



5. Bataille

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.

Georges Bataille¹

5.1. Mystique

Georges Bataille was, without question, a religious type. That is, one of those individuals who yearn 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 to Catholicism early on in his life. At twenty he joined a seminary to train for priesthood; he was a man with a *vocation*. But three years later, he seemed to have lost the faith entirely.

Reign of Discursive Terror

Rather than surrendering to the self-contented atheism and mediocre agnosticism of his contemporaries, and true to his religious yearning, he marched straight out 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 Jesuitic philosophism (i.e., his disingenuous nonsense) 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.²

“My research,” Bataille wrote in 1934, “initially had a twofold objective: the sacred and ecstasy.”³ Allegedly, the conversion of Bataille was occasioned by a vision of ecstatic (out of body) revelation, which he recounted in what may be called the experience of the umbrella.⁴

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: this umbrella, which I wore like a hood over my head, covered all of 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.⁵

For the first time, he felt like an insect, which had “fallen on its back”; he found himself helpless (*désespéré*), yet not palsied by panic. Looking about he did not think the situation “bad”; rather, he felt “excited.”⁶

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. 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 du Four, coming eventually to some sort of realization — a realization from which “the project” must have drawn its fundamental inspiration.

Reign of Discursive Terror

I know, as I founder, that the only truth of man, finally glimpsed, is that he is a supplication without answer.⁷

The Void is what Catholic philosopher Miguel De Unamuno (1864–1936) —an anti-Bataillean thinker in his own right⁸— dreaded the most.⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.”¹²

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. Midway through, he found himself examining studiously a series of photographs. They dated from the time of the Boxer Rebellion,* and portrayed a young Chinese man being methodically hacked into pieces, “beautiful like a wasp,”¹³ 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

* China’s xenophobic pushback against the early imperial meddling of the West at the turn of the twentieth century.

Reign of Discursive Terror

its sovereignty (*souverainement*): I could not but love him to the dregs and without hope.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

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, *but 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 the Marquis de Sade— one ought to give in to the flow, to the natural cycle of generation and mayhem. He counseled: “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.¹⁶

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.”¹⁷ 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 has dissolved, the seer finds that life is a question mark with no answer; if *that* is the authority, then there is no God.¹⁸ By feeling and reason alone, it appears to be just impossible to weave the breath of our physiological existence, drudgery’s ticktack 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, or tolerable possibility.¹⁹

From this realization onward 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 reinvent 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."²⁰

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*."²¹

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.²²

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.²³

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 is still not satisfied, rejects the notion of God to invest “Nothingness with substance and is 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 *nonknowledge* (*le non-savoir*): this is the ultimate truth, which, at face value, is remarkably similar to what traditional wisdom teaches, namely, a humble (and fairly depressing) 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.”²⁴

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.”²⁵ If nonknowledge—the great unknown—is the terminus of the experience, “absolute knowledge is but one form of lore (*connaissance*) amongst many.”²⁶ 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.”²⁷ 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 with which 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.²⁸

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 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 instead the impatience of desire. Bataille thus suggested that individuals 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.²⁹

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.³⁰

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”³¹—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*).³² 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 warned 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.”³³ 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.”³⁴

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 mud, 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.³⁵

Thus, like the bull in the corrida, man 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.”³⁶

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.³⁷

And so, the seed of the 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.

