
The thirst for annihilation

An important literary and philosophical figure, Georges Bataille has had a significant influence on other French writers, such as Foucault, Derrida and Baudrillard. *The Thirst for Annihilation* is the first book in English to respond to his writings. In no way, though, is Nick Land's book an attempt to appropriate Bataille's writings to a secular intelligibility or to compromise with the aridity of academic discourse – rather, it is written as a *communion*.

Theoretical issues in philosophy, sociology, psychodynamics, politics and poetry are discussed but only as stepping stones into the deep water of textual sacrifice where words pass over into the broken voice of death. Cultural modernity is diagnosed down to its Kantian bedrock with its transcendental philosophy of the object but Bataille's writings cut violently across this tightly disciplined reading to reveal the strong underlying currents that bear us towards chaos and dissolution – the violent impulse to escape, the thirst for annihilation.

Nick Land, whose aim is to spread what he calls 'the virulent horror' of Bataille's writings, himself writes with a vividness and commitment more usually associated with works of literature than intellectual investigations. This book is of relevance to everyone interested in the philosophy of desire, the psychopathology of deviance, political and legal theory, the history of religion or poetry. It is also urgent for all those intrigued by their sexual torments or the death they mistakenly conceive of as their own.

Nick Land is a lecturer in Continental Philosophy at Warwick University.

Preface

As though to give yourself a certain 'positive' assurance, which harbored as well a suspicion of superiority, you have often reproached me for what you call my 'appetite for destruction' [TE 113].

The reasons for writing a book can be led back to the desire to modify the relations which exist between a human being and its kind. Those relations are judged unacceptable and are perceived as an atrocious wretchedness.

However, to the extent that I have written this book I have been conscious that it is impotent to regulate the account of that wretchedness. Up to a certain limit, the desire for perfectly clear *human* exchanges which escape general conventions becomes a desire for annihilation [II 143].

*

I have always unconsciously sought out that which will beat me down to the ground, but the floor is also a wall.

*

What best befits an author is to preface a work with its *apology*, ornamenting it with the guilt of necessity. After all, one should not beg attention without excuse. That a writer provide some rudimentary justification for a book seems a modest enough expectation, but such a demand obliterates me, since this is a text which has been reared in perfect superfluity, clutching feebly at zero. There is not a single sentence which is other than a gratuitousness and a confusion; a cry at least half lamed and smothered in irony. Each appeal that is made to the name 'Bataille' shudders between a pretension and a joke. *Bataille*. I

know nothing about him. His obsessions disturb me, his ignorances numb me, I find his thought incomprehensible, the abrasion of his writing shears uselessly across my inarticulacy. In response I mumble, as a resistance to anxiety, maddening myself with words. Locked in a cell with my own hollow ravings . . . but at least it is not *that* . . . (and even now I lie) . . .

In truth, Bataille seems to me far less an intellectual predicament than a sexual and religious one, transecting the lethargic suicide upon which we are all embarked. To accept his writings is an impossibility, to resist them an irrelevance. One is excited abnormally, appalled, but without refuge. Nausea perhaps? Such melodrama comes rapidly to amuse (although we still vomit, just as we die).

So I try to persuade myself that it *would have been* relatively straightforward to write a sound book on the work of Georges Bataille; a book that would have discussed the contribution he has made to the philosophical and literary culture of twentieth-century France, expositing his doctrines of 'general economy', 'base materialism', and 'atheology', appraising the excellences of his various prose styles and his poetry, recommending that his works be invested by serious reading, scholarship, and eventually a judicious estimation – by my reckoning, a *schlecht* book. Such books are always depressing enough, but in the case of Georges Bataille the situation is even more acute, touching on something akin to the pure pornography characterizing our contemporary *Nietzsche scholarship*. To succeed in writing a book of any kind about Bataille is already something wretched, because it is only in the twisted interstitial spaces of failure that contact, infection, and – at the limit – the anegoic intimacy that he calls 'communication' can take place. A recovery of the sense of Bataille's writing is the surest path to its radical impoverishment. It is as pathetic to seek education from Bataille as it is to seek comfort from Nietzsche. (Bataille is, of course, somewhat more honest than this about his own hypocrisies.)

