

The Place of Violence: Selected Writings

Georges Bataille

Translator's introduction

It is necessary to state that violence, which is the doing of all of humanity, has in principle remained voiceless, that, accordingly, humanity in its entirety lies by omission, and language itself is grounded in a lie.

Georges Bataille cited by Louis-René des Forêts

Language grounded in a lie. Translator, traitor. A consideration of Bataille's language, a translation of Bataille brings us, indirectly but inescapably, to the question of violence. The violence of the translation is old hat, right – but it still very much hits home. *Passons*. The violence in Bataille's style is another question, and it is time somebody talked about it, about his style in general. The style of a pornographer? Precisely: pornography shows too much (thence its link to transcendence), the question is how – with all sound form *defeated* as a matter of principle – to show too much? Let's try to forget silicon packaged performance and take a step back in time.

Late twenties, early thirties: Bataille is a not-so-young-anymore peasant trying to make it as a writer in Paris (that of the Surrealists and of all they rail against). Let's say it: his writing is bad, recognizably bad: heavy, circumvoluted, old fashioned – except, here and there, modernity transfixes the text, the driest modernity, capable of lifting teenage-silly preposterous analysis-muck into the mind-boggling book that *Story of the Eye* will remain for this epoch. But there is more, and right away: Bataille also wants to be a philosopher (but Nietzsche has said it all), but he can't take himself too seriously – something about having had his feet in manure too long during his childhood, about having believed too hard in church pavement pain as a way out of it, and yet,... that was precisely it: thought's refuse. But how to say it? What language both effusive and outmoded enough? Which style to declare in the most brutal way, but not without characterization, so as not to say too much, and yet to state it unmistakably, because it needs to be said, but only if it is clear that it *needs* to be said, here, now, by somebody in the flesh, and because it hasn't been said enough: that men have feet, for instance, most of them in manure, that some have erections, and some even *are* erections. That needs to be said, because somebody's

experienced it, however ludicrous, unmentionable, shameful, all too... *It is necessary to state* that violence...

Language itself is grounded in a lie – the chance of writing: let that violence, let the transgression that literature is, a bridge thrown over a lie: first page: welcome, enter in, be expressed. And above all, let language know that it itself is violent, always already violence upon itself (which can be shortened to: it itself is itself, and that is why literature is useless, even if...). Bataille began to write the real books he had dreamt of for so long, those books that would say it like he knew it, but not be sold only to cheap titillated idiots, no: published by Gallimard, no less (who had refused Proust, hadn't they; Proust, the ultimate novelist – think about it: Proust and Nietzsche, what was to be done? what is still?), books with a philosophical content that would definitely leave the shadow-horse frolicking Surrealists in the stables – well, it took Bataille the whole thirties not to write those big books: impossible series of unfinished projects (the *Solar Anus* begins it, no less). Busy schedule, though: he realises just how much he has to say with *Documents* (1929-30), figures out he's definitely not a Marxist -not even a Trotskyist- in *La Critique Sociale* (1931-33), but then again, even Freud could have gotten a clue from the savages, he decides to take apart Fascism from within, but also sociology, i.e., science and the Occident (1933-39), before taking to the streets with the Surrealists (in 1935 they said they wanted to), but then decides to go home: there's a fundamental problem with publicity, that much is too clear, and so while the Collège de Sociologie spins out its heterogeneous science, he and consorts do something in secret, and publish the Nietzschean pre-war machine *Acéphale* (1936-39).

The war breaks out, any public activity is dismembered, but Bataille had been ready, waiting only for Blanchot's formula: Experience is the authority (but authority is expiated). That was just it: the words for writing – author, authority, violence, expiation. Expiating violence: in language, to expose the lie grounding language (some call that a reflexive structure, Bataille calls them milksops and yellow-bellied cowards – and he means to make you smile, yes, laugh at him, with him, the ridiculous grandiloquence of his condemnation, and yet you saw what he meant).

I'm becoming didactic, I'll stop. (But somebody had to say something about his style, and this is only as mis-placed as anywhere else.) So, here is a selection of texts from the thirties that had not yet been translated into English (I did my best, and Elena helped me: be she praised). They all have something to say about violence, not necessarily only when they mention it. If I can risk a bit of reading advice: see how the laborious convolutions of the earlier pieces evolve into a much more controlled meandering: try to follow it: mastery gaping wide onto the unsaid – only to better lose itself, sovereignly. But above all, my good Nietzschean friends, enjoy!

