

BATAILLE, SOCIOLOGY'S EVIL GENIUS

FROM THE IDEOLOGY OF TYRANNY

Excerpt, Chapter 5



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I imagine the earth projected into space, similar to a woman screaming with her head on fire.¹

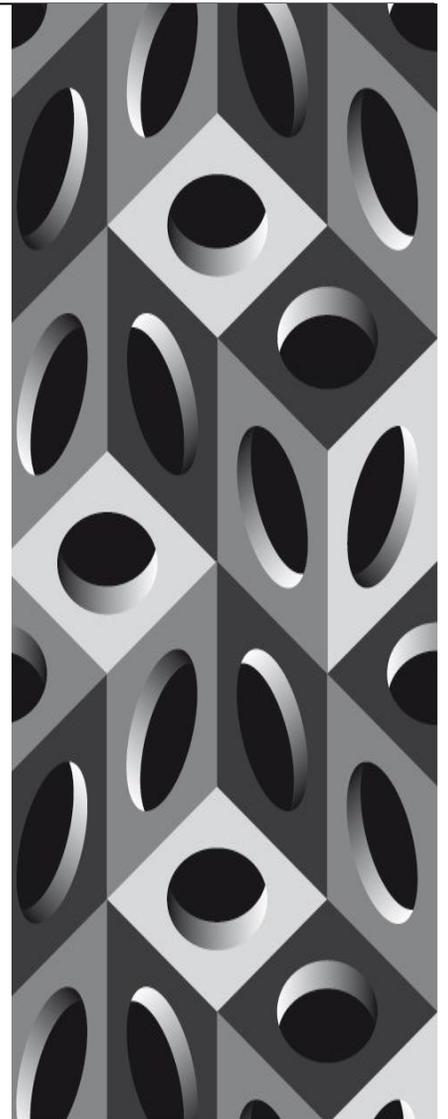
It seems to me that I have a crab in my head, a crab, a toad, a horror that I had to vomit at any cost.²

An abandoned shoe, a decayed tooth, a nose too short, the cook spitting in the food of his masters are to love what the flag is to nationality. An umbrella, a sexagenarian, a seminarist, the smell of rotten eggs, the gouged eyes of the judges are the roots off which love feeds. A dog devouring the stomach of a goose, a drunken woman that throws up, an accountant that sobs, a jar of mustard represent the confusion which love uses as a vehicle.³

BATAILLE

MYSTIQUE

Georges Bataille was without question a religious type. That is, one of those individuals that yearns for the metaphysical Other, convinced that something unspeakable stirs beyond, or rather, *from within* the tangible realm. A religious type with a stupendous knack for metaphorical construction, Bataille converted early on in his life to Catholicism. At twenty he joined a seminary to train for the priesthood; he was a man with a *vocation*. But three years later, he



seemed to have lost the faith entirely. Rather than surrendering to the self-contented atheism and mediocre agnosticism of his contemporaries, and true to his religious yearning, he straight out marched in the opposite direction and invented an elaborate system of worship –a veritable theater of devotional belief, complemented by a no less imaginative sociological appendix. The latter would be the authentic kernel around which Foucault would weave his discourse for the American audience a generation later.

We are accustomed to associate religion with the law, with reason. But if we dwell upon that which founds religions, *collectively*, we must reject this principle. Religion is doubtless —or rather, basically— subversive; it deflects the gaze away from the laws. At any rate, what it demands is excess, it is sacrifice, it is the feast, whose summit is the ecstasy.⁴

“My research,” Bataille wrote in 1934, “initially had a twofold objective: the sacred and ecstasy.”⁵ Allegedly, the conversion of Bataille was occasioned by a vision of ecstatic (out of body) revelation, which he recounted in what may called “the experience of the umbrella.”⁶