There is no doubt that to season Bataille in preparation for his comfortable digestion by capital's cultural machine is a piece of twisted prostitution of the kind he would fully have appreciated. The delicious obscenity! A writer who tried to help us to expend, stored away with all the others in our reserve of informatico-financial assets, in order to be pimped out into the career flows of the Western academies. There are North Americans who have already learnt to gurgle 'Bataille contra Marx' for instance,

although the issue is rarely this inanely ideological. More insidious is the 'he was a librarian you know' Bataille, increasingly snarled-up in the deconstructivist pulp industry of endless commentary on Logocentrism, Western Metaphysics, and other various *Seinsvergesenheiten*, the Bataille who read a lot, and had something very clever to say. Bataille may be praised or condemned in terms of his erudition, but this scarcely matters when compared with his sanctity as a voyager in sickness . . . but books make good burrows in which to hide, and few places are as redolent of the *little escape* as a library; the shelves of fiction, history, geography, each book a pretext for derealization, patiently awaiting the moment when it will be coupled to some vague reverie.

Not that this book makes any special pleading for itself, it has scratched about for needles in the most destitute gutters of the Earth, cold-turkey crawling on its knees, and begging the academy to pimp it ever deeper into abuse. Ever since it became theoretically evident that our precious personal identities were just brand-tags for trading crumbs of labour-power on the libidino-economic junk circuit, the vestiges of authorial theatricality have been wearing thinner. Who cares what 'anyone' thinks, knows, or theorizes about Bataille? The only thing to try and touch is the intense shock-wave that still reaches us along with the textual embers . . . for as long, that is, as anything can still 'reach us'. Where Descartes needed God to mediate his relations with his fellows, secular man is happy with his television set, and with all the other commodified channels of pseudo-communication with which his civilization has so thoughtfully endowed him. Such things are for his own protection of course; to filter out the terrifying threat of infection. If openness to alterity, base communication, and experimental curiosity are marks of an exuberant society, its only true gauge lies in its tendency to be decimated by sexually transmitted diseases and nihilist religion. On this basis it seems that our society, despite its own most strenuous efforts, has not yet consummated its long idealized sclerosis into impermeable atoms. The grit still exists, and it is only amongst the grit that we connect.

*

It is 03.30 in the morning. Let us say one is 'drunk' – an impoverished cipher for all those terrible things one does to one's nervous-system in the depths of the night – and philosophy is

'impossible' (although one still thinks, even to the point of terror and disgust). What does it mean for this episode in the real history of spirit to die without trace? Where has it strayed to? 'I thought of death, which I imagined to be similar to that walk without an object (but the walk, in death, takes this path without reason – "forever")' [III 286].

An extraordinary lucidity, frosty and crisp in the blackness, but paralysed; lodged in some recess of the universe that clutches it like a snare. A wave of nausea is accompanied by a peculiarly insinuating headache, as if thought itself were copulating unreservedly with suffering. A damp coldness, close to fog, creeps through the open window. I laugh, delighted at the fate that has turned me into a reptile. The metallic hardness of intellect seems like a cutting instrument in my hand; the detached fragment from a machine tool, or an abattoir, seeking out the terminal sense it was always refused.

The object of philosophy, insofar as the reflective meditation upon thought can be taken to characterize it, is arbitrarily prescribed as undisturbed reasoning (the cases of psychopathology, psychiatry, abnormal psychology, etc. do not remotely contravene this rigorous selection, because such studies of disturbed thought are constituted – in principle – without entanglement). It is thus that successfully adapted, tranquil, moderate, and productive reason monopolizes the philosophical conception of thought, in the same way that the generalized robotism of regulated labour squeezes all intense gestures out of social existence. My abnormal devotion to Bataille stems from the fact that nobody has done more than he to obstruct the passage of violent blanks into a pacified oblivion, and thus to awaken the monster in the basement of reason.