Dali screams with Sade¹

The elements of dreams or hallucinations are transpositions; the poetic use of dreams amounts to the consecration of unconscious censoring, that is, of secret shame and cowardice. The terror caused by the *real*² elements of seduction³ is in fact the very node of all the movements that make up psychological existence, and it is not surprising to find everywhere means to escape: poetry, whose good reputation persists in every which way, is, in most cases, the most degrading way out. At the same time, in no way should seduction cease being terrible, rather it should become as powerful as possible, however dreadful the terror.⁴

Whatever the insipid character of quotidian life, in which all efforts are combined precisely toward concealment, enough happens incessantly, on the surface of the Earth, to endlessly give rise to this spasmodic dread.⁵ Any one body contains possibilities of suffering and bloody or revolting horror such that the most depraved imagination will never encompass them. In general, it is religions that determine the human responses with respect to this, for it is only when they are exasperated by death and coffins that some men find an inspiration to carry off their voice with prophetic violence. The ambiguous attitude found in the religions of the savages – in which delirious attraction alternates with fright – is resolved on the side of fright in the course of the evolution leading to the great religions, which, for the most part, sanction spiritual emasculation. The Buddhist renouncement stemming from the impossibility to bear the spectacle of suffering is characteristic, but no less so is the Christian method in which renunciation is directly tied to meditating on torments. With time, on the whole, these elaborate religious techniques turn into mental dissimulation and generalised banalities, the best means to evade the thought of suffering being to give up on the attractiveness of exceeding joy itself. Only recently has the opposite attitude openly come to light, the attitude which claims that the extreme fear of rot and bloody mutilations is tied to a violent attraction which everybody would rather conceal.

Following the revelations resulting from the analysis of dreams, to which the name of Sigmund Freud is tied, we have been given to see that the difference between peoples as cruel as the Assyrians⁶ and contemporary peoples was a superficial one, that the scandalous statements of the Marquis de Sade were as natural as the fever of animals when they are thirsty. The meaning of the horrible things which take place on the surface of the Earth lies in secretly weakening, to the point of sickness, the most delicate and the purest amongst us. And every morning, the crowd of human beings awakened by the sun above the city demands the share of horrors which, despite the puzzlement and even the protestations of the moralising editorialists, the main newspapers deliver without fail, omitting no detail: for what one wants to know above all else is what atrocious thing has happened. Before the war, a column in *The Police Eye* was entitled “The Bloody Week”: despite their sick horror, the deeds that were related in this column, far from making life noxious and unbearable, are among those which contribute to the restlessness and the general and exasperating excitement of a big city, which is, in a sense, an incredible sight.

Contrasting with this great popular palpitation, *by all means healthy* (the most morally robust and best adapted to life may well be the butchers), and despite the relative

lack of response from the crowds, the “stand to attention” ordered by all public monuments and uniforms sounds out like an incessant curse, forcing the crowd, in the end, to more or less behave in the streets; a “stand to attention” repeated and echoing, amplified to the level of thunder to the ears of all those who try to express their thoughts; depressing and disconcerting “stand to attention”, leading them to seek shelter far from all noise into the closest nursery house, ground for poetic babbling and the frolics of shadow horses. Yet, at night, when no sound is heard, there lay great deserted areas in which only rats are seen, *real* rats which can be run through from end to end with long hatpins and left there to agonise...

The social structure⁷

The *place* that must be *given* to violence, and, in another sense, the insufficiency of the limits that can be assigned to it, which never imply a definitive security, cannot go against certain principles concerning qualification, according to which one determined category of human beings rather than another one must be delivered to the ravages of warfare. The division of social functions is a primitive one: even though, for attack as well as for defence, any group would have an interest in arming its available women against the men of a neighbouring society, the principle of male qualification seems to be universally abided by. In developed societies, this qualification does not only exclude the female part of the population, but also entire social categories, either altogether unqualified or qualified for something else. Accordingly, slaves, tradesmen, families or clergymen are often kept away from the military profession, the access to which is limited to two determinate classes of men: that of the *nobles* makes up the most brilliant part of the army, that of the mercenaries (foot soldiers) makes up its sinister part. In fact, through *participation*, the two classes constantly exchange the qualities that are proper to each: the nobles, warlords, cannot reach their full military splendour without participating in the sinister character of the brutes that make up their troops; reciprocally, the troops would not be able to achieve the full extent of the filthy purulence which characterises them without participating in the glory of the adorned man that lead them. As a whole, the group appears, with respect to the rest of society, as something *altogether other* and as a foreign body. Its function – the ambiguous aspect of which corresponds precisely to that of the social structure – is slaughter, the implements for which it bears ostentatiously but in such a way that the richest garments seem worthless in comparison with these grim outfits. Thus, the soldier is to the butcher what a sweet smell is to the stench of genitals: in both cases, an ostentatious and bright element is substituted for a vile one, and in both cases the brightness borrows from the vileness of the opposite term.