The Rue de Rennes was deserted. Coming from Saint-Germain, I crossed the Rue du Four. I was holding an open umbrella and I don't think it rained.(But I hadn't drunk: I here say it, I am positive). I had this umbrella needlessly open (...). I was very young then, chaotic and full of empty inebriations: a swirl of ideas uncouth, vertiginous, but already bursting with concern, rigor, and crucifying was running loose (...). In this shipwreck of reason, anguish, solitary forfeiture (*déchéance*), cowardice, and phoniness were given their due: yonder the feast began anew. What is certain is that this drift, as well as the “impossible,” stirred, exploded in my head. A space shimmering with laughter gaped its obscure abyss in front of me. Crossing the Rue du Four, I became in

this nothingness a stranger, all of a sudden (...). I denied these gray walls that trapped me, I rushed in a sort of rapture. I laughed divinely: the umbrella canopying my head covered me (I covered myself on purpose with this black shroud). I laughed as one had never laughed before, the deep bottom of each thing opened, denuded itself, as if I were dead... ⁷

For the first time, he felt like an insect, which had “fallen on its back”; he found himself helpless (*désemparé*), yet not palsied by panic. Looking about he did not think the situation “bad”; rather, he felt “excited.”⁸

This moment of mystical truth was the beginning of Bataille’s *inner experience* (*l’expérience intérieure*). It would also be the seed of a book belonging to his mature production (1943), in which the chronicling of his ecstatic sensations is for the most part incomprehensible, and the numerous allegories and metaphors that season the memoir are only of modest avail in clarifying the true color of this experience. But, again, epiphanies are by definition inexpressible and their protagonists should never be faulted for failing to translate their portent into conventional prose. Moreover, there is no legitimate reason to doubt the veracity and depth of his vision. We take him at his word. He may very well have seen something. In one of man’s recurring night panics, he must have glimpsed the Void. That, in itself, however, was by no means exceptional. But then, presumably he had squinted deeper into it, underneath the parasol in the rue Dufour, coming eventually to some sort of realization –a realization from which “the project” must have drawn its fundamental inspiration.

I know, as I founder, that the only truth of man, finally glimpsed, is that he is a supplication without answer.⁹

The Void is what Catholic philosopher Miguel De Unamuno (1864-1936) –an anti-Bataillean thinker in his own right—¹⁰ dreaded the most.¹¹ Unamuno was terrorized by the

bottomless despair that arises from *the thought that there might be nothing beyond this existence of ours*. “I always felt,” Unamuno confessed, “that nothingness was much more terrifying than the descriptions of the tortures of hell.”¹² Staring into the gaping nothing (*la nada*) is the moment of truth; that is when each man’s ego decides, as the novelist within himself, what is humanly sensible to hope, to expect, to believe. Because faith boils down to a matter of choice: Unamuno’s longing was to become himself God, “yet without ceasing to be I myself, I who am speaking to you.” He further reasoned:

To believe that there is no God is one thing; to resign oneself to there not being God is another thing, and it is a terrible and an inhuman thing; but not to wish that there be a God exceeds every other monstrosity (...). [Some men] are atheists from a kind of rage, rage at not being able to believe that there is a God (...). They have invested Nothingness with substance and personality, and their God is an Anti-God (...). Is it not perhaps a mode of believing in God, this fury with which those deny and even insult Him, who, because they cannot bring themselves to believe in Him, wish that he may not exist? (...). Being men of a weak and passive or of an evil disposition, in whom reason is stronger than will, (...) they fall into despair; and because they despair, they deny...¹³

Like Bataille, Unamuno realized that, in the shadow cast by the Void, “life cannot submit itself to reason, because the end of life is living and not understanding.” And because the mind is impotent to answer the queries that lurk in the maws of nothingness, it is then only “by love and suffering, (...) by hungering after [God],” said the Basque philosopher, that men come to know the mystery. “To believe in God,” Unamuno concluded, “is to wish that there may be a God, to be unable to live without Him.”¹⁴

But Bataille, “from a kind of rage, “ did not *think* so; and thus did not wish so. He remained too much a man of *reason*, even if one blessed by apocalyptic clairvoyance. And, after the rapture, reason told him that there might have been other (sacred) paths traversing which one could reconcile oneself with the terror of living.