Not that the repressed is locked in a dungeon, it is stranded in a labyrinth, and connected to the daylit world by a secret continuity. A tangle of confusion comes to seem like a door, a maze like a barrier, and one says 'I', but the inside is not a cell, it is a corridor; a passage cut from the soft rock of loss. Inner experience traverses a sombre porosity, and the moans of the minotaur reverberate through its arteries, hinting at an indefinable proximity. It becomes difficult to sleep.

*

Of course, I indulge myself, in innumerable ways. 'I' tell myself the

personal pronoun fails to mark the pseudo-neutral position of a commentator *this time*. That is rather a protraction of 'Bataille's' incessant *je* into a further episode of debasement. For it is remarkable how degraded a discourse can become when it is marked by the obsessive reiteration of the abstract ego, mixing arrogance with pallid humility. The chronic whine that results – something akin to a degenerated reverberation from Dostoyevsky's underground man – is the insistence of a humanity that has become an unbearable indignity. 'I' am (alone), as the tasteless exhibition of an endogenous torment, as the betrayal of communication, as a festering wound, in which the monadic knitting of the flesh loses itself in a mess of pus and scabs, etc. etc. . . . (You yawn of course, but I continue.) Yes, *I* am – *definitionally* – a filthy beggar (like God), scrabbling at the coat-tails of a reluctant and embarrassed attentiveness, driven into a guile that fuses wretchedness with an elusive element of threat. Is it mere indolence that defeats all tendency towards decorous impersonality? Scarcely. Or rather; I cannot bring myself to think so. I nag at the margins of this *discourse on the writings of Georges Bataille* as a hideous confirmation of its cowardice and moderation, simultaneous with the dreariness of its prostitution; a wheezing parody of laughter teetering upon the abject nakedness of a sob. Yet at the same time it scarcely matters whether I write of Bataille or myself. If there is a boundary between us it is only insofar as he was momentarily frustrated in his passage to the truth of his text.

Bataille's writing exhibits a marked attachment to the first person pronoun, and the confessional mode is especially predominant in his more 'literary' works, although it spreads almost everywhere. The most obvious consequence of this device is to immerse the narrative ego in the text, fusing voice and discourse in a field of immanence, and putting identity unreservedly into play (*en jeu*). Not only is most of the fiction published during Bataille's lifetime narrated in the first person – including *The Story of the Eye*, *Madame Edwarda*, *The Impossible*, *The Abbé C.*, and *The Blue of Noon* – but in every case more than one confessional voice is involved – even after the various egos of dialogue are excluded – whether this is the result of 'authorial' prefaces, or stratified narrative structures. *The Abbé C.*, for example, includes no less than three distinct first person narrative voices, and temporal ruptures in the order of its discourses complicate the situation still further. There is an unmanageable appeal, a plight of isolation, a voice resistant

to all delimitation, an *infection*, so that reading Bataille is not a contribution to positivity, but a plea.

It does not befit beggars to garb themselves in the robes of proud neutrality, the matter is quite to the contrary; no one sinks beneath the burden of individuality as they do. If beggars are so often driven to religion it is because it can never be in the rational interest of anyone to respond to them. They must inherit the tradition of unanswered cries encrypted in monastic cells. These mendicants have certainly been destituted in an echo of the death of God, but with no space awaiting them in the secular order they are forced to live their limitless impoverishment as an impossible necessity. As for myself (Bataille also) the matter is altogether more comic.

Do not think I am unsympathetic. These thickets of abstract identity are no doubt unpleasant to stumble through. The scrawny little sign of promiscuous individuality is a perpetual aggravation; reminding you in each case of your own incarceration by self. That enunciation should be harried by an 'I' is no mere stylistic infelicity, it is a loathesomeness, and yet the only routes of evasion leading away from it are hypocritical. To try and hide the manacle-scars which wreck the complexion of the text would itself be a decisionistic celebration of autonomy, debasing the text further, branding it even more conclusively as servile matter (out of which the ego has transcended into invisibility). To write oneself out of a book can be many things; the dilettantism of one for whom writing is from the start affectation and artificiality, the professionalism of one for whom a book tends to an anonymity – if not immediately to that of the commodity, at least to that of career capital – the authoritarianism of one lost in a monological insanity close to solipsism, or the all-too-ostentatious humility of one who prefers to guide from behind the scenes. It can be genuine timidity, pomposity, inertial apathy, even experiment, but what it can never be, for as long as it is remotely deliberated, is flight.