5.2. The Monstrous Archons

The Aztecs started out as a warrior civilization that rested on heredity and the hierarchy of classes; they had a solar calendar and an imperial administration. By the time the Spaniards came ashore to crush them, it appears that they had undergone “a characteristic degeneration in the direction of a special and sinister Dionysism, which may be called frenzy of blood. [Their human sacrifices], even in the form of collective slaughter, were performed in order to maintain contact with the divine but with a dark, fierce exaltation derived from destroying life, the likeness of which is to be found nowhere in the world.”³⁸ The blood orgy was officiated by an intimidating caste of priests. They kept themselves in spiritual unison with the gods through the shedding of their own

blood, which was made to ooze continuously by making incisions and piercings at the temples, scrotum, and tongue with maguey thorns. The plentiful blood, which the gods demanded, however, was not merely the trickle of the priests' temples and genitals, but the loads of lifeblood that were going to be distilled from victims, sometime slain by the thousands in the brief interval of a day. "In 1428, the ruler Itzcoatl, and his adviser Tlacocel, initiated a policy of conquest, encouraging the Aztecs to think of themselves as [the gods'] *chosen people*, whose mission was to feed the sun" with captives of war. Thenceforth a tradition was established, which required an amount of drained bodies and resected hearts ranging from ten- and fifty-thousand per annum.³⁹

At birth, the midwives cut the umbilical cord of the future warriors of the empire, intoning a propitiatory lullaby that greeted the newborn as creatures "whose fatherland lies elsewhere," born to fight and feed the enemies' blood to the Sun.⁴⁰

As known, the sacrificial victims were subjected to a rich menu of rituals. For instance, as offerings to the Fire God, they were roasted alive, but before death could intervene, their blistered and scorched bodies were cast off the blaze with hooks and opened to extract the hearts.⁴¹ Alternatively, the "priests flayed men and tortured children to death so that their tears might induce the [rain god, Xipe Totec] to send more rain."⁴² The skins of flayed men and women were then worn by the sacrificing priests in deference to the respective male and female gods, whose icons were represented in the guise of anthropomorphic figures fitted with hooded suits and masks

Reign of Discursive Terror

made of human flesh. The disemboweled and decapitated bodies of the sacrificed were dismembered, and the choicest pieces sent to market to fetch a good price in chocolate. The Daphoene of the Aztecs was named Caotlicue, and like the Indian Kali, she wore a skull-pendant suspended from a necklace. "Her head had been severed, and from the neck [flowed] two streams of blood represented by snakes whose heads meet in profile to form a grotesque caricature of a face."⁴³

"Death for the Aztecs," Bataille commented, "meant nothing." "The Mexicans asked of their gods not only to make them receive death with joy, but even to help them find in it charm and sweetness." The Aztecs," he stated, "were probably just as religious as the Spaniards, but they mixed with their religion a sentiment of horror, of terror, linked to a kind of black humor even more terrifying than horror." Bataille appreciated the Aztecs: amid the complexities of imperial management, they had achieved a workable balancing of life and death, of laughter and horror—an equipoise, which, in its bloody elegance, put to shame, in his eyes, the ravages of the contorted Christian West. A world, the Western one, that was itself disfigured by endless violence and a mal-digested worship of the biblical, benevolent God.

"Mexico," he continued, "was not only the bloodiest of human slaughterhouses, it was also a rich city, a veritable Venice with canals and footbridges, decorated temples, and especially very beautiful flower gardens." "These ferocious warriors," he concluded, "were but affable and sociable men like all the others," who consorted lively at banquets, where the consumption of intoxicants was customary.⁴⁴

The way the Mexicans abused death casts us before the abyss. To this abyss, doubtless, we shall never cease from inching closer, attracted as we are by terror (*l'effroi*), but I should like to turn momentarily away from it, and consider solely the glory, exclusive, which the Mexicans pursued.⁴⁵