Much of what Bataille wrote in the *Inner Experience* is the fruit of self-taught meditation on the very insufferableness of life. Mid-way through, he found himself examining studiously a series of photographs. They dated from the time of the Boxer Revolution, and portrayed a young Chinese man being methodically hacked into to pieces, “beautiful like a wasp,”¹⁵ captioned Bataille. This was the man’s punishment for having murdered a prince.

[This] young and seducing Chinese man, surrendered to the work of the executioner, I love him of a love in which the sadistic instinct has no part: he conveyed to me his sufferance, or rather the excess of his sufferance and that was exactly what I was looking for, not to take pleasure in it, but to ruin within myself what opposes ruin itself...The part of me that sobs and curses, is my thirst to sleep in peace, my rage for being disturbed. Excesses are the signs (...) of what the world is in its sovereignty (*souverainement*): I could not but love him to the dregs and without hope.¹⁶

Bataille had obtained the set of photos in 1925; he became obsessed by them; he often mentioned “the punishment of the one hundred pieces” as it was called, and never parted from these images.¹⁷

So now we begin to understand. After the mad laughter on the Rue Du Four, it had become evident that God was indeed absent, but the beckoning chasm that was left behind —the tenebrous sea of Gnosis— was not itself empty, but full of “love.” A peculiar, hopeless love *also for destruction*. For Bataille, there was sweetness in butchery, mildness in the

tearing of flesh: likewise, there was no sense in sobbing, crying, cursing and protesting against the screaming pain and iniquity of the deeds of men –no justification, for this was the (sovereign) way of life. Nothing could alter it, and thus, instead of demurring stubbornly and idiotically –like the obtuse maidens of Sade— one ought to give in to the flow, to the natural cycle of generation and mayhem. He admonished: “Ruin within yourself what opposes ruin itself.” To conserve, to worship life was the feeling proper of traditional religion, of cowards.

Combat is the same as life. The value of a man depends on his aggressive strength.¹⁸

The tone of his confession is not truly Sadean: Bataille was adding something new, he was expressing a form of *empathy* for the carnage. The sovereign aristocrat painted by Sade was an isolated being, *Bataille wished instead to recreate “community.”* He wanted Sade without the liberal egocentrism. The “experience” for Bataille is a voyage to the limits of human possibility. It is an endgame of *transgression*, in which the object is to burn, negate and overcome all “limits, values, and authorities” –the old prerogative of the Gnostic perfects, in short.¹⁹ That in itself, said Bataille, *is* the authority. In the trance of mystical rapture, the feeling of God, passion, and all those bits of talk, speech, and moral discipline, which we have taken from life, are united, encompassed in the experience. Yet the “work” of this experience is to exclude rational activity, which in turn seeks to “surpass all these objects.” Bataille thus posed the central dichotomy between ecstatic rapture on the one hand and *thought* on the other. The latter he called indifferently *discourse* or *discursive thought*. But by the end of the experience, after object and subject have fused and the ego dissolved, the seer finds that life is a question mark with no answer; if *that* is the authority, then there is no God.²⁰ By feeling and reason alone, it appears to be just impossible to

weave the breath of our physiological existence, drudgery's tick-tack and the screwy incidents of our sentimental patterns, into one, orderly sigh. Perfection and impurity, beginning and end, god and the devil: how is one ever to encase one into the other, and all of them at once into *theory*? It won't do; hurriedly, Bataille took the aesthetic way out:

Gone crazy, deep within the infinite hollowness of possibility, God, in a flicker of lucidity, dreamt of being a sick man gnawed by bedbugs. He then became a bedbug that the sick man, having turned the lights on, found in a fold of the sheets and squished between his nails. This sick man fell asleep once more and dreamt: he dreamt of being emptied sand, without a lower or an upper bound, without repose, nor tolerable possibility.²¹