On the current system of repression⁸

The existence of repression, under the threefold form of imprisonment, torture and execution, implicates the very existence of human societies. Yet, if it were possible for conscious and reflective will to control in a categorical way and wittingly what takes place between humans, it is likely that all repression would be done away with and societies dismantled.

But it cannot be so, and all that can be envisaged, now that it is too late to go back to primitive organisations and efficacious taboos, is for society to be organised in such a way that there would be next to no reason to kill or steal, property being suppressed as a principle.

It would be idealistic to believe that things could be transformed to such a point that social repression would have no place. On the contrary, there are reasons to suppose that the less asexual and more violent among men will go on killing and stealing out of passion. Those human sentiments that are irreducible to social life cannot in any way be destroyed, and it is necessary that they find an expression in the most admirable⁹ representatives of the species, whether they be harmless geniuses, madmen or criminals.

Hence, it is probably time, speaking in the name of these criminals as much as of these brilliant characters or these madmen, to state the strictest demands to which societies and their repression will finally have to bend.

IT IS INADMISSIBLE THAT SOCIETY PUNISH CRIMINALS ANYWHERE BUT IN BROAD DAYLIGHT.

It is inadmissible that men be slaughtered at dawn and away from sight like animals killed for the butcher's shop. It is inadmissible that men be sent to rot away in Cayenne¹⁰ and that the law-abiding bourgeois be able to avoid watching them rot.

It is inadmissible that police officers be able to inflict tortures on prisoners (often, in fact, innocent), without the *public* being able to freely witness these tortures, and without the names and pictures of the policemen-torturers printed in the newspapers along with the images and accounts of the torments.

It is inadmissible, if blows are needed, that the beating be done with the awful cowardice of the well-fed bourgeois, who doesn't only tremble in the face of the harm which the criminal could cause him, but also in front of the (in fact infinitely more atrocious) harm which he causes to the criminal: he who is tortured has the imprescriptible right to spoil the sleep of the cowards and faint-hearted for whose ease of digestion he is put to death.

THE TIME HAS COME TO SCREAM EVERYWHERE AND IN EVERY POSSIBLE WAY THAT THE CURRENT SYSTEM OF REPRESSION IS THE MOST MONSTROUS AND THE MOST DEGRADING OF ALL THAT HAVE EVER BEEN INSTITUTED.

In relation to general conditions of existence, however cruel any of these may have been, it has entirely lost the passionate element without which social repression could never have been instated. The feelings of the Chinese toward someone tortured seem human in comparison with those of a European bourgeois toward those he peacefully sends to the penal colony or the scaffold. In China, the liver of he who died while proudly undergoing torture is eaten by those who admired him and wish to appropriate his value. Accordingly, a society *only has the right* to strike criminals to the extent that it recognises the *sacred* character of crime, only to the extent that it is ready to *sacrifice* a man who, in wilfully choosing the path of crime, has offered *himself* up to sacrifice. In a society without hypocrisy, a criminal deed can only be conceived, by those who oppose it because of a sad necessity, insofar as it designates a man – like the ecstasy of the martyr or the sexual delirium of the insect – to a violent and sacrificial death.

Death – on the condition that it be given in the most provocative way possible; on the condition that no man be able to escape the horror or the pleasure it induces; above all, on the condition that the condemned be treated, all the way to his execution, not as a criminal but as a god or a victim – death (and for robbers, the pillory, banning all prisons as well as all penal colonies) can be accepted by a society with the aim of repression – steering the cowards away from crime – only insofar as it elevates the one it strikes above all the terrified milksops, like a bird of prey looming over poultry.