Beginning with the Aztec cult, Bataille launched into a vast anthropological quest to disinter the vestiges of the primordial Dionysian-Aphrodisitic tradition, of which he had appointed himself modern-day hierophant. *The exploration consisted in identifying all those clues in the realm of creation and social memory that bore the imprint of darkness, and in raising their status, again.* He clearly understood that in the past millennia the Churches of the vengeful God, whom he had come to reject irremediably, had labored strenuously to eradicate, efface, break, alter, and conceal all traces of these ancient, violent cults (and not without administering a torrent of violence themselves). And for Bataille, it became part of his sacred mission, now that he had forever abjured the Catholic God of his youth, to bring them back and enshrine them anew but in an environment that was alien to the one in which these cults originally emerged. Hence all that nebulous preamble about experience, project, and discourse. Bataille's entire production in one form or another was concerned with this effort at revival: from a bizarre note on the big toe, which many cultures hide from view given its manifest bestiality, to the study of eroticism or economics by way of Gnosis, Bataille pursued the project of converting the modern mind to the bloody altars of the sacred Elders. Surviving traits of the ancient madness in our modern world are to be found everywhere, in fact. Bataille dwelt on self-mutilation and cited

the celebrated case of Van Gogh's ear—which found its way, not at all accidentally, Bataille remarked, *to a brothel* (a central venue of sacred, erotic dissipation, presided by Aphrodite the whore)—as well as other instances drawn from daily chronicle, in which common men, in sudden fits of inexplicable frenzy, bit off their fingers, and so on.⁴⁶

Gnosis. Here Bataille, as set out earlier, was on kindred ground: "In essence," he wrote in this regard, "it is possible to single out as the leitmotiv of Gnosis the conception of matter as an *active* principle, possessing its autonomous eternal existence, which is that of the tenebrous depths (which are not the absence of light but the *monstrous archons* revealed by this absence),⁴⁷ that of evil (which is not the absence of good, but a creative act)."⁴⁸ It is revealing to see how Bataille modeled the Gnostic tradition into a devil-loving bent, which is not so patent from the Gnostic originals themselves. Bataille, in fact, acknowledged his bias

and admitted that the "evil archangels" were systematically evoked by the Gnostics as (deviant) emanations of higher entities. "But," he persisted, "the despotic and bestial obsession of the evil and lawless forces appears undeniable, in metaphysical speculation as well as in mythological nightmare. It is difficult to believe that taken as a whole Gnosis is not above all a testimony of a sinister love for darkness, of a monstrous taste for the obscene and lawless archons."⁴⁹

Iipse dixit.

Everything that follows—orgies, intoxication, and the magic practices of the black arts—is for Bataille a positive expression of what he calls "base matter," which, being the

polar opposite of spiritual transcendence, must be unconditionally embraced and penetrated to the full in willing defiance of all prohibitions (allegedly) sanctioned from the heavens. At this juncture, his project appeared to be drifting toward the carnivalesque appeal of the modern Luciferian Churches, and, truth to be told, the flavor of his anti-Christian manifesto, which will be detailed shortly, differed little from the pop proclamations of those saucy manuals for the closet-Satanist so in vogue during the era of Haight and Ashbury.⁵⁰ Bataille went on:

If today we abandon overtly the idealist viewpoint, as the Gnostics had implicitly abandoned it, [...] the attitude of those that saw in their own life an effect of the creative action of evil appears even radically optimistic. It is possible to become in all freedom a toy of evil if evil itself does not have to answer before God. Before an authority like that of God, which the archons confound by way of an eternal bestiality. Because the point is above all not to submit self and reason to anything loftier [...]. This Being [of ours] and [our] reason can only submit to what is basest, to what cannot in any case ape an authority of any kind. I submit myself entirely to the matter that exists outside myself. Base matter is foreign and alien to the human ideal aspirations and refuses to be reduced to the great ontological constructs resulting from these aspirations.⁵¹

In sum, Bataille did not naively swap God for Satan, so to speak, not in words at least. He committed himself to a form of pantheistic aestheticism, referring preferably to the “obscene archangels of evil,” whose bestiality makes a perennial mockery of the Kingdom of Heaven. Instead of moving up, he opted to sink down, so far down that he wished

to reach a point of annulment where he found no inverted ape-God but a tumultuous reconciliation with an ambivalent blend of darkness and brightness —the ambivalence of, say, his beloved Kali— the patroness of destruction, chaos, night, prostitutes, cholera, and cemeteries.⁵² Yet Kali, the archons, and the Aztec demons appeared to be mere allegorical egresses for Bataille; he had no intention of making the mistake of erecting another idol on a pedestal, though there is reason to suggest that he somewhat failed in this intent.