It is still tempting to renounce the posture of the first person, even though its force of corrosive qualification reduces the risk of complacent objectivism or pseudo-collectivity. The indulgences of personality, of spurious autonomy, responsibility, and idiosyncratic affectation, are sufficiently repellent to provoke a measure of tactical carelessness. One paralyses a dimension of messy effectivity, out of distaste. But to write of Bataille in such a way is more than a little absurd, suggesting, as it does, that impersonality is a

simple thing to achieve. After all: the 'I' is not to be expelled, but submitted to sacrifice. When shuffled about within a text upon Bataille it is compelled to refer not to an author, but rather, to an *ennui*, gesticulating at the void; the symptom of an absent tragic community.

*

It is a long time now since I was afflicted by Bataille's poem 'Rire' ('Laughter'):

Laugh and laugh
at the sun
at the nettles
at the stones
at the ducks

at the rain
at the pee-pee of the pope
at mummy
at a coffin full of shit [IV 13].

This poem introduces three of the most crucial themes traversing Bataille's writing: laughter, excrement, and death. Such 'themes' are suspended only momentarily at the lip of philosophical intelligibility, and then released into a euphoric immolation upon the burn-core of literature, disintegrating into a senseless heterogeneous mass. His texts obsessively reiterate that the decomposed body is excremental, and that the only sufficient response to death is laughter. The corpse not only dissolves into a noxious base matter analagous to excrement, it is also *in fact* defecated as waste by the life of the species. For the corpse is the truth of the biological individual, its consummate superfluity. It is only through the passage into irredeemable waste that the individual is marked with the delible trace of its excess. It is because life is pure surplus that the child of 'Rire' – standing by the side of his quietly weeping mother and transfixed by the stinking ruins of his father – is gripped by convulsions of horror that explode into peals of mirth, as uncompromising as orgasm. 'Rire' is, in part, a contribution to the theory of mourning. Laughter is a communion with the dead, since death is not the object of laughter: it is death itself that finds a voice when we laugh. Laughter is that which is lost to discourse, the haemorrhaging of pragmatics into excitation and filth.

Bataille tells us that the universe is energetic, and the fate inherent to energy is utter waste. Energy from the sun is discharged unilaterally and without design. That fraction of solar radiation which strikes the earth resources all terrestrial endeavour, provoking the feverish obscenity we call 'life'.

Life appears as a pause on the energy path; as a precarious stabilization and complication of solar decay. It is most basically comprehensible as *the general solution to the problem of consumption*. Such a solar- or general-economic perspective exhibits production as an illusion; the hypostatization of a digression in consumption. To produce is to partially manage the release of energy into its loss, and nothing more.

Death, wastage, or expenditure is the only end, the only definitive terminus. 'Utility' cannot in reality be anything but the characterization of a function, having no sense short of an expenditure which escapes it utterly. This is 'relative utility'. The order of Western history has as its most pertinent symptom the drift of utility away from this relative sense, towards a paradoxical absolute value. A creeping slave morality colonizes value, subordinating it to the definition 'that which serves'. The 'good' becomes synonymous with utility; with means, mediation, instrumentality, and implicit dependence.

The real trajectory of loss is 'immanence', continuity, base matter, or flow. If the strictly regional resistance of everything that delays, impedes, or momentarily arrests the movement of dissolution is abstracted from the solar flow it is interpretable as transcendence. Such *abstract resistance to loss* is characterized by autonomy, homogeneity, and ideality, and is what Bataille summarizes as '(absolute) utility'.