The Primal Tragedy¹¹

Life values nothing more than the path leading from the Dionysiac woods to the ruins of Antique theatres. This, it is necessary not only to say, but also to repeat with a religious obstinacy. Lives become petty and laughable to the extent that they shy away from the presence of the tragic. And to the extent that they participate in a sacred horror, they become human. It may be that this paradox is too great and to difficult to uphold: still, it is no less the truth of life than blood is.

The god whose festivities have been turned into tragic performances is not only the god of drunkenness and wine, but also the god of confused reason. His appearance brings confounding suffering and fever no less than crying laughter. And the madness of the god is so dark that, in their frenzy, the bloodied women who follow him devour alive the children they have begotten.

The extent and majesty of the ruins of theatres offer to our miscomprehending eyes an image of the reception given by the “happiest” and liveliest of people to this black monstrosity, to frenzy and crime. The tiers of seating delimit the dark empire of dreams within which the act with the most meaning for life took place, turning misfortune into supreme chance and death into too great a light. In this way *too*, theatre, like dreams, reopens to life the well of horrors and blood filling the interior of bodies.

In no way does theatre belong to the Uranian world of head and sky: it belongs to the realm of the stomach, to the infernal and maternal world of the deep earth, to the black world of Chthonian divinities. Man’s existence can no more elude the obsession of the maternal breast than that of death: it is tied to the tragic to the extent that it does not belie the humid soil which produced it and to which it will return. The greatest danger is to forget the dark underground that is torn by the very birth of awakened men. The greatest danger would be that men, no longer lost in the obscurity of sleep and of the Mother-Tragedy, complete their enslavement to useful toil. The greatest danger is that the miserable *means* of a difficult existence be taken as the *end* of human life. The *end* is not what facilitates: it is not to be found in the day’s work: it is apprehended in the night of the labyrinth. There, life and death tear each other like silence and thunder. There, for the earth to be charged with the explosions which again and again tighten the stomach, the monster must kill and be put to death.

Hair¹²

If, for a few instants, foregoing all caution and all deliberation, surrendering all at once to a flash of easy clarity, thought rushed ahead into the world and the void, following a bent that is its own...

It matters little that the blazing figures that would then flash into the night would be the most elusive: the happy laughter greeting them would still resound when the dark obscurity returns, inexorably. Indeed, what more can be expected *from a human life*, short of considering again, like the Ancients and their blind stone busts, that man's knowledge is a base for the starlit universe.

The best would be to, all of a sudden, surrender to chance: for instance, to believe, or even to feign believing, that the world, since it is not there for man to *know* it, is there for him to be drunk.

Thus, like *there is* a sun that shines, explodes, is blazing, and as the flowers of plants themselves shine, burst, embellish the earth with the brief blaze of petals, there would be a lit up face crowned with hair as with flames.

If, on the cool globe that bears us, combs fold hair according to fashion, what their teeth separate may just be the silent trace of an altogether other nature, that of constellations, galaxies, comets, suns, traces of fire where the cold has instated the order of our houses. Above heads, hair flow down as free from the fixity of worries as the most transparent of jellyfish bathing in light shining through the waves. Nothing seems closer, and yet nothing is further away than hair's substance of light and water, so far away that the stupendous recess of the night sky is barely enough to fathom its strange presence. In their meditative exercises, the Tibetans manage to transform life in such a way that they perceive their ego's existence to be situated not in their heads but in a hand, torso, or any other part of their body. If it were possible to *live* not a hand or a foot anymore, but to *live* the useless hair, nothing, it seems, would hold this life back to the level of the ground, it would only be a flow of lights lost in a black space, it would only be the irreversible self-loss of a river.

The most fleeting figures are thus cast into the mind, and the figures flee the mind: but then is it certain that a true misfortune would not strike the one who does not flee these figures as much as they flee him? He who tried to keep them, more clearly, he who didn't have the insolence to expel them, to create in himself a void filled only by forces, would he not betray what constitutes the inexorable demand of what he has once loved in the absolute silence of all that, in him, was but a dead past? For where it is easy to consider existence complete, it could be that it is merely beginning. It may be that nothing is given to those whose violence falters, stops with the first shadows and ceases to counter lies: haven't the figures mentioned for an instant vanished a long time ago already? Who can still perceive a prime wonder in these nearby images? All has slowly turned to dark, while, in the mind of the one turned accomplice to the fallen obscurity, violence has remained bare.