This goat-faced, cloven-footed Satan, with his stable-smelling arse, such as he is depicted —gleaming in the Sabbath— by the powers of a collective imagination presently on the defensive; this hideous countenance conjured up by the unhinged nervousness of the Christians, is it not, so close to us, the emanation of Dionysus?⁵³

At any rate, he recognized the existence of demoniacal influences *outside* himself, which are capable of endless seduction —and that by itself is a sonorous avowal of religious belief. Indeed, the principle of Dionysus to him is “the divine in its purest state,” a principle “unscathed by the obsessive desire to eternalize a given order.” Dionysus’s poesy is not the melancholia of the lone Rambler, nor his tragedy the murmur of the ecstatic hermit. In Dionysus Bataille saw the *crowd*, instead.⁵⁴ Bacchus is the subversive god of the maddened throng. “Satan,” he wrote, “led the witches’ coven, Dionysus the maenads’, and the lasciviousness in both instances was the venomous heat of the games [...]. The two divinities (for the devil is *divine*) incarnate in their personage the same rites —of orgiastic fury, of nocturnal frenzy: and if there is no necessary

continuity between these rites, there is at least contact, contagion.”⁵⁵ But instead of worshipping by kneeling down, he intended to repay Dionysus and the archons, ritually, with their same currency, not by genuflecting but, as he would fantasize in his novels, by carousing with them, as an equal, spitting back at them the muck, blood, and excrement that they smear daily on the faces of humans for mere sport (in this connection, Bataille alluded to the dark humor of the Aztec gods).

To say “God is evil” is not at all what one imagines. It is tender truth, it is love for death, a slip into the void, towards absence.⁵⁶

But what of the traditional archons of light, Apollo, Michael, Marduk, and the others? Simple: they don’t exist. Kali is made to cover both sides of the ledger—a giver and destroyer of life, all in one. Thus, no more dichotomy or theodicy. This is Bataille’s revengeful payback to the Church for having, like a miserable cheat, erased the monstrous archons from the sacred narrative. Religious orthodoxy, in fact, has surreptitiously cast Satan out of the sacred circle and reduced him to a profanity, tossing the rebel angel in the pile of refuse and psychological aberration, with the covert intent to kill altogether the very thought of him in the minds of men.

As Bataille revealingly put it, “The impure sacred was dispatched into the profane world [...]. The confusion of the impure sacred and the profane seemed for a long time contrary to the sentiment that memory had conserved of the intimate nature of the sacred, *but the inverted religious structure of Christianity* required it. One of the signs of this decline is the scant attention paid in our time to the existence of the devil:

one believes in it ever more infrequently [...]. This means that the black sacred, being ever more poorly defined, loses in the long run any meaning.”⁵⁷ And so it was Bataille’s duty to give “black, impure scared” its long due after years of conspiratorial suppression on the part of the Judeo-Christians. For that, he performed the opposite operation: to kill the conception of the benevolent God, *he reversed the terms of the orthodoxy and cast God into the profane realm, identifying it with reason, discourse, or rationality*; in other words, he classed (Catholic) Christians and utilitarians in the common despicable lot of dried out, philistine, and *irreligious* oppressors. He accused *them both* of having perverted the (bloody, impure, and true) sacred.⁵⁸ This equally surreptitious reversal —though not entirely illegitimate— confusion of Judeo-Christian sacredness and utilitarianism has passed the test of time, and has in fact become the chief battle cry of the postmodern legions. It is for the most part the astute construction of Bataille.

