suffering’, and her desire to return to the nothingness of death, as he observed, ‘announced the approach of ecstasy’. But whereas Janet, for all his subtlety, clearly regarded this photograph as another document in the data he had assembled on Madeleine, Bataille’s interest in this image, I want to argue, was precisely in its resistance to discursive knowledge.

Let me clarify what I am saying here. If, as I have suggested, the unity of Madeleine’s delirium found its ‘expression’ in this attitude — of crucifixion, certainly, but also of ‘joy in the face of death’ — this doesn’t imply that Bataille viewed the photograph of her as the unmediated ‘representation’ of this attitude. I said earlier that in order to speak of mystical experience, Bataille turned not only to Janet’s schema of the passage from anguish to ecstasy, but also to Charcot’s narrative of the hysterical attack, taking from it something of its pace and even more of its vocabulary to structure his own narrative. I also observed that, given Bataille’s distance from the discourse of the scientist, initially, at least, this presents something of a paradox. To resolve this, it is necessary to return to my earlier, related question, and ask what Bataille’s image of mystical experience

owed to Breton’s notion of convulsive beauty: because, as I want to argue, it is in what Bataille did and did not owe to Surrealism that his own relation to the image is best understood.

Like Charcot before him, Janet’s approach to hysteria aligned him with a broad school of thought that maintained that hysteria was a ‘malady through representation’. This was taken up by Freud, who saw in hysteria the transposition of repressed desires into somatic symptoms which, because of this transposition, retained a symbolic relationship to the repressed idea. It was because of this relation to its own representation that hysteria was so fascinating to the Surrealists, who saw in it not only, as Freud had, a rebus by which to decode the primary mechanisms of the unconscious, but a model by which to elaborate an aesthetics and a language of convulsive beauty. It was in this spirit that Breton and Aragon, in the 1928 issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, celebrated the ‘Cinquantenaire de l’hystérie’ as the ‘greatest poetic discovery of the late nineteenth century’. They reject its official disappearance from contemporary medical science (something they define as a ‘moment’ in its dialectical ‘becoming’), and pass rapidly through the history of its definitions before proposing their own, equally celebrated definition of hysteria as a ‘supreme means of expression’. For the Surrealists, hysteria was first and foremost a language, the expressive form of a convulsive state of identity to which they themselves wished to accede, while at the same time distancing themselves from what remained, in their eyes, its essentially feminine aetiology. They therefore distinguished it from systematic forms of madness, and in doing so rejected its categorisation as a psychosis. Although it was a language, therefore, hysteria was not only irreducible to a pathological phenomenon, but defied any attempt at definition.

Bataille, on the other hand, no doubt wary of its association with


120. Louis Aragon and André Breton, ‘Le Cinquantenaire de l’hystérie (1878-1928)’, *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 11, (15 March, 1928); collected in André Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, pp. 948-950.

121. ‘Hystérie’, they write, ‘is a more or less irreducible mental state characterised by a subversion of the relations established between the subject and the moral world in which he believes himself a practical participant, outside of any systematic delirium. This mental state is based on the need for a reciprocal seduction, which explains the hastily accepted miracles of medical suggestion (or counter-suggestion). Hystera is not a pathological phenomenon and can, in every respect, be considered a supreme means of expression’ (Louis Aragon and André Breton, ‘Le Cinquantenaire de l’hystérie (1878-1928)’, p. 950.
Surrealism, never once mentioned hysteria in his writings. Of course, it can't be denied that the mystics he was most interested in were predominantly female, nor that the body of the mystic, as Saint Teresa said, 'has some share' in their experience — 'even', as she finally concedes, 'a considerable share'. It shouldn't be construed from this, however, that Bataille's notion of communication can be reduced to what the Surrealists, searching for the aetiology of hysteria, identified as 'the need for a reciprocal seduction'. And yet like the Surrealists, Bataille wanted to reclaim the figure of the convulsive from medical science; not, like Breton and Aragon, in order to claim it as a 'supreme means of expression', but rather to speak of the silence which surrounds sovereignty. Insofar as it related to the photograph of Madeleine, therefore, any interest he had in the iconography of hysteria was not in the spectacle it offered of the somatic conversions of a psychic disorder, but as the expressive form of a convulsive inner experience as irreducible to a psycho-sexual pathology as it was resistant to discursive investigation.

Despite their apparent similarities, the difference between Bataille's stance here and that of the Surrealists is revealed in Breton's own interest in the iconography of hysteria. To accompany their article, Aragon and Breton included several photographs of the young hysteric Charcot called Augustine — who, as they remind us, was only fifteen-and-a-half when she entered the Salpêtrière. These famous — by now infamous — photographs, taken from the second volume of Bourneville and Régnard's *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1878), show Augustine during the period of the 'attitudes passionelles'. The most celebrated of these is plate XXIII, 'Extase': an image which, in its iconography — arms raised in supplication, head thrown back, eyes heavenward, the mouth open and smiling — invites comparison with representations of religious mysticism in European art, and above all with Bernini's statue of Saint Teresa. It is significant, therefore, that Breton and Aragon did not reproduce plate XXV of this series, in which Augustine is shown stretched out on her bed in the attitude of crucifixion. Having rejected the pathological diagnosis of the Salpêtrière, the last thing Breton wanted was to be mistaken for a mystic. And yet Madeleine's ecstatic delirium, and the delusionary, mystical visions that came to her during this state, would undoubtedly have been situated by Charcot, as he had situated those of Augustine, within the period of

122. Louis Aragon and André Breton, 'Le Cinquantenaire de l'hystérie (1878-1928)', p. 950.
123. Désiré-Magloire Bourneville and Paul Regnard, *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, vol. 2 (Paris: Progrès Médical, 1878), pp. 123-186. Strictly speaking, only the first four of the six plates reproduced are from the period of the 'Attitudes passionelles' (plates XIX 'Appel', XXI 'Érotisme', XXIII 'Extase', and XXVI 'Moquerie'). Plate XXVIII is captioned 'Début d'une attaque: Cri'; and plate XXX 'Hystéro-Épilepsie: Contracture'. This last category was one Charcot had coined to account for the ambiguity between the two disorders. Charcot had struggled all his life to separate hysteria from epilepsy. Madeleine, it should be recalled, had lived for many years with a woman she herself called a 'delirante', and it is more than likely, therefore, that like the hysterics at the Salpêtrière she had imitated the forms of her delirium.
the ‘attitudes passionnelles’. The ‘amour fou’ under whose banner the Surrealists placed these states of rapture, moreover, was a term coined by Janet to describe the state of ecstasy experienced by the female mystic. And yet despite these similarities, there is a distinct difference between the photographs of Augustine and that of Madeleine in the attitude of crucifixion. Whatever the context in which it was first produced and later published, the photograph of Madeleine, presumably also taken by Regnard, fails to conform to the logic of its staging. It is this, I think, that accounts for Bataille’s interest in this photograph, and even, in many respects, for his interest in Janet’s book as a whole.

Like all the photographs taken at the Salpêtrière, the one of Madeleine is haunted in retrospect by the conditions of its staging. Almost from the moment they were produced, the theatricality of Charcot’s demonstrations, the recklessness with which they opened themselves to accusations of simulation, placed their authenticity and veracity as visual documents in doubt. Bataille himself wrote that Janet ‘had her pose’ in this attitude, and certain details in the photograph raise doubts about its authenticity. The chair, for instance: is it there to support her — as a precaution? (it’s unlikely: Janet remarks on Madeleine’s astonishing balance in this posture). And yet despite the questions it raises, the photograph of Madeleine has a very different quality to the staged tableaux of Augustine’s ‘attitudes passionnelles’. The arc of Madeleine’s right arm, for instance, has just the right degree of tension — something Picasso had struggled with in his painting; its hand opening to what Barthes, in another context, called ‘the right density of abandonment’. And other details, too, communicate an altogether different quality of experience. The soft flesh under her arms, the breadth of her hips, the sudden tapering of her legs, the raised feet — its toes, which so fascinated Janet, pushed to the side like a ballerina’s — the wisps of dark hair pulled back from her face, the lines around her mouth and between her eyes, the almost biblical light bathing her left arm and raised palm, casting the shadows on her breast where, Janet tells us, next to the shape of a cross, she burnt the letters I. M. (thereby signifying her union with Jesus). Madeleine’s face, above all — the face Janet looked to for a window to her experience — is withdrawn into an absolute interiority. The logic of this photograph, the taxonomy of its staging, is to display the hysterical body as the external sign of an internal disturbance, whatever its origin: to turn that body inside out, to subject it to a symptomatology of pathological afflictions (like the hysterics whose skin, across which the physicians traced the title of their afflictions, registered the passing of their

fingers in raised red letters). And yet all this image tells us is of the utter incommensurability, the complete unrepresentability of that experience. Nor does it seem, like so many of these images, to be in a theatrical relationship to its own staging. Everything is drawn into a complete interiority, as resistant to the probing eye of the camera as it is to the medical gaze. No wonder Bataille, looking at this photograph, was led to dismiss the pathologisation of such states by a positivist medical science. What discourse, he might ask, could possibly penetrate the silence that reigns here? And if by some magical power it did, how could it speak of what it saw without betraying the sovereignty of that silence. ‘Nothing’, Madeleine tells the despairing Janet, ‘can convey the idea of interior joys’. To which Bataille adds (this is from the 1952 lecture on unknowing in which he referred to Janet’s book): ‘What is sovereign occupies the domain of silence, and if we speak of it we move toward the silence by which it is constituted’ (OC VIII, 207).

To speak of this photograph, therefore, as an image of an attitude of ‘joy in the face of death’, is to consign it to the silence by which Bataille defined sovereignty. As distant from Charcot’s positivism as it is from Breton’s vision of a ‘supreme means of expression’, it was to Madeleine’s own account of her inner experience that Bataille turned in his attempt to understand what transpired when the delirium of torture became that of ecstasy. When Madeleine entered into this attitude — during which, Janet tells us, the stigmata would appear — she would meditate on the five wounds inflicted on the body of Christ. ‘In particular’, she writes, ‘I would contemplate the wound in the heart of Jesus. In my mind I entered there, and I saw how deep it was!’ Through this wound Madeleine was able to enter into a state of union with Christ, following, as it were, in the steps of the great female mystics. This, Janet says, was a kind of spiritual marriage, the nature and intensity of which, however, would draw her into an identification with God so complete that it would end in the desire, as she says, ‘to be consumed in and to die in Him’. It was at this supreme point, when the subject is lost in the ecstasy of its own annihilation, that Madeleine attained the summit of her spiritual journey. Janet never tired of transcribing her accounts of this state, no doubt certain, as he declared in his study, that he had a genuine ‘ecstatic’ in his care:

No, the state I enter into is not sleep; ordinary sleep is a sort of suspension of the life of the spirit in order to sustain animal life. My state is the exact opposite: it is the domination of the mind over the body, which ceases to move in order to leave to the soul the ability to think, to contemplate and to love. It is a suspension

125. For an analysis of this phenomenon of ‘dermographism’, see Janet Beizer, Ventriloquized Bodies, pp. 20-29.
of the sense of living, as if I had no more body, no more limbs; there is only the spirit left, which lives intensely. It is as if I am dead to everything around me: only my body is here, my mind and heart soar over vast horizons which engulf them and where they lose themselves deliciously. I feel myself raised above material things and with an inexpressible intoxication I lovingly contemplate the divine sun of justice filling everything with its grandeur, its love and its goodness. I am like a dead person, indifferent to material life, because a new light illuminates and dazzles me to the point where I no longer see anything else. The more the soul frees itself from material things, the more it is able to comprehend the divine mysteries that God reveals to it little by little. The earth is nothing for me, I have no more body, I no longer live a material life, I am in another world, I live another life, I no longer see with the eyes of the body, I only have a spiritual existence: the light of the mind and the life of the body is nothing compared to that of the soul. But this spiritual life is not monotonous: on the contrary, it varies unceasingly and seems always to be new, its impressions succeeding each other like a vision of flowers in an immense garden, its thoughts multiplying in my mind and the affections of my heart renewing themselves with an always increasing ardour. I feel that it is then that it truly attains the infinite, where the human soul can destroy itself without ever reaching the bottom of this ocean of love.128

Several observation can be made about this extraordinary passage, whose importance, it seems to me, cannot be overestimated in Bataille’s trajectory during the war years, above all in the development of his thinking about his own inner experience. Indeed, it is at the points at which he would depart from what is, essentially, a classic document of Christian mysticism, that Bataille’s ‘conscious mysticism’ is best approached. In the opposition Madeleine maintains between ‘animal life [la vie animale]’ and ‘the life of the spirit [la vie de l’Esprit]’, no less than in the distinction she makes between ‘mind [esprit]’ and ‘spirit [Esprit]’, there is something of that history of consciousness to which Alexandre Kojève had first drawn Bataille’s attention, and which is expressed in the trinitary structure of both Hegelian and Christian ‘spirit’, holy or otherwise.129 The Christian trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit parallels Hegel’s own division of the concept into the universal, the particular and the individual, and Bataille was well aware of this: recalling on several occasions that the Hegelian dialectic had antecedents other than Heraclitus and Plato.130 It is linked, he