From this realization onwards begins the "dramatization of life." What Bataille appeared to be saying was the following: if the benevolent God of traditional belief has left us to fend for ourselves in a world of cyclical butchery, it is incumbent upon us to make a poem of our lives, to re-invent them in the open space of the void, though not arbitrarily, but according to rituals, which the convulsions of life and nature suggest to our understanding. If the dramatization, he warned, becomes interior and egocentric (we may think of Unamuno's "I" thirsting after God), then one falls back on the delirium of the Christian mystics: we run the risk of facing the usual jealous and exclusive authority of the vengeful One. We might, he averred, "squeeze too much being upon itself," and assume thereby the countenance of an "avaricious shopkeeper." No question of salvation, then, for salvation is "the most heinous of pretexts."²²

The sentiment behind this trembling attempt at redefining theology, is, as always, *resentment*. "Oh God the Father," wailed Bataille, "you, who in a night of despair, crucified your own son, who, in this night of butchery, as the agony became *impossible* – to be cried out – became the *Impossible* yourself and felt the impossibility till it became horror, God of despair, give me this

heart, Your heart, which falters, which boils over and no longer tolerates that You exist!" In Bataille's lyrical indictment of Christianity, God, no longer knowing what to do, despairs and takes his own life by nailing himself to the cross. Rationally, therefore, what appears manifest of Christianity to Bataille is but "the hate that God has for himself." "If God failed this hatred at any moment," Bataille wrote, "the world would become *logical, intelligible...*"²³

To speak of God would be –dishonestly— to connect that of which I can only speak by way of negation with the impossible explanation of that which is (...). GOD, if he were, would be a pig...²⁴

Thus the culmination of joy cannot be joy itself, because it will end. But in *despair*, there is joy, because only death terminates it, and then we are no longer. *There* is the beauty of desperation, its "simplicity; it is the absence of a "bait" (*leurre*)—that which has the taste of hope after we bite it. Joy makes no sense, but despair,...despair is logical.²⁵

To affirm that the universe resembles nothing and that it is but amorphous is tantamount to saying that the universe is something like a spider or slobber.

Bataille is a man of reason, who, in the words of Unamuno, because he despairs, denies, and still not satisfied, rejects the notion of God to invest "Nothingness with substance and personality." This, in brief, is the introduction of his project, and the (not so) covert aleph of the postmodern deception. It is an old cycle of rage, re-proposing itself. And so for Bataille here we are, forsaken by a self-hating, and ultimately inexistent God, and caught between the waters of chaos and the deep-blue of the discursive sea.

Knowledge. The inner experience, Bataille insisted, leads to *non-knowledge* (*le non-savoir*): this is the ultimate truth, which at face value, is remarkably similar to what traditional

wisdom teaches, namely a humble surrender before the inexplicable and a profession of faith in spite of all. Bataille, of course, did not settle for resignation. He had a programmatic syllabus of his own. Like the Gnostics, Bataille had no desire to agonize, solo, in his own despair, and let the others, in their own private insanity, believe. No, *he wanted to talk (j'ai voulu parler)*, to be published, to reach out –he wanted converts. And so he had to speak to them by way of discourse.