“I do not hate God at all,” he explained. “Basically, I ignore him. If God were what they say it is, it would be *chance*. To substitute chance for God is no less insulting to my understanding than it is for a devout person to do the inverse [...]. The only grace that we may wish for is that [chance] should destroy us tragically instead of letting us die of hebetude.”⁵⁹

In Bataille’s view, the Christian has made himself ill with fanatical *renunciation*; he has renounced to know the value of man in order to affirm in its stead that of a principle which condemns him to a *resigned servitude* —to Bataille, the Christian devotee is a benighted slave.⁶⁰ But by abjuring and

embracing the monstrous archons, Bataille had set himself free: he and his former Catholic self were presently even. The question was settled.

I imagine myself covered in blood, crushed but transfigured and in agreement with the world, both as a prey and as a jaw of Time, which kills ceaselessly and is ceaselessly killed.⁶¹

This is in synthesis Bataille's *acephalic theology* or "theopathy" (a painful feeling of the divine):⁶² it initiates with a descent into the abyss, which is "the experience." The experience is transgression, an act of revolt (*contestation*) —they are one and the same. In the darkness of ecstasy Bataille found no God but a tenebrous cycle (of generation, chance, and destruction), traversed by solar energy in perennial flux, whose motion has historically suggested to the human imagination the existence of a troubling plot hatched by a richly decorated pantheon of obscene archangels. The ebb and flow of power through base matter, which humans accompany with the waves of *laughter*, spirals into a climax of eternal defeat —of annihilation, of matter refusing to culminate into anything— and finally wanes down to the origin to initiate a new round.

We have laughed of a laughter pure and remorseless that allowed us together to penetrate into the secret core of things [...]. Whoever wishes to focus his action upon this point of vertiginous fall must be possessed of great strength [...]. All enclosures collapse, and the convulsive contractions of the laughs are unleashed and reverberate in unison. Not only does each of them partake in the undefined streaming of the universe, but he fuses himself into the laughter of others, so completely that, in a room, there are no longer several laughs, independent from one another, but a single wave of hilarity

[...]. Beyond the knowable realities, laughter traverses the *human pyramid* like a network of endless waves, which would renew themselves in every direction. This reverberated convulsion strangles from one end to the other the immeasurable being of man —climaxing at the summit through the agony of God in the black of night.⁶³

To characterize the idea of this eternal return that erupts into eternal nothingness Bataille conjures the allegory of a headless, acephalous God: the *Acéphale*, which was illustrated by Bataille's friend, the French surrealist artist André Masson (1896–1987) (see figure 5.1 on the next page).

Beyond what I am, I encounter a being that makes me laugh because he has no head, who fills me with anguish because he is made of innocence and crime: he holds a weapon of iron in his left hand, flames similar to a sacred heart in his right. He unites in one same eruption Birth and Death. He isn't a man. Neither is he a god. He isn't myself, but He is more than I: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, and I myself with him, and in which I find myself being him, that is to say, a monster.⁶⁴

Fizzing with excitement before the prospects of his newly crafted religion-toy, Bataille founded his own "secret society" in 1936, *L'Acéphale* (and released a publication by the same name), which gathered a consorterie of Parisian aesthetes, writers,

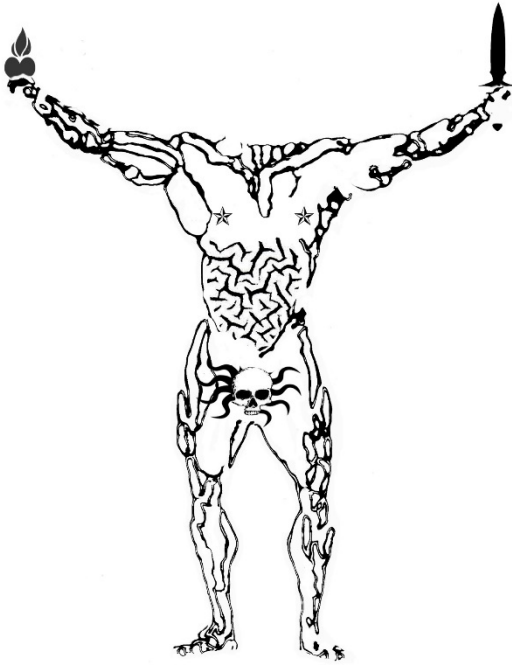


Figure 5.1 Bataille's *Acéphale*, original sketch by André Masson reinterpreted by Evelyn Ysaïs.