Ch. V of the Anti-Christian's manual¹³

Your sex is the darkest and bloodiest spot in yourself. Hidden in linen and brushes, it itself is a sort of half-being or animal; foreign to your surface habits. An extreme discrepancy lies between it and what you show of yourself. Whatever your real violence, you show others your civilised and polite sides. Day to day, you try to communicate with them by avoiding clashes and by reducing each thing to its poor common measure in order that everything may coincide and fall into place. Even most friendly and informal dealings contribute to this arrangement since, above all, it is agreed that it shouldn't be upset. The only part in you which does not enter into this ordering is your sex. This is why, once in solitude, you must enter into the darkest night of your being and listen to the barbaric and broken voice coming from the depth of your belly. Will you finally heed the lesson of your slimy root or of your swamp of blood. The despised, comical, greedy sex teaches the most subterranean truth: that there is no communication in eluding clashes, that the other is reached through shocks that frighten, rend, and overwhelm.

The conditions in which I am writing (the most horrible battle is raging on and nearing) dictate that I now express myself in aphorisms – and even without always taking into account what I have to say strictly -, for what I feel at this very moment that is violent and overflowing, I must also say.

Notes

¹ Originally entitled “Dali hurle a ved Sace”, this text was published posthumously in *Œuvres Complètes* II, pp. 113–115. It appears to be related to “The lugubrious game”, an article about Dali published in *Documents* 7 of December 1929. However, the reference to the “vampire of Düsseldorf” (cf. below) implies it was perhaps not written before the Spring of 1931, at which point Bataille may have been attempting once more to settle his account with the “Icarian idealism” of the Surrealists.

² Note on reality [?] and reality. [Bataille's note]

³ Note on low seduction. [Bataille's note]

⁴ Crossed out in the manuscript: “The game which consists in playing, like a rat caught in a trap, on the edge of a bucket of boiling water, with one's own terror”.

⁵ Crossed out in the manuscript: “Whatever the appearances, houses suffocate, and this even without the vampire of Düsseldorf”. The vampire of Düsseldorf was a blood-drinking murderer whose trial in April 1931 drew much of Bataille's attention.

⁶ Note on Assyrian cruelties. [Bataille's note]

⁷ Originally entitled “La déchéance” (“Downfall”) then “La structure sociale”, this text was published posthumously in *Œuvres Complètes* II, pp. 248–249. Its dating is uncertain, but the topic and style

suggest the years 1933-36, between the unfinished studies on heterogeneity and the “sacred sociology” of the Collège de Sociologie.

⁸ The original of this text, probably dating from the years 1933–1936, bears no title (it was published posthumously as “Note sur le système actuel de répression” in *Œuvres Complètes* II, pp. 134–136). A typed copy contains the following header, crossed-out later:

“The following text is provisionally proposed here for the approval, *that is, public signature*, of those who are ready to examine social problems without shrinking back from the consequences”.

⁹ The word should not be taken in its idealistic meaning (that which should be admired), but in its strictly technical sense: that which provokes a feeling, whether voluntary or not, generally conscious but sometimes also unconscious, of stupor, admiration, and horror. [Bataille's note]

¹⁰ France's most infamous penal colony, set in conveniently far-off French Guyana.

¹¹ Essay first published as “La Mère-Tragédie” in *Le Voyage en Grèce* 7, Summer 1937 (reprinted in *Œuvres Complètes* I, pp. 493-4).

¹² Essay originally published as “Chevelures” in *Verve* I, 1, December 1937 (reprinted in *Œuvres Complètes* I, pp. 495-6).

¹³ Written in the same period as the diary entries edited for *Le Coupable (Guilty)*, this untitled text was published posthumously (as “Aphorismes”) in *Œuvres Complètes* II, pp. 390–391. It bears the date May 19th, 1940 which explains the reference to war in the second paragraph: at this date, the German troops were well on their way to

overrunning France. The “Manuel de l’anti-chrétien” was an unfinished project for a sort of meditation manual; as such, it provides a bridge between the experience of Acéphale and the major war-period texts (*Inner Experience, Guilty, On Nietzsche*).

Boris Belay earns a living teaching English in Paris, and *spends* his life, well, otherwise.