130. Bataille had attended Kojève’s lectures on Hegel at the École pratique des Hautes Études between 1933 and 1939. These were assembled from various notes and stenographic records by Queneau, and published as Alexandre Kojève, Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: Leçons sur la Phénoménologie de l’Esprit professées de 1933 à 1939 à l’École des Hautes Études, texts collected and edited by Raymond Queneau (Paris: Éditions Gallimard: ‘Classiques de la philosophie’, 1947; 2nd
observed, not only to Gnosticism and Neoplatonic mysticism, but to what he calls 'philosophical phantoms' such as Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme, and more generally, and historically, to negative theology. Bataille, moreover, must have been struck by the similarities between this text and the passage from Breton’s _Second manifeste:_ above all between a point which ‘dazzles [éclairée]’ as it ‘illuminates [éblouit]’, and one where, according to Breton, being is annihilated into a ‘blind radiance [brillant aveugle]’. Bataille, who often deployed this oxymoronic form of expression, saw it as a kind of testing of the limits of representation, or rather, as the mark of its outer limits, where language, on the threshold of non-meaning, folds back on itself. From this, no doubt, came his interest in Saint Teresa’s phrase about ‘dying of not dying’. The point this fold indicates, however, is not that of their dialectical synthesis, where each term is subsumed into a new, unifying term; on the contrary, they maintain themselves in opposition to each other: blind and radiant, illuminating and dazzling, tearful and joyful — each term being the necessary condition and outcome of attaining this point. It was in just such terms, moreover, that Bataille had first spoken of Picasso’s painting. In ‘Soleil pourri’, the article in which he included a reproduction of _La Danse_, Bataille concluded by writing: ‘In contemporary painting, the search for that which most ruptures the highest elevation, and for a blinding brilliance [un éclat à prétention aveuglante], has a share in the elaboration or decomposition of forms, though strictly speaking this is only noticeable in the paintings of Picasso’ (OC I, 232). But insofar as the negative term of this opposition is not a nothingness that is negated in its becoming — a nothingness, as Sartre would say, that is manifested within us as desire — this antithesis does not designate a difference within identity; rather, the oxymoronic combination marks the limit of possible experience: that point where we encounter the beyond of enclosed, finite being. But it is a beyond that we only reach, as Bataille said, across the nothingness that we encounter in our communication with another being. Which is why the moment in which ‘torture becomes delights’ is experienced as a sacrificial identification with the other — as the representation, in other words, of that beyond we glimpse in our own death.

And yet, the extent to which Bataille found a mystical vocabulary lurking

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131. See Bataillé comments in ‘Le bas matérialisme et la gnose’, _Documents_, no. 1 (1930) (OC I, 220-221); ‘La critique des fondements de la dialectique hégélienne’, _La Critique sociale_, no. 5 (March 1932) (OC I, 283); and his presentation to the Collège philosophique on ‘Non-savoir, rire et larmes’ (February 9, 1953) (OC VIII, 230).
dormant in this text distinguishes his own relation to the medical discourse on such elevated states from their appropriation by the Surrealists to an aesthetics of convulsiveness. Several examples will serve. For Bataille, the laceration of the body in ecstasy (‘as if I had no more body, no more limbs’) is the key to his reading of the ‘moment of sacrifice’ in Hegel’s narrative of the emergence of man from the negativity of his own death. The difference is that here, in the experience of the mystic, the body is suppressed (‘as if I am dead . . . like a dead person’), and a familiar opposition is set up between the material and spiritual world, the life of the mind and that of the soul, the animal body and the immaterial spirit. And yet, as Kojève had so brilliantly demonstrated, finitude is the condition upon which spirit reveals itself. Even God, in order to reveal Himself, must become a mortal man. This is the secret not only of the Crucifixion, but of sacrifice in general; which is why Bataille chose Grünewald’s painting to illustrate this connection. Certainly Janet’s description of Madeleine’s face during the attitude of crucifixion suggests comparison with Bataille’s description, which we looked at in chapter two, of his own face during his meditations on the photograph of the cent morceaux. But Bataille had another model of this face in Grünewald’s painting of the Crucifixion. While it is impossible to say exactly when he first saw this image, in 1928 — around the time Borel gave him the photograph of the cent morceaux — Bataille read Huysman’s Là-Bas, which opens with an extended description of Grünewald’s painting. Not only does the recollection of Durtal (Huysman’s protagonist) draw uncanny parallels with Bataille’s own meditations on his photograph of torture, but it was this, I would suggest, that explains why Bataille, thirty years later, chose to reproduce this particular painting rather than the almost identical but far more famous scene from the Isenheimer Altar: because in his description Huysman draws attention to what he would later identify as distinguishing the Karlsruhe painting from the earlier work, lifting it to a level inaccessible to the Isenheim Crucifixion. This is the terrifying rictus on the face of the dying Christ, which makes this image of sacrifice so disruptive to the Christian notion of transcendence:

132. See Georges Bataille, ‘Hegel, la mort et le sacrifice’, Deucalion, vol. 5, no. 40, Être de penser, Cahiers de philosophie, Neuchâtel (October 1955); collected in OC XII, 326-345. This is the point of departure of the chapter titled ‘The Work of Death’, which I have not been able to include here, but which is the basis to the conclusions I reach in this chapter.

133. ‘Existence’, wrote Kojève, ‘is essentially finite or mortal, and it is exclusively because it is mortal that it is revelatory and revealed. There is “revelation” only where there is finitude and death. And so “God” must die in order to “reveal” himself completely and definitively (e.g., Christ); i.e., he must become “man” and therefore cease to be “God”’ (Alexandre Kojève, ‘Hegel, Marx and Christianity’, p. 28).

The huge and shapeless head, encircled by a ragged crown of thorns, hung down in exhaustion, a look of pain and terror still gleaming in one pale, half-open eye; the face was furrowed, the forehead drawn, the cheeks drained of blood; all its features were drawn [renversés] with tears, while the broken mouth laughed, its jaw contracted by atrocious tetanic spasms.\textsuperscript{135}

In the same manner, what distinguishes Madeleine’s experience from a traditional Christian model of redemption and salvation — and which provides its main point of interest for Bataille — is that the life of the spirit she describes is lived constantly on the threshold of its own ecstatic loss and destruction (‘over vast horizons’, she says, ‘which engulf them and where they lose themselves deliciously’), rather than in life everlasting. ‘Spirit attains its truth’, wrote Hegel, ‘only in finding itself in absolute laceration’; and it is this repeatedly affirmed proximity to our own mortality that introduces a sacrificial dimension to Madeleine’s Catholicism.\textsuperscript{136} But whereas in both the Christian and Hegelian doctrine the death of the victim is sublated in the movement of spirit toward the ultimate unity of being, the testimony of Madeleine’s delirium is that the violent, even mortal suppression of the mystic’s material, animal existence is not only the condition of the unconditioned moment of ecstatic abandon, but the unsurpassable horizon at which spirit maintains itself, as it were, ‘in the face of death’. So although the light of the ‘divine sun’ toward which Madeleine’s succession of states leads her is that of a recognisably Platonic vision of truth and justice, it is a light that ‘dazzles’ as it ‘illuminates’, so that the eyes of the body are rendered blind. In this can be seen a conflation of the Icarian and Oedipal myths through which Bataille mediated his own relation to philosophy’s fluctuating faith in vision and its access to truth.\textsuperscript{137} But it also suggests how Bataille might have viewed Picasso’s painting. It is unclear whether Bataille knew of the personal tragedy that intervened in the making of this work, but perhaps more than any other viewer, and at no time more than during the war years, Bataille was disposed to recognise the ‘faint taste of death’ in this ecstatic dance. While the three figures in Picasso’s painting recall the trinitary structure of Christian spirit, therefore, the dance itself is haunted, as Picasso himself said, by the inexpiable ‘presence’ of Pichot, before whose face, which is that of death itself, this\textit{danse macabre} is performed.\textsuperscript{138} Far from being a moment of negativity ultimately

138. In his contribution to the ‘Hommage à Picasso’ issue of \textit{Documents}, Carl Einstein spoke of the shadows of the figures in Picasso’s paintings as the ‘emanations of man’. However, while Einstein linked these emanations to the expression of what is ‘psychically unassimilable’ to the self, he nevertheless situated this splitting of identity within a dialectical model of representation. See Carl
recuperated into the unity of spirit, therefore, the ‘moment of sacrifice’, pulled here between the twin figures of Dionysus and the Crucified, opens onto an ecstatic loss of self in the continuity of being.

In this respect, the terms Janet uses to explain this moment say a lot about how he understood Madeleine’s experience, because in doing so he evokes the very terms Hegel used to posit the division of self-consciousness into the opposing figures of master and slave. ‘In a couple’, Janet writes, ‘there is a superior and an inferior, a master and a servant’. For Bataille, however, although he acknowledges that the mystic speaks to his god ‘like a slave’, Madeleine’s annihilating identification with Christ has more in common with the movement of what he called communication, which he substitutes, as I have argued, for Hegelian recognition, since it is in this movement that the distinction between the subject and object of this relationship collapses. In the pages of Le Coupable titled ‘L’Ange’, Bataille writes: ‘Through what could be called incompleteness, animal nakedness, the wound, different separate beings communicate, acquiring life by losing it in communication with each other’ (OC V, 263). When Madeleine adopted the pose of crucifixion, therefore, it was the exterior sign of her entry into an attitude of imitatio Christi, of her sacrificial identification with the crucified and dying Christ. Like Christ, she would suffer the physical tortures of the Crucifixion — often imagining her hands and feet pierced by a burning iron spike — and feel the anguish of the lama sabachthani, of that moment when, abandoned by God, Christ experienced the anguish of a finite being before the nothingness of its beyond. Rather than an ascent into the unity of the Holy Spirit, therefore, her ecstatic union with God becomes what Pseudo-Dionysius called the ‘plunge’ into the ‘darkness of unknowing’, in which the subject, he says, lost in the plenitude of being, is ‘neither oneself nor someone else’.

I said earlier that mystical experience gave Bataille a framework and perhaps a testimony by which to think the economy of this moment — above all because of what it revealed about the character of this experience. But it meant more than that — which is why I think he was happy to return later on to the overtly religious terminology of ‘mystical’ rather than ‘inner’ experience. What Bataille saw in this image of Madeleine was the link between the path by which she attained ecstasy and the sin of the Crucifixion; or, in his own terminology, between the economy of the instant and the movement of transgression. For Bataille — and I’m projecting here — what held him about this photograph was


that, after the anguish of doubt and the temptation of sin, it was in the moment in which Madeleine identified with a ‘dying god’ that she passed from the delirium of torture to an attitude of ‘joy in the face of death’. It is in relation to this photograph of her, therefore, that I want to examine the economy of this moment — and, by extension, the role of the image in the meditative practices by which Bataille himself reached the point of ecstasy. Perhaps then it will become clear why Bataille might have compared this image, as I have, with Picasso’s painting of La Danse. It is not by chance that these contemporaneous images share in an iconography of the Crucifixion. What is remarkable, however, and what I imagine made Bataille return to them during the war years, is that they both suggest the link, which he himself was trying to make, between the ‘death of God’ and the economy of the instant in Nietzsche’s ecstatic vision of the eternal return. In order to understand this relation, therefore, I want to look, finally, at what Bataille meant by ‘mystical experience’, and at how he wrestled it — the experience and the term — from the language of both the theologian and the philosopher.

IV. Summit and Decline

This God who quickens us beneath his clouds is mad.
I know, I am he.

— Bataille, Le Petit (1943)

And so we return to Sartre. I said earlier that for both Bataille and Sartre, Surrealism stood or fell by their respective views of that ‘point of the mind’ Breton had formulated in the Second manifeste, and around which Bataille would formulate his own notion of sovereignty in the post-war years. But for Breton too, this point had become increasingly emblematic not only of the Hegelian credentials he wished to accord Surrealism, but of his continued belief that the ‘antinomies of existence’, as he called them, could never be resolved by a social revolution alone, but demanded, in addition, the liberation of man from himself. Breton’s formulation of this position was typically lyrical. In the speech he gave at the ‘Congrès des écrivains’ in June 1935, Breton declared: ‘Marx said: “transform the world”; Rimbaud: “change life”; for us, these two watchwords are one and the same’. A lot of blood had been spilt since then, however, and when Breton returned to France in 1946, it was around the relevance of this position to the post-war era that the debate on Surrealism was taken up. Behind this debate, however, was another struggle which had only a peripheral relation to the future of the Surrealist movement: because in the years immediately following the war, it was through the significance they attributed to Surrealism

that Bataille, and to a lesser extent Sartre, sought to argue their respective positions. As we have seen, the first meeting between the two men had left unfinished business; but much as Sartre tried to forget him (he had more pressing concerns than this ‘new mystic’), Bataille was not so easily dismissed. In numerous articles in *Critique* and elsewhere Bataille kept up an incessant and lively commentary to which Sartre, despite himself, could not help but respond. And although Sartre’s occasional comments were dismissive and contemptuous at best, it is these I want to examine in the final section of this chapter. My point in doing so, however, is not to revisit the debates of the post-war period, to weigh the validity of their arguments, or even to come to some provisional judgement as to their correctness. It has to do, rather, with the problem of speaking of what disappears, at the moment discourse approaches it, into the domain of silence. Taking his cue from negative theology, Bataille circumvented this paradox by arguing that the object of mystical experience can only be known by what it is not. When he came to speak of that object, therefore, in the post-war period, he did so in the context of distinguishing his own understanding of Breton’s ‘point of the mind’ from that of Sartre. Indeed, it was under Sartre’s critique of this point that Bataille first linked his notion of sovereignty to the economy of the instant in mystical experience.