and *artistes* (including Masson) desirous to experiment with the obscene occult. Sade, Dionysus, and Nietzsche were the tutelary figures of *L'Acéphale*. This fraternity of dilettante, Aleister Crowley-wannabes, “performed strange rituals, including the sacrifice of a goat,” though what was truly needed to bond “irremediably” these “initiates” to one another was a *human* sacrificial victim.

Queasy bourgeois that they were, alas, it appears that none of the founding members volunteered to offer themselves up for the slaughter. Bataille's biographer, however, suggests that a consenting victim was indeed found —someone possibly

outside the inner circle— but no sacred henchman to dispatch it. Whatever the truth of this folly —all members having shielded the society with the deepest silence— Bataille would later avow that “in time his collected works would account for both the error and the *value* of this monstrous intention.”⁶⁵ Hardly a recantation, or the expression of remorse. “The group,” as earnestly related by a deferential Bataillean academic, “was to be a community formed to lift guilt, acknowledge the role of decomposition in a positive way, practice asceticism, practice acephalic play, practice perversion, acknowledge the universal nature of all communities, and change the world by affirming the role of aggression in power.”⁶⁶

“Acephalic play?” Though no one never found out what “acephalic play” actually was, it is however revealing to discover how completely unfazed these the modern admirers of Bataille have been by the solid reality and celebration in *L'Acéphale* of the holocaust. The “program” of *L'Acéphale* included the following points:

3. Assume the function of destruction and decomposition, as an achievement not as a negation of being [...].
6. Take upon oneself perversion and crime not as exclusive values but as values needing to become integrated into human totality [...].
9. Participate in the destruction of the world that exists, looking forward to the world that will be [...].
11. Affirm the value of violence and of the will to aggression insofar as they form the basis of all might.⁶⁷

This manifesto is a strange thing. It is, above all and unpremeditatedly, dissonant: on the one hand, it harbors a

seething sense of dejection (“torch the cosmos to ashes!”) — something that seems to have issued from a past, instinctual indignation at the divine obscenities of Nature & Man: wanting to see world devoured by flames in view of a rebirth is, deep down, the rant of the jilted troubadour, the howl of the former believer; on the other hand, the proclamation calls for an obnoxious espousal of violence, not so much for Sadistic play (which would be inane enough), as for the sake of might — aye, of *power*. So, if it’s power you seek, then you’re at home, right here on earth, where, in the end, violence & power form the sole idiom all creatures understand. Why a manifesto, then? Solely to recycle Aztec rituals of carnal laceration?

Something is off.

It is precisely in the disjuncture that the Foucauldian sham-discourse will take root: behind the nihilistic pretense of Bataille’s Aztec quirks, there lies a “nook of/for talk,” a little niche in which where “might” (again, always) can be cultivated — or so it seems: thus, it is not a conspiracy about torching anything (and resurrecting it identically for torching it anew) — the world of men does that frequently and intensely enough: more insidiously, it could be about assembling a form of communication that further confuses man — this beastly supplication without an answer— so as to make him even more entomologically adapted, insect-like, to the System’s behavioral exigencies.

Speaking of pre-Columbian civilizations, American writer William Burroughs (1914–1997) —a modern Gnostic in his own right— often lamented the giant bonfire the Catholics made of all Mayan codices:⁶⁸ it is recounted that the

Intelligence official in charge of the censorship was one Bishop Landa, who, having collated the scrolls which illustrated in pictorial form the communicative techniques of social regimentation devised by the high priests for conditioning the slaving masses, found these so horrifying and was thereby so terrified by the prospect of seeing them re-appropriated and tested anew in different settings that he ordered their immediate and thorough incineration.