The (inevitable) return of constricted energy to immanence is religion, whose core is sacrifice, generative of the sacred. Sacrifice is the movement of violent liberation from servility, the collapse of transcendence. Inhibiting the sacrificial relapse of isolated being is the broad utilitarianism inherent to humanity, correlated with a profane delimitation from ferocious nature that finds its formula in theology. In its profane aspect, religion is martialled under a conception of God; the final guarantor of persistent being, the submission of (ruinous) time to reason, and thus the ultimate principle of utility.

Cowering in the shadow of its gods, humanity is the project of a definitive abrogation of expenditure, and is thus an impossibility.

The humanizing project has the form of an unsustainable law. Despite the fortifications of prohibition, the impossible corrodes humanity in *eroticism*; the eruption of irreducible excess, which is the base unity of sexuality and death. Eroticism gnaws us as the inevitable triumph of evil (utter loss).

It is this passionate submission to fate (= death) that guides Bataille's own readings, in *Literature and Evil* for instance, the greatest work of atheological poetics. *Literature and Evil* is a series of responses to writing that exhibit the complicity between literary art and transgression. Bataille's insistent suggestion is that the non-utilitarian writer is not interested in serving mankind or furthering the accumulation of goods, however refined, delicate, or spiritual these may be. Instead, such writers – Emily Brontë, Baudelaire, Michelet, Blake, Sade, Proust, Kafka, and Genet are Bataille's examples in this text – are concerned with communication, which means the violation of individuality, autonomy, and isolation, the infliction of a wound through which beings open out into the community of senseless waste. Literature is a transgression against transcendence, the dark and unholy rending of a sacrificial wound, allowing a communication more basic than the pseudo-communication of instrumental discourse. The heart of literature is the death of God, the violent absence of the good, and thus of everything that protects, consolidates, or guarantees the interests of the individual personality. The death of God is the ultimate transgression, the release of humanity from itself, back into the blind infernal extravagance of the sun.

*

It is a mere consolation to the timid to imagine that philosophy has died. The fact of the matter is quite to the contrary. Philosophy will be the last of human things; perhaps the efficient impulse of the end. That humanity is fated to terminate is amongst the most basic thoughts, and no more than the most elementary qualification for philosophy, since to think on behalf of one's species is a miserable parochialism.

Man is a little thing that has learnt to stammer the word 'infinity'. In doing so it makes everything small, diminishing even itself. One need only dip into the history of monotheism to note the wretchedness of human 'infinities' in comparison to the most casual of natural immensities. It is first necessary for a thing to shrivel for it to share anything with us; to become 'humane'.

Insofar as nature can be injured or offended by us, it is mere surface, superfluous, sensitive skin. Profound nature – matter – is something else; the indifferent and the inviolable. (It is deeper, therefore, than God.) This deep nature suffers nothing, resents nothing, makes no cases. It is only in the shallows that one ever finds a defence.

There is one simple criterion of taste in philosophy: that one avoid the vulgarity of anthropomorphism. It is by failing here that one comes to side with cages. The specifics follow straightforwardly:

- 1 Thoroughgoing dehumanization of nature, involving the uttermost impersonalism in the explanation of natural forces, and vigorously atheological cosmology. No residue of prayer. An instinctive fastidiousness in respect to all the traces of human personality, and the treatment of such as the excrement of matter; as its most ignoble part, its gutter . . .
- 2 Ruthless fatalism. No space for decisions, responsibilities, actions, intentions. Any appeal to notions of human freedom discredits a philosopher beyond amelioration.
- 3 Hence absence of all moralizing, even the crispest, most Aristotelian. The penchant for correction, let alone vengefulness, pins one in the shallows.
- 4 Contempt for common evaluations; one should even take care to avoid straying accidentally into the right. Even to be an enemy is too comforting; one must be an alien, a beast. Nothing is more absurd than a philosopher seeking to be liked.