**Revolt and Revolution**

When Breton returned to Paris in May 1946 the questions raised by the renewal of Surrealist activity in Paris were quickly addressed by Sartre in his extended article ‘Qu’est-ce que la littérature?’. Appearing in *Les Temps modernes* between February and July 1947, its fourth instalment, which appeared only two months before the opening of the ‘Le Surréalisme en 1947’ exhibition at Galerie Maeght, opened with an attack on the revolutionary credentials of Surrealism. Explicitly situating the movement in relation to the class origins of its members, Sartre argued that the essential legacy of Surrealism was its assault on the notion of subjectivity, which it deemed to be as bourgeois as the world they rejected. This was the testimony of automatic writing, the discovery of which had first led the Surrealists to dismiss the conventional distinctions between dream and waking. It was not a question, however, of substituting an unconscious subjectivity for consciousness, but of revealing the subject as a ‘flimsy illusion’ at the heart of an objective universe. Concomitant with this assault on subjectivity, therefore, was the destruction of the objective world — and it is here that Sartre announces his charges against Surrealism. Because the Surrealists — bar the odd bar brawl — shied away from real destruction, their assault on the objective world was confined to the construction of imaginary objects whose aim, he says, was to expose the world as a ‘radical contradiction’. Whatever destruction they effected, therefore, necessarily remained at the symbolic level: the destruction of the self by automatic writing, of language by the production of aberrant meanings, of
painting by painting, of literature by literature. ‘Surrealism’, Sartre writes, ‘pursues this curious enterprise of realising nothingness through a plenitude of being’.\footnote{Jean-Paul Sartre, \textit{Qu\'est-ce que la litt\'erature?}, p. 185.} It was always by creating, in other words, that the Surrealists destroyed — and this gave to their works a certain ambivalence. Since the Surrealist object was both a contribution to the cultural form it sought to annihilate, and the annihilation of that form along with itself, the nothingness it sought to realise, Sartre argues, merely ‘glitters on its surface, a Nothingness’, he writes, ‘which is only the endless fluttering of contradictions’.\footnote{Jean-Paul Sartre, \textit{Qu\'est-ce que la litt\'erature?}, p. 186.}

It is from this failure to realise itself as negativity that Sartre launches his attack on Breton’s ‘point of the mind’. Quoting the relevant passage from the \textit{Second manifeste}, Sartre argues that far from being a declaration of allegiance to the struggle of the working-classes, Breton’s ‘point’ is a divorce from it. In order to bring its struggle to a successful conclusion, the proletariat, Sartre points out, must at every moment distinguish between the past and the future, the real and the imaginary, life and death. It is not by accident, therefore, that Breton cites these oppositions: they are all categories of action, upon which revolutionary activity depends. When Breton, therefore, in \textit{L\'\textquoteright{egitime défense} (1926) — his first formulation of Surrealism’s political position — argued that the Surrealists could pursue their inner experiences on the margins of and parallel to the revolutionary activity of the proletariat, he condemned himself in advance: for this implied that the realisation of Rimbaud’s call to ‘change life’ did not first require the fulfilment of Marx’s caveat to ‘transform the world’ — at least not for certain people.\footnote{See André Breton, \textit{Légitime défense} (1926); reprinted in \textit{Point du jour} (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1934), and collected in \textit{Oeuvres complètes}, vol. 2, pp. 282-296.} By its negation of the useful, by its radicalisation of the \textit{acte gratuit} (exemplified by Breton’s lines about ‘the simplest Surrealist act’), and by its celebration of the impulsive and the immediate over conscious activity, Surrealism, Sartre concluded, could only have ended in the quietism to which it now found itself confined. Far from being the declaration of its dialectical aspirations, therefore, Breton’s imaginary ‘point’ haunted the Surrealist adventure. Dream and waking, as Sartre says, may be ‘communicating vessels’, but the instrument of their mediation was lacking. While Surrealism had the concept of totality, therefore — and it is this, Sartre says, that constituted its originality — in its concrete manifestations it realised something quite different. It represented the ‘antinomies of existence’ as essential moments in the unity of life, but it lacked the moment of synthesis to resolve this contradiction. Indeed, as Breton himself said, it is the ‘tension’ between these antinomies, rather than their resolution, that constituted the Surrealist ‘instant’ properly speaking; and it is this that distinguishes Breton’s ‘point’ from the negation that is ultimately only a sublated ‘moment’ in the dialectic of action. ‘This shouldn’t surprise us’, Sartre
writes: 'there is a quietism in all parasitism, and the favourite tempo of consumption is the instant'.\textsuperscript{145} In opposition to Breton's 'fluttering' contradictions, therefore, Sartre is already formulating the oppositions on which he would later found his critique of Bataille, and between which, he says, history forces us to make a choice: quietism or activism, consumption or production, parasitism or self-determination, revelling in an instant of unrecuperated expenditure or committing ourselves to actions that are integrated into and superseded by a framework of endeavours. Having refused to subject its spirit of revolt to the demands of revolutionary action, therefore, the instant Surrealism hoped to attain betrays the contradictions which, according to Sartre, are at the origin of the movement itself:

It is neither Hegelian Negativity, nor hypostasised Negation, nor even Nothingness, though it bears a likeness to it; it would be more correct to call it the Impossible or, if you like, the imaginary point where dream and waking, the real and the fictitious, the objective and the subjective, merge. Confusion and not synthesis: because synthesis would appear as an articulated existence, dominating and governing its internal contradictions. But Surrealism does not desire the appearance of this novelty, which it would again have to contest. It wants to maintain itself in the nervous tension provoked by the pursuit of an unrealisable intuition.\textsuperscript{146}

In phrasing his critique in these terms, Sartre has clearly accepted Bataille's own conflation of Breton's 'point' with his 'Impossible' — with the proviso, of course, that his reflections on the latter, as Sartre writes a few pages later, 'aren't worth the slightest Surrealist tract'. Behind its bluster, this attack is two-pronged and subtle: it subsumes Bataille's post-war activity to a continuation of the Surrealist experiment, and attacks the revolutionary efficacy of that experiment by equating it with Bataille's mysticism. Bataille's current position, therefore, is invalidated in advance by the impotence to which Surrealism had so demonstrably been reduced in post-war France, and that impotence is confirmed and justified by the quietism which, in Sartre's opinion, is inherent to mysticism. No doubt it was this representation of Surrealism that Breton was set on refuting in the interviews he conducted with André Parinaud in 1951, re-affirming, as he did, both the Hegelian dimensions of this point and its distance from the mystical plane. But there was another spur to Breton's comments, which came from an altogether unexpected source, and which gave Bataille the opportunity to respond to Sartre's remarks.\textsuperscript{147}

In the year Sartre published this attack on Surrealism, Camus began to write

\textsuperscript{145} Jean-Paul Sartre, \textit{Qu'est-ce que la littérature?}, p. 190.

\textsuperscript{146} Jean-Paul Sartre, \textit{Qu'est-ce que la littérature?}, p. 186.

\textsuperscript{147} Bataille had already written to \textit{Les Temps modernes} to inform them of his decision not to publish in their review precisely because of Sartre's remarks. See Georges Bataille, 'Lettre à M. Merleau-Ponty', \textit{Combat}, no. 930 (4 July, 1947); collected in \textit{OC} XI, 251-252.
When he finally published it in November 1951, this sparked off a series of exchanges that would only conclude in December 1952 and would have serious repercussions for all its participants. This began when Camus published a short extract from his book in Cahiers du sud titled 'Lautréamont et la banalité'. In response to this less than complimentary assessment of Surrealism's greatest and perhaps last remaining hero, Breton, who until then had enjoyed close relations with Camus, published the short article 'Sucre jaune' in the newspaper Arts. Camus's response was rapid, 'Une lettre d'Albert Camus en reponse à André Breton' appearing in the same newspaper a week later. When L'Homme révolté itself appeared the next month, however, more fuel was added to the fire, because immediately following the pages on Lautréamont, Camus had included a section on 'Surréalisme et révolution' in which, taking up many of Sartre's arguments, he argued that the Marxist model of revolutionary action was incompatible with the spirit of revolt Surrealism had inherited from Rimbaud. While the former, he argued, aims to conquer the totality of the world, the latter seeks the unity of life; and although the Marxist is only too willing to submit the irrational to the rational to achieve his aims, the Surrealist, in order to realise this unity, demands their reconciliation. Like Sartre, therefore, Camus identified the Surrealist solution in Breton's 'point of the mind'. But far from being the Hegelian synthesis of thought and being, this 'supreme point', he argues, is what Breton himself, in the Second manifeste, called 'the colossal abortion' of the Hegelian system. Where Camus disagrees with Breton, however, is that this abortion did not lead Surrealism, as Breton had argued, to the principles of dialectical materialism, but to what he calls 'the search for the summit-abyss [sommet-abîme], familiar to mystics'. As the fusion of dream and waking, Breton's 'point' was simply the sublimation of the old contradiction between the ideal and the real. 'In truth', Camus concludes, 'it is a question of a mysticism without God, which appeases and illustrates the absolute thirst for revolt'. Camus, who had been in the audience at Moré's that evening, had clearly not forgotten Bataille's metaphor of summit and decline, and like Sartre before him, equated its dialectic with Breton's 'point'. Breton, of course, was furious with this characterisation of Surrealism, and sought the quickest means to refute its claims. By the time Camus's book appeared,
however, his discussions with Parinaud — which would be aired between March and June the following year — had already been conducted. The following month, therefore, Breton released another interview in *Arts* under the title ‘Dialogue entre André Breton et Aimé Patri à propos de *L’Homme révolté* d’Albert Camus’. Breton clearly relished this opportunity to remind the world of his presence, and grandly accused Camus, among numerous other crimes, of ‘bearing false witness’. At which point Bataille, incensed by Breton’s remarks, entered the debate, publishing ‘Le temps de la révolte’ in the December 1951 and January 1952 issues of *Critique*.

Despite his frustration at the haste with which Breton had clearly misread Camus’s book, Bataille’s approach, in contrast, was typically subtle. His article takes its point of departure from the impasse which, in the course of following Kojève’s lectures on Hegel, and in opposition to their conclusions, he had identified at the heart of Hegel’s dialectic of mastery and slavery. Bataille argued that if the master, by submitting the slave to servitude, forfeits his sovereignty, the slave too, who in Hegel’s narrative overcomes the master by the labour of his hands, is in turn enslaved by his work. In addressing the question of revolt raised by Camus’s book, however, it is significant that Bataille does so in relation to Surrealism, in which he sees a spirit of revolt irreducible to the historical destiny of the slave. It is in this context that he quotes Breton’s lines about ‘the simplest Surrealist act’. Both Sartre and Camus had referred to these lines: the former seeing in them the impasse to which Surrealism, divorced from a means of affective action, had condemned itself; the latter, the nihilism at the heart of Surrealism’s revolt. Breton, however, during his interview with Patri, had argued that to the extent that such an act would necessarily lead to the death of its perpetrator, ‘it is a question’, he says, ‘ — metaphysically speaking — of

154. See André Breton, ‘Dialogue entre André Breton et Aimé Patri à propos de *L’Homme révolté* d’Albert Camus’, *Arts* (November 16, 1951); collected in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, pp. 1048-1055.

155. See Georges Bataille, ‘Le temps de la révolte’, *Critique*, no. 55 (December 1951) and no. 56 (January 1952); collected in OC XII, 149-169. Bataille’s other response to Camus’s book was the unfinished manuscript of *Le Surréalisme au jour le jour*, in which he gave an account of Surrealism from the perspective of someone who lived through its upheaval — something he saw as necessarily lacking in Camus’s account. See *Le Surréalisme au jour le jour* (1951); collected in OC VIII, 167-184.

156. See G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness’, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, pp. 229-240. In 1939 Kojève had published a translation of and commentary on this section of the *Phenomenology* in the January issue of *Mesures*, and this was later included as the introduction to the complete publication of his course. Kojève’s reading of Hegel’s dialectic of mastery and slavery is also recounted in Queneau’s lecture notes of the academic year 1933-34; at the end of the second of the last two lectures of that year, which appear in the appendix to the *Introduction* as ‘L’Idée de la mort dans la philosophie de Hegel’; in the eighth of the sixth to ninth lectures of the year 1934-35, which also appeared as an appendix titled ‘La dialectique du réel et la méthode dialectique’; and finally in Kojève’s résumé, in the first three lectures of 1937-38, of the first six chapters of the *Phenomenology*.

157. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, p. 191; and Albert Camus, *L’Homme révolté*, p. 123.
a conscious assault on man which is of the nature to strike out against both the "self" and the "other", and which, no matter how little one might reflect on it, is not without affinities with the final assault . . . against "God". Bataille, who quoted Breton's comments in his article, was eager to establish what value is posited by this spirit of revolt for which the rebel condemns himself, as the slave would not, to certain death. Adopting Camus's notion of 'metaphysical revolt', Bataille argued that it is this value that distinguishes the Communist model of revolution, in which violence has value only as a means to a greater end, from the revolt which, insofar as it is an end in itself, expresses a will to sovereignty. In order to attain this sovereignty, therefore, the rebel cannot subordinate his revolt to a means — cannot use it, as the master uses the slave, like a thing; but at the same time he cannot aspire, like the labouring slave, to the mastery he struggles against. In response to this dilemma, therefore, the rebel must show both revolt and restraint: revolt against the human condition, but restraint in his revolt — lest it become, in its turn, the tyranny of the master. Like the amok of Malaysia and the priest at Nemi — both of whom Bataille refers to in his text — the rebel must accept the consequences of his crime and his guilt, both of which he must pursue to their inevitable conclusion — to the limits, as it were, of revolt. He must, in other words, face his death. Only then can he attain that sovereign part of himself which exists in all men, which is irreducible to the world of utility, and whose sacrificial character is expressed in Breton's description of 'the simplest Surrealist act'.

Bataille's argument here not only responded to Sartre's attacks on Surrealism in 'Qu'est-ce que la littérature?', but anticipated many of the attacks Sartre would subsequently launch against Camus in response to his book, which, when they were published, led to the break — even more famous than that between Breton and Aragon — between the two men. According to de Beauvoir, relations between them had been deteriorating steadily since 1945, but Sartre's response to Camus's book brought an abrupt end to their friendship. Initially, however, Sartre had kept his hand, leaving L'Homme révolté to be reviewed by Francis Jeanson, the young editor of Les Temps modernes who published the acerbic and long-awaited 'Albert Camus ou l'âme révoltée' in May 1952. Stung by criticism from this unexpected source, Camus responded in kind with the pointedly titled 'Lettre au directeur des Temps modernes', and this, together with Sartre's equally barbed 'Réponse à Albert Camus' and Jeanson's 'Pour tout

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158. André Breton, 'Dialogue entre André Breton et Aimé Patri à propos de L'Homme révolté d'Albert Camus', p. 1052; quoted by Bataille in OC XII, 161.


vous dire', was published that August.\(^\text{161}\) The focus of Sartre's critique was what Jeanson, in his review of Camus's book, had identified as its denial of history, in place of which, Sartre says, Camus has substituted the absurdity of the human condition — which is to say, as it was characterised by him, the struggle of man against an empty and indifferent nature in which he lives as a stranger condemned to die. Camus himself had written that the purpose of his analysis was neither to describe the phenomenon of revolution, nor to examine the historic or economic causes of specific revolutions, but to discover in them the illustrations and constant themes of 'metaphysical revolt'.\(^\text{162}\) Confronted by the silence of the universe, metaphysical revolt is neither a state of being nor an action, but the tension between man's desire to survive and his mortal destiny. And while this has been one of the major themes of French literature from Rousseau to Breton, in describing the 'privileged moments', as Sartre calls them, in which man attains a provisional harmony with nature, Camus, he says, introduced a new note of morality. Since it is their extreme singularity that makes them universal, it is in these moments that he discovered both a universal morality and the solidarity of man: 'I rebel', Camus writes, 'therefore we are'.\(^\text{163}\) By now it should be apparent that such a claim would not be complete without the inevitable reference to Bataille — and this duly follows. This pursuit of the privileged moment, Sartre says, is similar to — but 'richer and more complex' than — the 'supplice' of Bataille: but since both are addressed to a God whose absence is a constant throughout the changes in history, the relationship of man to this eternal silence transcends and denies that history.\(^\text{164}\) Of course, there is a certain irony — which Sartre may not have been in the mood to appreciate — that this language of 'privileged instants' and 'perfect moments' had been used by him in \textit{La Nausée} \(1938\).\(^\text{165}\) Bataille himself had noted this in 'Le Sacré', the article in which he first formulated his notion of communication around the economy of the instant.\(^\text{166}\) But therein lay the crux of Sartre's disagreement with Camus. As the struggle of man against nature, metaphysical revolt, he says, is at once the cause and effect of the equally ancient but more pitiless struggle of man against man. And as he had with Breton and before him Bataille, Sartre confronts Camus with its historical agents, 'who do not recognise their all-too-real protest', he argues,


\(^{162}\) Albert Camus, \textit{L'Homme révolté}, p. 142.

\(^{163}\) Albert Camus, \textit{L'Homme révolté}, p. 38.

\(^{164}\) Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Réponse à Albert Camus', p. 346.


\(^{166}\) Bataille's observation had been: 'Jean-Paul Sartre, in \textit{La Nausée}, has already spoken of "perfect moments" and "privileged situations" in a significant way' (OC I, 560).
'in your ideal revolt'. What Sartre accuses his friend of, therefore, is not of betraying his former thought (how could he, when it was this sentiment of the absurd that first drew him to Camus?), but of not adapting it to what he now perceived to be the demands of history. The question to be addressed, he argues, is not whether history has a meaning (since history is an abstraction, he says, the question is meaningless), but to give it one. Action alone has the power to do this — human action; and it is this that Sartre accuses Camus of betraying.

Sartre concluded his reply with the hope that his would be the last word. Camus obliged, and the two never spoke again. But in the December issue of *Critique* Bataille gave his own response to this debate in ‘L’affaire de L’Homme révolté’. Bataille’s aim in this short article was not only to refute Sartre’s call to action, but to openly declare the rebel’s attitude — that attitude he had advocated in ‘Le temps de la révolte’ — to the ‘demands’ of history. Rather than adopting a nineteenth-century model of class struggle and applying it, under the dubious pretext of ‘making’ history, to the problems of the contemporary world, Bataille argued that the only response to current events, and specifically to the onset of the Cold War, was not to deny history, he says, as Sartre had claimed, but to revolt against it. Bataille recognised that this ‘untenable’ attitude, as he calls it, which is condemned in advance to misunderstanding, and which he was at pains, because of this, to distinguish from the merely verbal violence of Surrealist agitation, does not lead to action, he says, and cannot change the world; it is, nevertheless, the only attitude that responds to the division into which the world, in 1952, was already settling. Whatever impasse this attitude of revolt would lead Bataille too — and it is the morality of this attitude that I am coming to in this discussion — Bataille was certainly right about one thing. It has recently been claimed that his position in this article ‘heralded the democratic idea now prevailing of a universal community founded on public debate’. That such a facile representation could be attributed to Bataille speaks volumes about the tenuousness of his stance here (without, however, entirely excusing it). Bataille’s article, nevertheless, brought the whole affair to an end. But in the middle of this exchange of texts — which led Sartre to a dubious rapprochement with the PCF — Gallimard published his monumental *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, in which Sartre once more made reference to Breton’s ‘point of the mind’, this time in the context of his critique of the morality of ‘saintliness’.


168. See Georges Bataille, ‘L’affaire de L’Homme révolté’, *Critique*, no. 67 (December 1952); collected in OC XII, 230-236.

Beyond Good and Evil

Sartre had originally written his book as an introduction to the *Oeuvres complètes* of Jean Genet, the first volume of which it eventually constituted. This was immediately reviewed by Bataille, who called it Sartre’s ‘masterpiece’ — adding, somewhat tongue in cheek: ‘never has he harped on his ideas at such length, or shown a greater resistance to those subtle delights which chance introduces into our life, illuminating it with a furtive light’ (OC IX, 288). Bataille was only tangentially interested in Genet, whose current literary stature he regarded as a fad, seeing in Sartre’s study, rather, the book in which he at last expressed something of himself. But Bataille had other reasons for reviewing Sartre’s book, since it was here, I want to argue, that Sartre launched his clearest and most sustained attack on Bataille’s notion of sovereignty. This was undertaken largely in the chapter titled ‘Pour arriver à être tout, veillez à n’être rien en rien’ — a phrase he takes, significantly, from Saint John of the Cross’s *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Although ostensibly a critique of Genet’s quest for saintliness, therefore, and argued with reference to the works of Jouhandeau and Gide, Sartre’s polemic in this chapter is clearly directed at his real opponent. And although Sartre only mentions him once by name, the terms he employs here are those Bataille had spent the last decade expounding on. What does Genet, after all, have to do with sacrifice, *potlatch*, the sacred, sovereignty, the instant, mysticism, the summit, transgression, sin, unknowing, and above all Breton’s image of the ‘point’ — all of which make an appearance here? Sartre’s terminology in this chapter, no less than his frame of reference, are so clearly matched to Bataille’s that this text must stand, as Bataille himself recognised, as a peculiar example of one thinker attacking another through an intermediary. What is equally clear, therefore, is that despite the criticisms in ‘Un nouveau mystique’, and the philosophical broadsides he had fired at Moré’s, Sartre hadn’t quite rid himself of Bataille — in acknowledgement of which he made this chapter the focus of his own review. More importantly, however, for our purposes, it was from the notes and drafts to his reviews of the books of Sartre and Camus that Bataille, in the spring of 1953, began to write his own book on

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171. See Georges Bataille, ‘Jean-Paul Sartre et l’impossible révolte de Jean Genet’, *Critique*, no. 65 (October, 1952) and no. 66 (November 1952). This was later reprinted by Bataille, with some revisions, as the chapter on Genet in *La Littérature et le mal* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1957); collected in OC IX, 287-316.

La Souveraineté. Bataille, at least, knew to whom Sartre's remarks were addressed.

Sartre had divided this chapter into two parts: the first examining saintliness as a 'social fact'; the second, and much longer, addressing saintliness as a 'subjective determination'. For both aspects, Sartre situates the saint within a Hegelian framework: first as a historical figure, then as a figure of consciousness within that history. He begins by pointing out that the saint appears chiefly in what he calls 'societies of consumption' (a term Bataille had used, three years earlier, in La Part maudite), the chief virtue of which is what Sartre calls 'the generosity of consumption'. Among its aristocratic masters, the supreme refinement of consumption is to destroy the possession without enjoying it. But this, Sartre says, is only a subterfuge. By placing himself above the goods of the world, the aristocrat experiences a secret satisfaction: in a society that places the blossoming of being at the instant of its annihilation, a negative, pushed to the extreme, is transformed into a positive. Thus poverty is wealth, refusal is acceptance, the absence of God is the dazzling manifestation of His presence, living is dying, and death is life. Sartre, however, will have none of this. In the society of masters, he says, the saint serves a 'mystifying' function: as the administrator of a state religion he prescribes economy, temperance and the wise administration of property for the middle classes; and as the spokesman for a class religion he preaches resignation to the lower classes, convincing them that by resigning themselves to their poverty they are equal to the aristocrat who rejects his wealth by squandering it in joyous expenditure. Saintliness, Sartre concludes, is above all a class attitude, and the self-abnegation of the saint, like the consumption of the master, is predicated on the labour of the working slave.

It is on this dependency that Sartre takes issue with Bataille. Despite its historical contingency, he says, this 'black aristocracy' continues to survive on the fringes of modern industrial society in what he calls, with a clear nod to Bataille, the 'knighthood of crime'. Here, he says, one finds all the features of a feudal order: 'parasitism, violence, potlatch, idleness and a taste for death'. Expressed in these terms, Sartre is clearly thinking less of Genet than of what he had once dubbed the 'strange and mysterious' Collège de sociologie, and beyond that of the

173. The plans for this unpublished work were lengthy and changeable. It began in 1949-51 as notes for a book on Nietzsche et le communisme. Concurrent with this, however, Bataille worked on a book on Camus titled La Sainteté du mal. Between 1950 and 1952 these two projects merged to become Nietzsche et le communisme, ou la souveraineté, and several studies for it were published in Critique, 84, and Synthèses. Between 1952 and 1953 Bataille worked on a book titled La Souveraineté et la révolte, which took its departure from 'Le temps de la révolte', 'L'affaire de L'Homme révolté', and 'Jean-Paul Sartre et l'impossible révolte de Jean Genet'; and again, several studies for this were published in Critique. This finally became the manuscript of La Souveraineté, which Bataille began in spring 1953 and only abandoned in the summer of 1954. In 1956 he published two more studies from this work in Monde nouveau-Paru and Botteghe oscure. See OC VIII, 592-678.


rumours which no doubt still circulated about the secret society of Acéphale. It was in the journal of the latter — in the article on ‘La pratique de la joie devant la mort’ — that Bataille had declared: ‘I MYSELF AM WAR!’ (OC I, 557). Since it was here that Bataille first announced his mysticism, it is hard to believe Sartre didn’t have this in mind when he argues that because the saint ‘transposes’ the military drama of the master and slave in terms of his ‘inner life’, the movement of history passes him by. Why he does so, however, is addressed in the second part of the chapter, in which Sartre launches his attack on both Bataille and Surrealism.