Yet “language is indigent.”²⁶

It might be indigent, Bataille conceded, but it is necessary. “The word silence,” he admitted, “is still a noise: (...) I have opened my eyes, but I should not have said it.”²⁷ If non-knowledge –the great unknown— is the terminus of the experience, so-called “absolute knowledge is but one form of lore (*connaissance*) amongst many.”²⁸ At this juncture, Bataille was about to develop the decisive passage from abstraction to practice. “As far as human beings are concerned,” he wrote, “their existence is tied to *language*: each person imagines, knows its existence with the help of words.”²⁹ But knowledge –discourse—can be “enslaving,” so the problem is to retain language as a means of communication without falling once more in the trappings of divine authority, of something commanding from on high. Two instruments are at one’s disposal: discourse and “the project.” Discourse, contrary to what the late Foucauldians would suggest, is not in its original formulation a label for *any kind of rhetoric* emanating from an established authority –be it religious, bureaucratic or utilitarian. And this can only signify that “discourse” is that symbolic speech with which humans have in fact articulated science by saying from the outset “I.” It is unmistakably the language of truth; humans, after they become aware of their uniqueness, embark on their quest. And once the consciousness flows, they go ahead: they measure the circumference of the earth, sculpt Laocoon, write *Richard II*, or compose the *Pastorale*. They may go astray, too; they may lie, they may err, they may botch the canvas, they may do nothing. But the game remains open. And

even when discourse brings them face to face with the unnamable, they are undeterred: they love to create above all. Bataille, too, could not resist the creative impulse himself, though he yielded to the torment of an anguished predicament, tearing himself to pieces in the dead-end of *impossibility*. That is why he feared the humanity of discourse, because it leads to an *affirmation of life*. But Bataille was nevertheless confident that he could “contaminate” conventional discourse enough to confuse the soul, and obtain as a result a special lexicon wherewith modern individuals could pay homage and offer prayers to the lingering spiritual residue of foul, bloody sacredness.

And “the project?”

The project was Bataille’s wish to create a philosophy, whose perverted discourse could fashion a sense of relatedness amongst human beings –*a community*— without leading them to an embrace with a superior, transcendent principle of authority –the cruel, indifferent God of orthodox monotheism.

The door must remain open and shut at the same time.
What I wanted: profound communication between beings to the exclusion of the link necessary to projects, which discourse forms.³⁰

The inner experience is to the project, said Bataille, what a festering wound is to the assurance of a forthcoming recovery: the one is life, the other is but a rationalization of human suffering. Thus even if we may envision a certain recovery, the wound of our body is no less excruciating here and now. The project is that old Sadean experiment to make violence and suffering, which are by nature silent, *speak*. As mentioned earlier, there is something fundamentally inauthentic to such a project; –even Bataille lucidly acknowledged it. One must nonetheless *make use* of the it, he intimated: “it must be maintained.” In the case of suffering, reason should intervene to placate anguish by inviting the suffering individual to assume a dispassionate and cynical detachment from the suppurating

wounds inflicted upon us by existence. The key to a successful realization of the project is “harmony,” as opposed to passion, which kindles the impatience of desire. Bataille thus suggested that individuals should employ “discursive thought” as a “mocking varlet” (*un valet moqueur*), who, “skeptical, ignoring nothing,” should be available to serve and prop up the experience, and be properly trained to withdraw discreetly whenever experience, its master, should claim absolute privacy for the duration of the revelation.³¹

I have drafted the project to escape from the project!
And I know that all I need to do is to crush the discourse
in me.³²

This obscurely defined “project,” which Bataille could never quite actualize, was to create a medium of communication and expression for a congregation of individuals, whose social exchange was to circulate like energy along a *network of cross-relationships*. Thus communication for Bataille came by analogy to be likened to the energy of “electric current” or “solar heat”³³—the analogy he had taken from Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. To continue with the metaphor, the energy is to seep through human beings by way of their open *wounds and lacerations* (Sade’s *déchirures, blessures*).³⁴ Here, already, we may recognize the blueprint for Foucault’s theory of power.