Libidinal materialism is the name for such a philosophy, although it is perhaps less a philosophy than an offence. Historically it is *pessimistic*, in the rich sense that transects the writings of Nietzsche, Freud, and Bataille as well as those of Schopenhauer. Thematically it is ‘psychoanalytical’ (although it no longer believes in the psyche or in analysis), thermodynamic-energeticist (but no longer physicalistic or logico-mathematical), and perhaps a little *morbid*. Methodologically it is genealogical, diagnostic, and *enthusiastic* for the accentuation of intensity that will carry it through insurrection into anegoic delirium. Stylistically it is aggressive, only a little sub-hyperbolic, and – above all – massively irresponsible . . .

Such thinking is less concerned with propositions than with punctures; hacking at the flood-gates that protect civilization from

a deluge of impersonal energy. It could be described as writing against reservation, but any description is inevitably domesticating. It will never find its father, or its mother; it has no ultimate ancestor of any kind. For it did not begin with Nietzsche, or with the topico-pathological furore found in Schopenhauer, or with the unconscious of the Kantian text, but ever further back . . . It has been the menace that provoked even the most ancient philosophy – already Anaximander as Nietzsche suggests – to anticipate the police. Another description might run like this: libidinal materialism is the textual return of that which is most intolerable to mankind.

No one could ever ‘be’ a libidinal materialist. This is a ‘doctrine’ that can only be suffered as an abomination, a jangling of the nerves, a combustion of articulate reason, and a nauseating rage of thought. It is a hyperlepsy of the central nervous-system, ruining the body’s adaptive regimes, and consuming its reserves in rhythmic convulsions that are not only futile, but devastating. Schopenhauer already knew that thought is medically disastrous, Nietzsche demonstrated it. An aged philosopher is either a monster of stamina or a charlatan. How long does it take to be wasted by a fire-storm? By an artificial sun upon the earth? It is only when the blaze in Nietzsche’s brain-stem fused with the one in the sky above a piazza in Turin that libidinal materialism touched upon its realization.

Like all ‘-isms’, libidinal materialism is at best a parody, at worst a constriction. What matters is the violent impulse to escape that gives this book its title. *The thirst for annihilation*. This name has grown on me as an ulceration in the gut. Is it desire or its negation that is marked here? The overcoming of the will, nihilism, *Todestrieb*? It seems to me that it is first of all the compulsion to abstract. Historically and anthropologically considered, this is negation torn from its logical function to become the non-objective destination of an attachment, destituted of its formality by a ferocious investment, *besetzt*, and coupled to a motor of liquidation. So that the instrument of logical dissection is at last acknowledged in its terrible materiality; negativity as an excitation. To rather ‘will negation than the negation of will’ [N II 839]; this is an elusive difference, twisting like a rusted nail into sensitive flesh. Is the primitive craving that seeks the abolition of reality an object of philosophical investigation, or a drive accomplishing itself *through* philosophy? What is it that makes use of subtlety here?

Subtlety grates upon the nerves, yet everything is driven by an immense crudity: death impassions us. Even before crossing over into death I had been excruciated upon my thirst for it. I accept that my case is in some respects aberrant, but what skewers me upon zero is an aberration inextricable from truth. To be parsimonious in one's love for death is not to understand.

This is not to deny that the gentleness with which Hell has treated me has been a source of considerable embarrassment. No one less worthy of sanctity has ever twitched upon the Earth. I slunk into Hell like a verminous cur, accompanied by a wanderer of an altogether more celestial aspect. According to the Sikh religion humans are the masks of angels and demons, and my own infernal lineaments bear little ambiguity (everywhere I go the shadows thicken). When I stare into the eyes of Bataille's photographic image I connect with his inexistence in a community of the kiln. I smile.

*

My wings are ragged
they have never been licked by the sun
black and hooked on iron struts
like a poison flower of death
they only open for the night

*

In the box it seems as if the choice is yours to either dismiss or accept my words when I insist: *I have been outside the box*. Like Plato, knowing is a memory for me, but unlike him I have outlived philosophy and aspiration, since I have outlived life itself. Death has no representatives, but I have at least returned from the dead (a characteristic I reluctantly share with the Nazarene). Since I have floated in death the world has desisted from all effort to seduce me into seriousness. I rest in life as a tramp rests in a hedge, mumbling these words . . .