Sartre begins by arguing that the motivations of saintliness have already been described by Hegel in the passage from the Phenomenology on the ‘unhappy consciousness’. Hegel argues that because it attributes the abstract and eternal universal to the transcendental being of God, the unhappy consciousness does not recognise that it is both the abstract subject and its particular contingency. In relation to this unchanging God, therefore, it regards its own particularity as an inessential consciousness which, because of this division, it attempts to destroy in order to raise itself to the universal. It is this that imparts to the classic texts of Christian mysticism (Sartre refers here to Saint Teresa) their tone of self-hatred. Between a society based on agriculture, however, in which the universal is still to be conquered, and an industrial world in which the universal is available in forms as diverse as science and morality, a reversal has occurred: the individual, Sartre says, is now conquered as something beyond the general, that is to say, in the extreme particularity of the person. This conception, he argues, which has coloured contemporary interpretations of ancient mysticism, has led philosophical minds to conceive of existence as a reality which cannot be thought, since all thought universalises, but only lived in silence. It is at the limit of the annihilation of the self, therefore — at what Jouhandeau calls its ‘supreme point’ — that these new mystics search for the autonomous fullness of their being. But whether their pursuit of this point leads them upward, as it had Nietzsche and Gide, or downward, as in Jouhandeau and Genet, its goal is always the same: to renounce nothingness — which is to say, the consequences of their finitude. In the wake of this renunciation, however, all that remains, Sartre argues, is pure being, an absolute positivity without negative counterpart.

As we have seen in his criticism of both Bataille and Breton, this is Sartre’s bête noire, based as it is on his own rejection, in L’Être et le néant, of that moment in which, according to Hegel, the Cartesian opposition between consciousness and the world, between being-for-itself and being-in-itself, is

surpassed by the negation of the negation.\textsuperscript{178} For Sartre, however, a negation that negates itself does not resolve itself into positive being — into either (depending upon whether one believes Heidegger or Hegel) a prior or future unity of thought and being (being-in-and-for-itself) — since this would be to negate that part of man which is proper to him. Indeed, Sartre argued that human reality is, by its very nature, 'an unhappy consciousness', he writes, 'with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state'.\textsuperscript{179} The synthesis Sartre accused Surrealism of lacking, therefore, was not that of an absolute knowledge attained at what Kojève had hailed as the rapidly-approaching end of history, but rather the constantly renewed dialectic of action in which that history is made by what he had come to accept, following Marx, as its agents — that is to say, the working classes. In contrast to which, therefore, the saint, who renounces his nothingness, does so in order to raise himself to pure being — face to face with his God. In a passage which repeats the terms of his critique of Surrealism five years earlier, Sartre spells out the consequences of this renunciation:

The passage to being, in effect, is not at all comparable to the Hegelian synthesis on which the thesis and antithesis are based: it transports the conflicts to a terrain of absolute possitivity; there is no solution of the antinomies; but, since there is no place for negation in the heart of being, the terms of the opposition lose their negative power. They are always contrary, but instead of repelling each other and of being to each other's nothingness, they interpenetrate. The voluntary and actual unity, whereby freedom made the contraries exist both for and in opposition to each other, petrifies into a substance, and the contraries are 'stuck' in this mould, which hardens.\textsuperscript{180}

As an example of this petrified unity, Sartre again quotes Breton's formulation from the \textit{Second manifeste}. It is precisely this 'point of the mind', he argues, that Genet is seeking: and the accusation here is the same as in the earlier text. Although Surrealism hoped to realise nothingness — the 'annihilation of being into a blind and interior radiance [\textit{brillant}]' — in practice it realised 'the production of a diamond [\textit{diamant}]' — the perfect image of pure being. There is a dialectic of being, Sartre says, and a dialectic of doing, a quietism and an activism: and it is clear which side he is on. Comparing Genet — but by extension Bataille too — to the 'swooning female worshipper who asks to be


\textsuperscript{180} Jean-Paul Sartre, \textit{Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr}, p. 243-244.
pierced by the divine sword’, the fusion of subject and object in mystical experience, he writes, is nothing more than a ‘sublimated dream of amorous possession’. This is hardly surprising: Genet’s aim, he says, is not the self-determination of man, not even of Nietzsche’s ‘overman’, but ‘to destroy’, he writes, ‘within himself, time, history and the human, so that the reign of the eternal and the divine may be born in the instant’.181 Meanwhile, he says, the world runs its course. And here the conflation of Genet’s saintliness with Bataille’s mysticism, which has driven his critique to this point, is finally expressed by Sartre with all the disgust he can muster. As a class attitude dependent upon and compliant with a decadent aristocracy, saintliness is condemned to a guilty silence; as an avatar of the unhappy consciousness, it is fixed in its nothingness; and as an attempt to attain the non-synthetic unity of Breton’s ‘point of the mind’, it is not only historically superseded by the labouring slave, but anticipates and invalidates in advance the notion of sovereignty Bataille had formulated in relation to this dialectic. On the morality of this dialectic, therefore, Sartre’s conclusion is final:

For my part, I am not as fond of shit as some people say I am, which is why I reject saintliness wherever it manifests itself, among the canonised saints as well as in Genet; and I smell it, even beneath their secular guises, in Bataille, in Gide, in Jouhandeau; and always for the same reason: that it is, to my mind, only the mystical bough of the generosity of consumption.182

Again, behind its bluster this is a strong argument, and one Bataille — its true target — was bound to answer. Bataille’s primary concern in his review, therefore, was to distinguish Genet’s quest for saintliness from what he understood by the term he had made his own, and which he would definitively link, in this text, to Breton’s ‘point of the mind’. He begins, however, by agreeing with Sartre. Behind Genet’s thirst for crime there indeed lies a quest for saintliness, and this, he concurs, only differs from sovereignty in appearance. The saint, Bataille says, is the man whom death attracts, the sovereign the man who attracts it to himself. This identification, however, immediately confronts the criminal with what Sartre had argued is an indissoluble contradiction. In a passage that Bataille quotes in his review, and in which the charges he had previously made against Surrealism are repeated, Sartre says of Genet: ‘He wanted to transform as much Being as possible into Nothingness. But since his act is a realisation, he finds at the same time that Nothingness is metamorphosed into Being, and the sovereignty of the evil man turns into slavery.’183 Far from rejecting this characterisation of sovereignty, however, Bataille recognised this

contradiction, which he calls 'the impasse of unlimited transgression' (OC IX, 298). Where he disagrees with Sartre, however, is in attributing its cause, the identification of which throws him back on the questions already raised by Camus's book.

For Bataille, the quest for sovereignty by alienated man is a fundamental cause of historical revolt, be it religious or political. But insofar as it is the destruction of the object, sovereignty is that which will always elude man. While Hegel, therefore, and after him Marx, pursued the dialectic to the ultimate triumph of the slave, his apparent sovereignty, Bataille argues, is only a will for servitude. By the same token, therefore, the criminal who relentlessly pursues evil until every interdiction has been violated, every sacred profaned, finds that his pursuit of sovereignty has become a duty, and his apparent freedom again turned to servitude. Confronted by this impasse, therefore, Bataille is forced to formulate the paradox on which his thought rests. ‘Sovereignty’, he writes, ‘must inhabit the realm of failure’ (OC IX, 306). If he is to avoid becoming that petrified substance Sartre had threatened him with, the rebel, he says, can never seek to be sovereign; the most he can hope for is the grace of the instant, which alone allows him to reach for it. In speaking of sovereignty, therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between those privileged instants in which life is bathed in the furtive light of communication — and which are accessible, Bataille says, to chance alone — and those attempts, among which Bataille includes Genet’s pursuit of saintliness, to seize sovereignty, the inevitable failure of which Sartre so exhaustively demonstrates.

It is this impasse that Sartre had identified, in the discussion following Bataille’s presentation at More’s, in his metaphor of summit and decline. Insofar as the summit corresponds to the violation of the integrity of being, it can only be reached through sin. For Bataille, however, the summit itself is ‘beyond good and evil’, since good and evil, he argues, belong to the decline, which is to say, to the realm of morality. It is the ‘beyond’ of this summit, however, that Sartre does not recognise. By positing the necessity of evil, he argues, Bataille necessarily affirms a value, even if it is that of crime or sin, which are only the negation of the good. But because we are situated in the world, because our actions have consequences, to negate one value, he says, is inevitably to affirm another. While Bataille’s summit may seem beyond the realm of morality, therefore, as soon as he posits it as such it becomes another morality. Far from contesting morality by something that would be beyond morality, the summit, Sartre argues, in fact posits the co-existence of two moralities: a high and a low — and it is from this opposition that the dialectical value of sin comes. In negating the good it negates itself, and the sinner is pushed toward a state in which he no longer recognises it as sin. It is precisely this, however, that Bataille denies. In Jenseits von Gut und Böse (1886) — which Bataille’s presentation is essentially a commentary on — Nietzsche had argued that while the master recognises a distinction between good and bad (which he equates with nobility
and ignobility of soul), the opposition between good and evil originates elsewhere, 
in what Nietzsche calls 'slave morality' — which, as he points out, 'is essentially 
the morality of utility'. It is in this sense that Bataille equated this opposition 
with the decline. From the moment one speaks of a morality of the summit, he 
argues, in reality one speaks in the name of the morality of the decline. This, 
however, cuts both ways. To the extent that the higher morality contests the lower 
morality, it must renounce itself as a value. And although Hyppolite would 
propose that this renunciation of values constitutes a third value — the value of 
contestation — Bataille doesn't accept this. Contestation, he says, is not a value, 
but the perpetual contestation of all values: at which point, Bataille says, 
‘everything enters into the night’ (OC VI, 346). It is not a means toward an end, 
and like the summit can never be attained. One can only speak, therefore, like 
Saint John of the Cross, of 'the ascent to the summit', which, insofar as the 
summit is inaccessible — to the extent, that is, that the ascent does not end in 
death — is necessarily followed by the decline. And while Sartre saw this as 
the failure of Batailie’s dialectic, for Bataille it is its lesson: the ‘paradoxical 
lesson’ of transgression.

For all his brilliance, this is what Sartre could not accept, driven as he was 
by an overriding indignation against every form of consumption not justified by 
the principle of utility. Since consumption, for Sartre, is only a moment in the 
cycle of production, expenditure — which is to say, the useless consumption of 
wealth outside that cycle — can only ever be an effect of the unequal distribution 
of that wealth. Far from being the expression of a principle of loss in which 
Bataille saw the unlimited becoming of the universe, therefore, expenditure, for 
Sartre, in whatever form it takes, represents a collusion with the unequal access 
to that surplus wealth, which is extracted, as he never fails to recall, from the 
labour of the dispossessed. In taking this position, however, Sartre aligned himself 
with the essentially bourgeois affirmation of the rights of the individual over the 
community. And this is where he differed from Bataille. Expenditure, for Bataille, 
is opposed to production as the sovereign is to the subordinate, freedom to

184. See Friedrich Nietzsche, Jenseits von Gut und Böse (1886); translated by R. J. Hollingdale as 
Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future, with an introduction by Michael Tanner 

185. The comparison to John of the Cross has been pointed out by Peter Tracey Connor in his recent 
discussion of Bataille’s presentation. See the pages titled ‘The Mysticism of Sin: Bataille versus 
Sartre’, in Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin, pp. 114-127. What is missing from Connor’s 
exposition, however, is the link between Bataille’s representation of the summit as ‘beyond good and 
evil’ and the critique of slave morality on which it is based.

186. Speaking, as he often did, of his elevated states of consciousness (which Bataille regarded as 
evidence of his experience of mystical states), Nietzsche wrote: ‘What has so far entered our souls only 
now and then as an exception that made us shudder, might perhaps be the usual state for these future 
souls: a perpetual movement between high and low, the feeling of high and low, a continual ascent 
as on stairs and at the same time a sense of resting on clouds’ (Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, 
p. 231; quoted by Bataille in OC VI, 111).
servitude, and the present to the future. Sovereignty, he argues, restores to the
primacy of the present that surplus share of production which is only acquired to
the extent that men and women first submitted themselves to the primacy of the
future. And although that submission is invariably unequal, if for no other reason
than that we are part of this unlimited becoming, Bataille would continue to
affirm that it is not necessity but its opposite, excess, that presents man with his
fundamental problem. Indeed, to the extent that excess, as soon as it is created,
is no longer part of the world of use, that world is subordinate to the principle of
loss. The question posed by sovereignty, therefore, is not that of good and evil,
but of utility and loss, and it is Sartre’s attempt to reduce the latter to the former
that betrays his own point of departure from a morality of utility. Because of this,
Bataille says, the greatest difficulty encountered by Sartre in his philosophical
studies was his inability to pass from a morality of individual freedom to a
common morality that would bind individuals to each other. For Sartre, who
retained an essentially Cartesian conception of subjectivity, it is the isolated being
and his self-determination that is fundamental — which is why he represented
Genet’s pursuit of saintliness as an attempt to ‘seize his existence’. But for
Bataille, humanity is not composed of isolated beings but of the communication
between them; and it is on this, he says, rather than the apotheosis of labour, that
a morality that ‘surpasses’ the utilitarian morality of the slave must be founded.