Bataille upturned our modern conviction that humans function for the most part as rational beings in a state of awakened consciousness. He reversed the ratio of thinking to unthinking time, and admonished that “the error begins only when this reflecting conscience [of ours] takes seriously the brief respite which the circumstances allow it. This respite is nothing but an interval *for recharge*. Conscience itself is meaningful only when it is communicated.”³⁵ It then follows for Bataille that the whole realm of existence and perception surrounding us is in fact *violence*, and “discursive thought” becomes but a hiccup, a flash going off in the night of terror, which for an instant —“the brief respite for recharge”— casts

about the individual a niche of self-consciousness where such despairing truth manifests itself cruelly. “[Reason] is reason,” Bataille wrote, “to the extent that it is exclusion, that it is the limit of Violence.”³⁶

Against half-measures, egresses, and the deliriums that betray the great poetic impotence, there can only be the counter-thrust of our rage, black, and even an inexpressible bestiality: how else is one to agitate if not by wallowing like a pig in the dung, gorging in the fange, tearing all things with the snout, driven by a repugnant voracity that nothing can stop (...). WE ARE TRUCULENTLY RELIGIOUS and, to the extent that our existence is the condemnation of all that which is accepted today, an interior exigency demands that we act imperiously. What we here undertake is a war.³⁷

Thus man, like the bull in the corrida, would no longer be the Void’s toy, but it is the Void that becomes the toy of man: and in the abyss, Bataille insisted, we lose ourselves in billows of contagious *laughter*, which travels fast from one (human) source to another. “Words, books, monuments, symbols, guffaws are but the myriad trails of this contagion, of these passages.”³⁸

I am, and you are, in the vast flux of things, but a punctuation propitious to the rebound (*rejaillissement*) (...). This human life, which is our lot, the conscience of a bit of stability, even of the profound lack of any veritable stability, unleashes the spells of laughter (...). Common laughter presupposes the absence of a veritable anguish, and yet, it has no source but anguish itself...³⁹

And so the seed of project had been planted, the discourse somewhat subdued, and the door partially shut...only to be reopened intermittently so that the phantasms of Gnosis could be ushered in.

Endnotes

¹ Bataille, OC, Vol. I, p. 557

² Ibid, Vol. V, p. 240.

³ Ibid, Vol. I, p. 82.

⁴ Ibid, Vol. X, p. 610.

⁵ Quoted from Pierre Prévost, *Georges Bataille & René Guénon, L'expérience souveraine* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992), p. 15.

⁶ Ibid, p. 29.

⁷ Bataille, OC, Vol. V, p. 46.

⁸ Ibid, Vol. XI, p. 19.

⁹ Ibid, Vol. V, p. 25.

¹⁰ A brief mention of the Basque author, seen as a counter-altar to Bataille, appears for instance in Roland Champagne, *Georges Bataille* (London: Prentice Hall International, 1998), p. 7.

¹¹ Miguel de Unamuno. *Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1954 [1912]), p. 9.

¹² Ibid, p. 43.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 184, 122, and 193.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 46-7, 116, 167, 168.

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- ¹⁵ Bataille, OC, Vol. V, p. 139.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 140-1.
- ¹⁷ Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille, La mort à l'oeuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), pp. 120-21.
- ¹⁸ Bataille, OC, Vol. I, p. 550
- ¹⁹ Ibid, Vol. V., p. 19.
- ²⁰ Ibid, pp. 20, 21.
- ²¹ Ibid, Vol. XI, p. 230.
- ²² Ibid, Vol. V, pp. 22, 24.
- ²³ Ibid, pp. 30-1, 50, emphasis added.
- ²⁴ Ibid, Vol. XII, p. 284, and Vol. III, p. 30.
- ²⁵ Ibid, Vol. V, p. 51.
- ²⁶ Ibid, Vol. VIII, p. 146.
- ²⁷ Ibid, p. 25.
- ²⁸ Ibid, p. 69.
- ²⁹ Ibid, p. 99.
- ³⁰ Ibid, p. 121.
- ³¹ Ibid, pp. 69, 73.
- ³² Ibid, p. 74.

³³ Ibid, Vol. VII, p. 265.

³⁴ Ibid, Vol. VIII, pp. 74, 99.

³⁵ Ibid, Vol. VII, p. 271, emphasis added.

³⁶ Ibid, Vol. XII, p. 484.

³⁷ Ibid, Vol. I, pp. 211-12, and 443.

³⁸ Ibid, Vol. VIII, pp. 109-11.

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 112-3.