In formulating this morality, therefore, although Bataille substituted the
movement of communication for that of Hegelian recognition, he did not
renounce the dialectic of reciprocity on which the latter is based and which was
anathema to Nietzsche’s conception of the autonomy of human will. So while
Bataille’s critique of slave consciousness clearly drew on the notion of
‘ressentiment’ formulated by Nietzsche in Zur Genealogie der Moral (1887), he
nevertheless rejected its implicit critique of Hegel’s assertion that consciousness
is always mediated by another consciousness.\(^\text{187}\) In the pages on Hegel in
L’Expérience intérieure Bataille writes: ‘The Genealogy of Morality is singular
proof of the ignorance in which the dialectic of the master and slave has been
held and continues to be held’ (OC V, 128). As Klossowski has pointed out,
however, it was out of this ignorance that Nietzsche ‘attacked the Hegelian
dialectic at its roots’; and it was from the terms of this attack that Bataille
formulated a figure who would emerge from the dialectic as neither master nor
slave.\(^\text{188}\) This is what the notion of sovereignty flirts with: the isolation of the
‘overman’ driven by the ‘will to power’. But insofar as this drive is also directed

\(^{187}\) See Friedrich Nietzsche, Zur Genealogie der Moral (1887); translated, with an introduction and
notes, by Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen as On the Genealogy of Morality (Indianapolis, IN:

On the relationship between Nietzsche and Hegel, see Gilles Deleuze, Nietzsche et la philosophie
(Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962); translated by Hugh Tomlinson as Nietzsche and
toward a goal — to the extent, that is, that it defers the present to the future — Bataille argued that the ‘will to power’ betrays the lightness of the laughter and dance of Zarathustra.\textsuperscript{189} Indeed, Bataille argued that the essential flaw in Nietzsche’s thinking was to have misinterpreted the opposition between sovereignty and power. Sovereignty, Bataille insists, can only ever be attained in communication, which he re-orientates, because of this, around the ‘will to chance’.\textsuperscript{190}

Because of this re-orientation, which locates sovereignty outside the sphere of action, it is necessary, Bataille says, to make the distinction between two kinds of communication, which he labels weak and strong. The former, which is bound to the profane world, and whose instrument is discourse, is that through which we attempt to establish the humble truths that coordinate our actions to those of our fellow human beings. But this weak sense of communication would not be possible without a profounder sense, which is never stronger than when the former fails, and which has meaning only in the instant in which it occurs. This is what Bataille meant when he said that sovereignty ‘must inhabit the realm of failure’. Because just as sovereignty presupposes communication, so communication, in this strong sense of the term, presupposes the sovereignty of the individual beings who communicate with each other. But since this communication transgresses the limits of individual being, sovereignty is inextricably bound to crime. ‘The violation of the interdiction’, Bataille writes, ‘is the essence of sovereignty’ (OC IX, 296). This is what Sartre’s representation of sovereignty failed to recognise. Recalling the ‘Discussion sur le péché’, and Sartre’s incomprehension at his use of the word ‘sin’, Bataille argued that insofar as it is protected by the law — to the extent, that is, that it is the object of an interdiction — good is the very reason for doing evil. And to the extent that our humanity is founded on the observation of interdictions, it is in the moment of their transgression that we transcend the particularity of individual being. It is this inaccessible summit that constitutes the sacred aspect of a morality that surpasses the utilitarian principles on which the opposition between good and evil is founded, and in describing which Bataille, recalling Breton’s lines about the ‘point’, called them ‘one of the best approaches to sovereignty’ (OC IX, 315-16).

\textit{The Death of God}

In September 1939 (this date to which I keep returning in Bataille’s life), as the rest of France braced itself for the coming trials of faith, Bataille set out in his journal the motivation for his writing in the clearest of terms. ‘As simply as I

\textsuperscript{189} Bataille first argued this in the preface to \textit{Sur Nietzsche} (OC VI, 21).

\textsuperscript{190} On this reorientation of Nietzsche’s doctrine, see Allen S. Weiss, ‘Impossible Sovereignty: Between \textit{The Will to Power} and \textit{The Will to Chance}’, in ‘Georges Bataille: Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Un-Knowing’, a special issue of \textit{October}, no. 36 (Spring 1986), pp. 129-146.
can’, he writes, ‘I’ll talk about the paths I took to find ecstasy, in the hope that others will find it in the same way’ (OC V, 264). In the pages that follow, which he would later title ‘Le point d’extase’, he goes on to recount the method he followed to reach this point. In this journey, Bataille — who at the time, he says, found most books ‘impossible to read’ — made an exception for, and eventually took as his guide in this ‘mystical training’, the writings of the thirteenth-century Italian mystic the Blessed Angela of Foligno. Bataille would go on to quote from Angela’s writings at length in both L’Expérience intérieure and Le Coupable, where he refers in particular to a passage in which she recounts her ultimate vision of God. What fascinated Bataille about this text was that Angela did not describe God appearing to her in the illumination of an absolute knowledge, but, as Pseudo-Dionysius had described it, in the ‘darkness of unknowing’:

But when God is seen in darkness it does not bring laughter to the lips, nor devotion, fervour, or ardent love; neither does the body or the soul tremble or move as at other times; the soul sees nothing and everything [nihil videt et omnia videt]; the body sleeps and speech is cut off. And all the signs of friendship, so numerous and indescribable, all the words which God spoke to me . . . I now understand that these were so far below that which I see with such great darkness, that in no way do I place my hope in them, nor is there any of my hope in them.191

These lines appear in the twenty-sixth and final step of Angela’s Memoriale (1292-1296), her account of the stages of her spiritual journey towards union with God. At this supreme point she was subject to a revelation which, in the words of her scribe, Brother Arnaldo, ‘surpasses anything conceivable or imaginable’.¹⁹² This final stage of her journey, however, was experienced concurrently with the twenty-fifth step, during which Angela suffered every agony of the soul and body — and above all the fire of sexual desire, which she cauterised, she recalls, with the antidote of ‘material fire’. Above all, however, Angela felt herself utterly abandoned by God, so much so that, like Christ on the cross, she cried out to him not to abandon her. These two stages in her ascent, which are only separated in the narrative for the sake of emphasising their opposition, clearly equate to Madeleine’s passage from the state of torture to that


192. Angela of Foligno, Memorial, p. 135.
of ecstasy. In this state, Angela, like Madeleine — and indeed like Saint Teresa, who was aware of her writings — entered into a union in which the distinction between her own identity and that of God disappeared in the plenitude of being: ‘You are I’, he tells her, ‘and I am you’.\(^{195}\) But beyond even this annihilating union, Angela passed to an awareness of God of such ‘abyssal profundity’, she says, that even to speak of it would be to blaspheme: ‘For in the cross of Christ in which I used to take such delight, so as to make it my place of rest and my bed’, she says, ‘I find nothing; in the poverty of the Son of God, I find nothing; and in everything that could be named, I find nothing’.\(^{194}\) This designation of both a limit to the possible and an impossible beyond it was reaffirmed on her death-bed when Angela, in extremis, twice cried out (and one must imagine the drawn-out thrill that passed through Bataille as he read these words for the first time): ‘O unknown nothingness! [o nihil incognitum]’.\(^{195}\) Bataille, who would quote these words in L’Expérience intérieure, in the pages in which he formulated his ‘nouvelle théologie mystique’, does so, he says, because he heard in this death-cry an escape beyond the limits imposed on man by his belief in a divine being — from the vanity, that is, of speaking of either a God or what resembles one — to an unknown that opened itself, at that instant, to the ecstasy of this dying woman.

Sartre, of course, had attacked this terminology before: first, as we have seen, in ‘Un nouveau mystique’, when he ridiculed Bataille’s notion of communication for positing ‘a night in which all cows are black’; and then again, in ‘Qu’est-ce que la littérature?’, when he dismissed the Surrealist instant as being ‘at heart nothing’, he wrote, ‘unless it is the divergence, impossible to reconcile, between the two terms of a contradiction’.\(^{196}\) Insufficiently purged, however, Sartre had returned to this polemic in Saint Genet, when he attacked the complacency of the saint before his ignorance of God. ‘The final light’, Sartre wrote, ‘is the darkest night, the great night of unknowing [non-savoir]. Beyond the blinding evidence of its damnation, this soul knows nothing; and it is on this nothing that it founds its hope’.\(^{197}\) Once again, however, and with unerring accuracy, Sartre had grasped the significance of Bataille’s words while letting their meaning fall through his fingers. Despite this, it was Sartre’s critique of this nothing and his own defense of it that led Bataille to return to the question of unknowing. Indeed, in his 1953 article ‘Le non-savoir’, Bataille clearly felt it

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193. Angela of Foligno, Memorial, p. 205.
194. Angela of Foligno, Memorial, p. 212.
195. Angela of Foligno, Instructions; collected in Complete Works, p. 316; quoted by Bataille in OC V, 122.
196. Jean-Paul Sartre, Qu’est-ce que la littérature?, p. 300.
necessary to preempt Sartre’s easy dismissal of its terminology. Referring to
the comment in ‘Un nouveau mystique’, Bataille writes: ‘In entering into
unknowing I know that I am effacing the figures on the blackboard. But the
darkness that falls is not that of annihilation, it is not even the “night in which all
cows are black”. It is the jouissance of the night’ (OC XII, 287). For Bataille, this
shift in terminology from the ‘nothingness’ of metaphysics to the ‘nothing’ of
unknowing is an effect of that movement, which we have been following, from
the anguish of individual being enclosed in the sphere of its particularity to the
ecstasy in which that sphere is shattered. It was in this movement, as we have
seen, that Bataille found the key to a general theory of the economy, which is
intimately linked, as I have argued, to his valorisation of the instant. What I want
to end by considering, therefore, is how Bataille linked the economy of the instant
to Nietzsche’s proclamation of the ‘death of God’. Because far from being the
retreat into quietism that Sartre would have us believe, it is in his response to this
proclamation that Bataille formulated the morality of sovereignty.

Between May and September 1952, immediately prior to his review of Saint
Genet, Bataille published his study on ‘Mystique et sensualité’, the article in
which, doubtless spurred on by Sartre’s critique, he most clearly expressed what
he understood by mystical experience. As we have seen, Bataille’s point of
departure in this text was his own inner experience of mystical states, which he
compares, in his study, to erotic effusion. For Bataille, however, although both
sexual and religious ecstasy reach states that can properly be called sovereign,
since eroticism, at least initially, is subordinated to the event, it is in mystical
experience alone, he says, that man attains complete sovereignty. In the
conclusion to his article, in a passage which clearly draws on the text of Angela
of Foligno, Bataille compares this summit to what mystics call the ‘theopathic
state’. What he introduces into this description, however, and which ultimately
distinguishes sovereignty from the notion of transcendence, is that Bataille situates
mystical experience in relation to man’s consciousness of the instant:

There is no longer any desire in the theopathic state; being becomes passive and
submits to what transpires within it with a kind of immobility. In the inert
beatitude of this state, in the transparency attained by all things and the universe,
both hope and apprehension disappear. The object of contemplation becomes equal
to nothing (Christians would say equal to God), and at the same time appears equal
to the subject who contemplates it. There is no longer, in any respect, any
difference between them: it is impossible to locate their distance from each other,
and the subject, lost in the indistinct and unlimited presence of the universe and
itself, ceases to belong to the perceptible unfolding of time. The subject is
absorbed in the everlasting instant. Irrevocably it seems, and without lasting
attachment to either the future or the past, the subject is in the instant, and the

198. See Georges Bataille, ‘Le non-savoir’, Botteghe oscurc, no. 11 (1953); collected in OC XII,
278-288.
instant itself is eternity. (OC X, 243-244)

In his engagement with philosophy from around 1931, Bataille would attest to the importance of the works of Jean Wahl: in particular, of course, *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* (1929), but also his *Études Kierkegaardgiennes* (1938). Bataille began to read this in September 1941 in conjunction with a French translation of Kierkegaard’s *Le Concept de l’angoisse* (1844), and his interest in the concept of sin — a term he played with, on the whole unsuccessfully, in the ‘Discussion sur le péché’ — derives, broadly speaking, from its deployment by Kierkegaard in this work. For Kierkegaard, the phenomenon of sin, which he situates in relation to man, to being and to time, is posited by him as individual, positive, transcendent and discontinuous: individual, because by suppressing man’s original state of innocence it posits the self; positive, in that it affirms rather than negates the being of non-being; transcendent, since by positing a beginning to history through the myth of the Fall it instigates a rupture with immanence; and discontinuous, because by separating man’s finite existence from his eternal life it consigns him to death. Sin, therefore, is an irreducible category of man’s existence, and the origin of his anguish. Because anguish, for Kierkegaard, is the vertigo of freedom, the temptation man experiences at the threshold of his fall from grace; and it is the instant of the fall, of his leap into the void, that separates man from eternity.

Bataille wrote something similar to this in the third notebook of *Le Coupable*, which he began while reading *Le Concept de l’angoisse*. Immediately following his quotation of Hubert and Mauss’s comments about the criminal character of sacrifice — lines he would later cite in ‘Le Sommet et le déclin’ — Bataille goes on to speak about the connection between sin, anguish and the movement of communication. ‘For those who grasp it as laceration’, he writes, ‘communication is sin, or evil. It’s the rupture of the established order. Laughter, orgasm, sacrifice — so many failures lacerating the heart — are the manifestations of anguish: in them, man is the anguished, the one who is grasped, held tight and possessed by anguish. But, to be precise, anguish is the serpent, the temptation’ (OC V, 305). Where this differs from Kierkegaard’s leap of faith, of course, is in the ecstatic movement Bataille sees anguish initiating. For Kierkegaard, sin is also a passage, not from good to evil, but from a domain in which there is neither good nor evil — the domain of innocence — into the domain of morality. And while this is the exact opposite of Bataille’s conception


of the summit as 'beyond good and evil', it is in this movement that Bataille understood the link between the instant and the eternal. Wahl's study is helpful here, and in particular the chapter titled 'Par l’angoisse vers la hauteur (Le Concept d’Angoisse)'. 'If time has a structure', Wahl writes, 'it is because the instant is posited; and if the instant is posited, it is because eternity is there. And if eternity is there, it is because man, in the instant and through spirit, posits himself as the unity of the temporal and the eternal'.

As the point of contact between time and eternity, therefore, the instant acquires a character of plenitude: 'what is present in the instant', Wahl writes, 'is the eternal'. And this brings him to the link Bataille himself wished to make. 'In this way', Wahl concludes, 'Kierkegaard formulates the idea that Nietzsche wanted to express in the belief in the eternal return'.

Persuasive as this sounds, however, a conception of the instant as that in which man, through spirit, posits himself as the unity of the temporal and the eternal, the particular and the universal, the immanent and the transcendent, is clearly not Bataille's. As Sartre might have said: it is not unity Bataille seeks but laceration. It was from this link to the eternal, however, that Bataille derived his own emphasis on the economy of the instant in mystical experience. Sartre himself recognised this in his review of L'Expérience intérieure. Determined as he was to find a precedent for every aspect of Bataille's thought, Sartre argued that in addition to being the 'ecstatic instant of the mystic', the 'instant of Gidean jouissance', and the 'instant of Proustian reminiscence', the instant in Bataille's thought, he says, is also the 'anguished and eternal instant of Kierkegaardian freedom'.

Sartre, however, is too eager by far to consign him to this auspicious lineage. Because for Bataille — and this is what his study on mysticism was meant to clarify — what the instant opens onto is not the unity of either Christian or Hegelian spirit, but what he calls 'the unknowable of the instant' (OC VIII, 259n).

I recalled earlier that in the manuscript to La Souveraineté Bataille wrote: 'There is nothing that I do not follow in the overall movement that Hegel's thought represents in his eyes' (OC VIII, 403); and I suggested that the 'paradoxical lesson' of transgression will only be learnt by understanding what this movement represented to Bataille. What I did not say, however, is that immediately after this statement Bataille goes on to write that whereas Hegel situated subjectivity in the identity that the subject and object attain in absolute knowledge, the discourse in which this identity is attained, he writes, 'itself dissolves into the nothing of unknowing' (OC VIII, 403). It is in relation to the movement of discourse toward absolute knowledge, therefore, that the subject of unknowing needs to be situated. Hegel's greatness, Bataille said, was to have seen

that knowledge depends on completeness, that knowledge which is not complete is not worthy of the name. But since being itself is not only incomplete but 'incompletable [inachevable]', knowledge cannot grasp a totality which, lacking either form or structure, is inaccessible to it. On the contrary, knowledge, as Bataille argued, can only grasp an object which, being abstracted from this totality, is itself incomplete and incompletable. Not because of the insufficiency of reason, therefore, but by its very nature, knowledge loses itself in unknowing, and it is in this vanishing that we should understand what Bataille meant by the 'overall movement' of Hegel's thought.

Bataille argues that whereas absolute knowledge closes the circle of knowledge, by following its circular movement, unknowing defines, beyond the limit it thereby attains, what is no longer, as it was for Angela of Foligno, an 'unknown [inconnu] nothingness', but an 'unknowable [inconnaissable]' that opens itself, at that instant, to the movement of communication. In the sense that it coincides with unlimited knowledge, therefore, unknowing responds to the state of questioning that is brought about by the search for knowledge beyond utility. 'But this unlimited knowledge', Bataille writes, 'is the knowledge of nothing' (OC VIII, 251-252n). No doubt this is what Derrida had in mind when he spoke of Bataille using the 'empty form' of the dialectic in order to designate the transgressive relationship between meaning and non-meaning, knowledge and unknowing. Lacking the ambiguity in the Latin, German and English terms, however, Bataille, in order to clarify this relationship, made a distinction between the 'nothingness [néant]' of metaphysics and the 'nothing [rien]' that unknowing takes as its object. 'Negative theology', Bataille writes, 'which attempts to transpose the implication of the theopathic state into the realm of knowledge, might be content to take up the thought of Dionysius the Areopagite: God is nothingness, but I prefer to say: God is nothing, not without linking this negative truth to a perfect laughter: the laughter that doesn’t laugh' (OC VIII, 251-252n). In doing so, however, Bataille linked this nothing to the economy of the instant: because while the autonomy of Hegel's absolute knowledge is that of discourse unfolding in time, 'the vanishing thought of unknowing', Bataille writes, 'is in the instant' (OC VIII, 403). In the theoretical introduction to La Souveraineté, Bataille writes:

Useless to say that this nothing has little to do with nothingness. Nothingness is what metaphysics envisages. The nothing I speak of is a given of experience, and is envisaged here only to the extent to which experience implies it. No doubt the metaphysician may say that this nothing is what he has in mind when he speaks of nothingness. But the whole movement of my thought is opposed to this pretence, reduces it to nothing. The instant this nothing becomes its object, this movement stops, it ceases to be, giving way to the unknowable of the instant. (OC VIII, 259n)

To the extent that it is founded on the anticipated result of a particular
activity, knowledge — which, as Hegel demonstrated, belongs to the servile consciousness of the slave — is never acquired except in the slow unfolding of time. Because of this, however, we can only know what is subordinated to the future. We know nothing, in other words, of the instant. And yet, as Bataille said, we are conscious of the instant (indeed, we are conscious of nothing but the instant); but this consciousness is, at the same time, the perpetual vanishing of the instant. Our consciousness of the instant, therefore, is never truly such except in unknowing: when the object of laughter, the object of tears, dissolves into nothing, and our laughter, like our tears, fills the void created by the absence of that object. But while this movement tells us why the subject of unknowing, to the extent that its object is nothing, is absorbed, as Bataille wrote, ‘in the instant’, it doesn’t explain why he immediately added, in his study on Mystique et sensualité: ‘and the instant itself is eternity [et l’instant, à lui seul, est l’éternité]’ (OC X, 244). This, however, is what I want to conclude by addressing: because it is in this link to the eternal that the thought of unknowing reveals its real debt to Nietzsche.

Although Bataille, in L’Expérience intérieure, admitted that he ‘tended more than Nietzsche toward the night of unknowing’, he nevertheless maintained that Nietzsche had an experience of the eternal return that was, he writes, ‘properly speaking mystical’ (OC V, 39-40). Years later, therefore, when he wrote about following the ‘overall movement’ of Hegel’s thought from absolute knowledge to perfect unknowing, it was in the context of a discussion that was less about Hegel than it was about Nietzsche, and more specifically of the relation between their thought and his own.\(^\text{204}\) This is a relation that goes to the heart of the thought of unknowing, raising, as it does, questions with which Bataille had grappled long before its formulation. In the paragraphs titled ‘The Pyramid of Surlej’ from the article ‘L’Obélisque’ — those paragraphs in which he first linked the vision of the eternal return to the object which, to the extent that it exceeds the categories in which it can be represented, is an object of unknowing — Bataille writes: ‘Nietzsche is to Hegel what a bird breaking its shell is to a bird contentedly absorbing the substance within’ (OC I, 510). Indeed, among the many things he represented for Bataille, Nietzsche is this relation to Hegel.\(^\text{205}\) When Bataille, therefore, years later, turned to the experience of unknowing, he argued that insofar as the passage from knowledge to unknowing is a moment of rupture, of discontinuity in the closed circle of absolute knowledge, ‘Nietzsche alone has described this’, he writes, ‘in the "death of God”’ (OC VIII, 403). What this

\(^{204}\) The relevant section is titled ‘La pensée de Nietzsche, celle de Hegel et la mienne’, from the chapter on ‘Nietzsche et le communisme’ in La Souveraineté (OC VIII, 399-404).

means is that when Bataille, around the same time, wrote that the instant in which the subject of unknowing is absorbed is itself eternity, he was making the link — which he had first proposed nearly fifteen years earlier — between Nietzsche’s proclamation of the ‘death of God’ and what he later experienced in his vision of the eternal return.

In making this link, of course, Bataille was not alone. Indeed, his path had been prepared in advance by two studies: Karl Löwith’s *Nietzsches Philosophie der ewigen Wiederkunft des Gleichen* (1935), and Karl Jaspers’s *Nietzsche* (1936). Each book had been reviewed by, respectively, Klossowski and Bataille in the January 1937 issue of *Acéphale*, and in the same issue Jaspers’s book had been the subject of an exposé by Wahl entitled ‘Nietzsche et la mort de Dieu’. Löwith’s study was the first to argue that the doctrine of the eternal return, which had generally been dismissed by previous commentators, was not only the unifying, fundamental idea in Nietzsche’s thought, but that its affirmation was implicit in the negation of the ‘death of God’. For Löwith, who sought to show that Nietzsche’s thought constituted a philosophical system, the ‘death of God’ is the resurrection of man, who finds himself in a ‘freedom toward death’. At the peak of this freedom, however, this will to nothingness inverts itself, and the nihilism of the ‘death of God’ becomes the affirmation of the eternal return. It was to Jaspers, however, that Bataille turned, years later, when he addressed the relation between Nietzsche and unknowing. Although Bataille wrote that Jaspers, expressed himself in a manner ‘diametrically opposed’ to his own, he also called him the ‘most profound’ of Nietzsche’s commentators (OC VIII, 478). What I imagine had the profoundest influence on Bataille’s reading, however, is that Jaspers saw the transformation in Nietzsche’s thought between 1881 and 1884 — which is to say, between *Die Morgenröte* and book three of *Zarathustra*, which culminates in the affirmation of the eternal return — as an


208. See the pages titled ‘The Death of God and the Prophecy of Nihilism’ in Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, pp. 36-55.

209. Bataille originally drafted this text in 1950 for the manuscript of *Nietzsche et le communisme*, and published it separately as ‘Nietzsche à la lumière du marxisme’ in 84, no. 17 (January-February 1951) (OC VIII, 474-480). The previous August, Bataille had borrowed the revised edition of Jaspers’s book. When he reworked his text, however, for the manuscript of *La Souveraineté*, the reference to Jaspers was deleted.
effect of what he calls Nietzsche’s ‘mystical experiences’.

Indeed, for Jaspers, a Christian, Nietzsche’s ‘metaphysical ideas’ were the expressions of the substance of the states of his being, and it is through these ideas, he says, that Nietzsche came to an understanding of those states.

Beginning with an impulse toward ‘self-overcoming’, therefore, Nietzsche passed through three basic existential attitudes: nobility of soul, heroic existence, and Dionysian abandonment, before arriving at three states in the consciousness of being: contemplative vision, mystical union, and, finally, Dionysian intoxication, which is the eternal joy of becoming itself, the joy that includes the joy in destruction. And because at this highest state of the affirmation of existence, Jaspers says, ‘all questioning and knowing ceases’, to express Nietzsche’s philosophical trajectory he quotes a phrase which Bataille himself would cite in *Sur Nietzsche* as evidence of Nietzsche’s experience of mystical states: ‘The new feeling of power: the mystical state; and the clearest, most daring rationalism is only a path to reach it’.

According to Jaspers, therefore, Nietzsche only had recourse to the doctrine of the eternal return because human understanding, which apprehends being as fixed and immutable, cannot conceive of the concept of becoming. This is where the vision of the return, as Bataille would argue, draws on the Heraclitean vision of time. Indeed, in the same issue of *Acéphale* in which he reviewed Jaspers’s book, Bataille published an early text by Nietzsche on Heraclitus. The supreme expression of the will to power, Nietzsche says, is ‘to imprint upon becoming the character of being’. Indeed, as Nietzsche’s dramatisation in *Zarathustra* reveals, his experience of the eternal return was of being suspended in a moment of becoming, at the gateway where the future and past meet. Here alone can we grasp the continuum of time. But insofar as the concept of becoming leads him back to Hegel and the unity of spirit (one only has to think

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211. Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche*, p. 349. This, however, is precisely what Sartre accuses Nietzsche of. In the handful of pages he devotes to him in *Saint Genet*, Sartre is critical of the fact that Nietzsche did not bother to furnish ‘proof’ of his ideas, but merely decided, in a burst of enthusiasm, that they were true. And since the doctrine of the eternal return authorised him to treat the real as a particular instance of the possible, he learnt to call his tears of suffering tears of joy. Nietzsche, therefore, only plays at astonishment, exaltation, joy, anguish: ‘all in vain’, Sartre writes, ‘behind the dance is only an absence of the soul’. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, pp. 346-350.


of Breton’s ‘point’), Bataille felt it necessary to link the eternal return to the ‘death of God’. This is what he addressed, in the same issue of Acéphale, in his article ‘Propositions’, which, in addition to being illustrated with Masson’s drawing of the headless god, also contains Bataille’s first statements on the eternal return. Since God, he argues, is the eternal universal that gave being its character of immutability, the concept of becoming anticipates the death of God. In the vision of the eternal return, therefore, ‘time’, Bataille writes, ‘becomes the object of ecstasy’ (OC I, 470). But if time is the object of the ecstatic vision of Heraclitus, it was Nietzsche’s proclamation of the ‘death of God’ that finally shattered the Parmenidean sphere of being, opening it to a new vision of universal existence. ‘A world like a bleeding wound’, Bataille writes, ‘endlessly creating and destroying particular, finite beings: it is in this sense that true universality is the death of God’ (OC I, 473).

It is in this vision of becoming that the instant acquires its character of eternity. Since all things are chained and entwined together, since all things are destined to return, if we affirm one single instant, Nietzsche says, we affirm not only ourselves but all existence. This is why he could say that if we ever wanted one moment of our lives to return, if we ever said: ‘You please me, happiness, instant, moment’, then we wanted everything to return. In saying yes to joy, therefore, we say yes to all woe. It is here that the identity of opposites, exemplified by Nietzsche’s ‘tears of joy’, is revealed as the transcendent expression of being to the extent that the perception of being exceeds the categories in which it can be represented. Wahl had pointed this out in his commentary on Jaspers’s book. But if every instant of becoming is justified by this affirmation, it follows that the present cannot be justified in the light of the future, nor the past by the present. It is in this sense that the eternal return demotivates the instant, freeing it from subordination to the future. But it is also what links the economy of the instant to the movement from anguish to ecstasy, which is where Bataille’s true interest in Nietzsche’s vision of the return lies.

Bataille’s understanding of anguish, as I have traced it, was primarily formulated in relation to three works: Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, Kierkegaard’s Le Concept de l’angoisse, and Janet’s De l’angoisse à l’extase — to which we might add his reading of Angela of Foligno. This intertwining of references — a philosopher’s account of the emergence of self-consciousness, a theologian’s discussion of sin, a psychologist’s analysis of ecstasy, and a mystic’s description of the theopathic state — all of which, as it were, he rejects (the language of phenomenology, theology, psychology and mysticism), allows Bataille, by this rejection, to articulate his anguish in relation to a general economy of expenditure. For Bataille, anguish arises from the anticipation that subordinates the present to a future moment. First and foremost, then, it is an expression of desire. This anticipation, however, is dependent upon the prior division of the self into a present and a future being — upon the projection of the self, in other words, into a future time. Anguish, therefore, belongs to the
consciousness that has the idea that one day it will cease to exist. And while this projection of the self is the precondition for the individualisation of the subject, since sovereignty, as Bataille argued, is the affirmation of the preeminence of the subject, which is the end, over the means, which is the object, in the instant in which it enters into unknowing, desire dissolves with its object, and the self is no longer subject but sovereign. It is when we are thrust from our anticipation of the future into the presence of the instant, therefore, that our anguish turns to ecstasy.

Let me recall again: Bataille found nothing in the idea of the eternal return to move him in his turn. As a cosmological speculation requiring scientific verification it held little interest; as the expression of a moral imperative even less; and as the conception of being as becoming it was anticipated by the vision of Heraclitus. What was important to him in this vision — and this is verified by Blanchot — was the sovereignty of an instant which, precisely because of its link to the 'death of God', opened onto the most profound of mystical experiences. Bataille first addressed this in 'Le rire de Nietzsche', a text he wrote in 1942, when his interpretation of Nietzsche was at a transitional stage between the ritual aspirations of Acéphale and the inner experience of Sur Nietzsche. Taking up his earlier propositions on Heraclitus, Bataille argued that the vision of the eternal return precipitates being into what he calls 'the double impossible of time'. Whereas, in the commonly held representation of time, the impossible is only encountered at the extremes of a prior and future eternity, 'in the eternal return', Bataille writes, 'the instant itself is a single impossible movement projected to these two extremes' (OC VI, 312). When Bataille, therefore, wrote that the instant in which the subject of unknowing is absorbed is itself eternity, he was situating it within an experience of the impossible which, precisely because it is the revelation of an unknowable nothing, escapes all knowledge. Rather than a metaphysical doctrine, therefore, the eternal return is a summons to make the leap — not of faith, as Kierkegaard would have it, and not even of the loss of faith that leads to humanism, but of joy in the face of the 'death of God'.

It is in this leap — more accurately in this dance, which he saw, it might be said, in Picasso's painting — that Bataille found the morality of sovereignty. Where Sartre saw an existential imperative to define the self by the actions of a free agent in a godless universe, Bataille heard the call to embrace death, as he


said, ‘in a potlatch of absurdity’, to join in Zarathustra’s dance, in the laughter of his drunken song.\textsuperscript{217} For Bataille, the eternal return was a call to affirm the present over the future, to say: ‘you please me, happiness, instant, moment’. And it is because the economy of this instant is linked to the eternal return that Bataille is not the ‘new mystic’ Sartre accused him of being. On the contrary, it is Sartre who, by cloaking the nihilism of the ‘death of God’ in the language of ‘commitment’, falls to proposing ‘new moral transcendences’. One more time: the eternal return is not the existential imperative to motivate actions as if they were to be repeated to infinity; on the contrary, it is the liberation of the instant from all ends, from a life driven by purpose. And it is the absence of purpose that gives it its weight. ‘Let us think this thought in its most terrible form’, Nietzsche writes: ‘existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness: the eternal return’.\textsuperscript{218} De Beauvoir was right: at the bottom of every glass lies a faint taste of death; but when the instant is experienced as an end in itself, without meaning or purpose, the particularity of individual existence dissolves in the continuity of being.

This is why Bataille felt it necessary, as he wrote, to ‘reverse’ the idea of the eternal return. It is not from the promise of death that our anguish arises, but from this: that our finitude renders useless the attempt to integrate life within a framework of endeavours that would transform our actions into so many means. Lived once, our life is meaningless: only the thought of the eternal return allows us to live each moment as an end in itself — ironically, by demotivating it. The eternal return frees life, if not from the burden of death, then at least from its anguish. But there is no consolation in the return: it is a vision of man alone in the free movement of the universe, without hope, but without apprehension too. And it is this vision that draws him into ecstasy. This is what Hölderlin captured in the line that so intrigued Blanchot about the ‘right to death’. Contrary to what organised religion claims, it is not life everlasting that man seeks but death. This is the truth of the return and the source of our ecstasy. It is also what Bataille meant when he concluded his book with the phrase: ‘sovereignty is nothing’ (OC VIII, 456). There is no beyond to finitude — a nothingness in which being would rediscover itself as spirit: God was sacrificed for nothing, to nothing. This is its ‘paradoxical mystery’. And it is because it is nothing that finitude is not a moment in the economy of sacrifice. On the contrary, this nothing affirms that death is the unsurpassable horizon of being — and that sacrifice, as Bataille said, bears witness to the entire movement of death. Bataille first realised, perhaps, in September 1939, in the wood at Saint-Nom-le-Brèteche; or after that, back in Saint-Germain itself, as he reflected on the death of Laure. And it was in the face


\textsuperscript{218} Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{The Will to Power}, p. 35.
of this death that he found that affirmation of being he called sovereignty.

As Bataille observed, since Christianity equates God with the good, God is limited to a category whose basis, as Nietzsche had demonstrated, is the principle of utility. The limit of man, therefore, is not God, who is the possible, but the impossible, which is the absence of God. This is the meaning of Nietzsche’s cry: ‘No God, no man above me!’ But if God is dead, killed by His servility, ‘man’, Bataille concludes, ‘is morally bound to be sovereign’ (OC VIII, 413). It is not often that Bataille uses this sort of language, and we should be careful about what he is saying. Once again, however, we need look no further than Nietzsche’s madman. ‘There has never been a greater deed’, he cries, ‘and whoever is born after us — for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto’. Confronted by the ‘death of God’, man is made aware of the nothing that is the foundation of his freedom, without, however, and contrary to what Sartre argued, making an absolute of this nothing. By valorising this nothing, Bataille, by his own admission, confers on it the ‘sovereign prerogative’; but we can only be sovereign, he writes, on one condition: ‘that we forget, forget everything’ (OC VIII, 259n). As Klossowski would point out, forgetting is the source and indispensable condition not only for the revelation of the eternal return — a revelation which, to the extent that it is endlessly repeated, breaks with itself at the moment of its affirmation — but for the ecstatic loss of identity of the being to whom it is revealed. In order to be sovereign, therefore, in order to take up the sovereign prerogative, rather than sacrificing the divine king, man must himself become a god — if only that he might sacrifice himself again, and so re-enter the cycle of becoming. However — and here we return to the question of the image — since sacrifice, as we have seen, is bound to representation, to the embodiment, that is, of the ‘dying god’, sovereignty is a sacrifice in which the victim is everything that is God.

Bataille had suggested as much in L’Expérience intérieure. While it is possible to hear, in Bataille’s descriptions of meditating on the photograph of the cent morceaux, an echo of that vision of darkness described by Angela of Foligno, Bataille would go on to draw a distinction between what he calls ‘ecstasy before an object’ and ‘ecstasy in the void’. Like Madeleine, and indeed as in Masson’s drawing of Acéphale, Bataille had described his arms stretching out ‘like branches in the darkness’; and like Grünewald’s Christ — his head, he writes, was ‘thrown back [renversée]’ and his eyes ‘rolled up [révulsés] in their sockets’ (OC IV, 165). But as if to indicate that

he had passed from a lower to a higher state of sovereignty, Bataille recalls that like Angela of Foligno he reached a point of tension, a state of immobility, in which it was, he writes, ‘impossible to laugh’ (OC IV, 165). While the former state, he says, is attained before either ‘the point’ or some ‘overwhelming image’ (and it is in speaking of the latter that he recalls his meditations on his photograph), it is only when the object of ecstasy was ‘suppressed’, Bataille writes, that he entered into the ‘night of unknowing’ (OC V, 144). This suppression of the world of sensible objects has a long legacy in mystical literature. Pseudo-Dionysus writes of breaking away ‘from what sees and is seen’, before plunging into ‘the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing’; and Madeleine, describing the state of ecstasy, says that she ‘no longer sees with the eyes of the body’; and finally, in the text in relation to which Bataille first formulated his own experiences of unknowing, Angela of Foligno tells her scribe that when God is seen in darkness, ‘the soul sees nothing and everything’. But while this shift from ‘the point of ecstasy’ to ‘ecstasy in the void’ describes something like the movement in the ascent to the summit, it also suggests the ambiguous place Bataille accorded the image, on the one hand in mystical experience, but more generally in opening a window onto the field of the sacred. ‘If I had not known ecstasy before the object’, Bataille writes, ‘I would not have known ecstasy in the night. But initiated as I was into the object — and my initiation had presented the furthest penetration of the possible — I could only find, in the night, a more profound ecstasy’ (OC V, 144). In the hierarchy of the various forms of communication, therefore, as on the path Bataille took to reach ecstasy, the image marks the limit of the possible: because, ultimately, a window onto the sacred is all the image can be. As Bataille said: it opens a wound in the sphere of our particularity, it allows us to glimpse the possibility of escape, but it does not permit us to reach beyond its limits.

This is the impasse by which sacrifice is confronted, and the key to Bataille’s notion of sovereignty. As Jean-Luc Nancy has pointed out, to the extent that it suppresses the particular for the general, representation is analogous to the Christian — that is to say, dialectical — model of sacrifice. But in order to become that ‘mythical, imaginary, ideal being’ in which sacrifice attains its highest expression, man must pass from the theatre of sacrifice, in which he identifies with a ‘dying god’, to the sovereignty he only attains in proclaiming the ‘death of God’. This is the secret of Nietzsche’s madman, the distant event he came to announce: that the Crucifixion of Christ is no longer a specific event, but

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222. As we have seen, in 1954 Bataille was to have included this text opposite the photograph of the cent morceaux in Le Tombe de Louis Trente. And it was around this time, in the manuscript to La Souveraineté, that he wrote: ‘I will not hesitate to indicate the existence of a point where laughter that doesn’t laugh and tears that do not cry, where the divine and the horrible, the poetic and the repugnant, the erotic and the funereal, extreme wealth and painful nudity coincide’ (OC VIII, 251n).

the sign of a general expenditure in which everything that God was has been sacrificed: truth, morality, being, unity, reason — every beyond, including, ultimately, sacrifice itself. Sovereignty, therefore, has very particular consequences for Bataille’s understanding of the image, whose relation to sacrifice is played out in Picasso’s painting of _La Danse_. At the beginning of this chapter I proposed that Bataille saw in this Dionysian image the link between Nietzsche’s proclamation of the ‘death of God’ and his ecstatic vision of the eternal return. But since the object of this vision, as Bataille said, exceeds the categories in which it can be represented, the movement from anguish to ecstasy in which Bataille saw the key to this economy describes a shift from the theatre of sacrifice — which is to say, of the reign of the sovereign — to the unadulterated sovereignty that Bataille called ‘the miraculous reign of unknowing’ (OC VIII, 252n). Because this, finally, is Bataille’s response to the challenge thrown down by Nietzsche’s proclamation. ‘Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?’, asks Nietzsche’s madman. ‘Must we not ourselves become gods simply to appear worthy of it?’ Of course, it will be said that only a madman could see a morality of sovereignty in the ‘death of God’. Bataille is that madman.

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