I understand Burroughs: one can only wonder what sort of “keys” those scrolls must have contained. But are we certain that Landa burnt all of them? Was it, then, that the Catholics were “bad,” but not so bad as to purloin these secrets for their own ends? I have little doubt, on the other hand, that the Anglo-American, Catholic-hating Puritans that now rule the world would love to lay their mittens on those parchments; perhaps they have already; or maybe, they have been on a quest to replicate them somehow —and possibly, to come to the point, their late endorsement of the Foucauldian technobabble has been an infant, ultra-rudimentary step in that direction.

In his 1936 novel *Le bleu du ciel* (Blue of Noon), Bataille had written: “Because I was driven by a happy insolence, I had to overturn everything, by any means overturn everything.”⁶⁹ We may ask: To what end? What for? For an impractical return to the bloody origins of the earth vacated by the celestial principle? So, it seems. The cult of Satan replaced that of the ancient divinities. That is why one may without absurdity recognize in the devil a *Dionysus redivivus*.⁷⁰

5.3. Eroticism

So, if I state, “in order to pray,” I am following an innate instinct that is no weaker than the sexual drive—in fact, even stronger. The two are alike insofar as foul things can happen when they are suppressed.

Ernst Jünger, *Eumeswil* ⁷¹

By the time he had broken his Catholic fast and cast off the cassock, Bataille had practiced much “acephalic play”: an assiduous frequenter of Parisian bordellos till the end of his life, he had savored therein the taste of debauchery, which he sipped in a variety of aromas. “My true church,” he would later write, “is a whorehouse”: in youth, he had been “anguished by all things sexual.”⁷²

During the late twenties, Bataille had come to orbit as a somewhat diminutive satellite in the periphery of the Parisian artistic and literary milieu, especially its surrealist wing, where he established the reputation of a “pervert” (*un obsédé*)—so was he judged in any event by the surrealist founder André Breton, who alternatively referred to Bataille as the “*philosophe excrément*.” The famous Sartre, instead, thought Bataille *un fou* (a madman).⁷³ Living up to his budding infamy, Bataille had also tried his hand at Russian roulette; he survived the “experience” and went on to write porn, of the “sophisticated kind,” that is. His first book is one of such “sulfurous”⁷⁴ novellas, the not unknown *The Story of The Eye*, published in 1926 under a pseudonym—not to mix his two identities: a respectable librarian by day, and an acephalic monster by night. Penguin, the prestigious New York publisher, reissued

the English translation in 1982. Bataille's first opus was thus granted in the Anglophone world the status of "classic." What is it about?

It is a morbid, quasi-autobiographical sketch, which opens with memories of carnal initiation in the provincial depths of France. Soon after this introductory, the tone varies as surrealist imagery of urine and of eggs, which pop up ubiquitously as props symbolizing the eye, is woven into the erotic fantasies of the protagonist-narrator and his young lover Simone (we are told in the appendix by Bataille that his father, blinded by paralysis, wetted himself regularly, hence the association). The narration proceeds with these accounts of Simone playing with and urinating on eggs, and of partouzes in the countryside. One of such little orgies goes awry and the violence of it shocks one young girl, who loses her mind and commits suicide. By the corpse of the girl, and excited by the cadaveric aura, the two young protagonists consummate intercourse for the first time.

Afterwards, the setting changes entirely, and we follow the sexual overkill of Simone and the narrator all the way to Seville, where they travel as retainers of a British voyeur, Sir Edmond. As one of the various episodes, the trio witnesses a corrida, during which the toreador is impaled by the raging bull; the consummation of blood, lacerated meat, and torrid heat is so intense that it makes Simone and the narrator rush to the dung-smelling stalls underneath the bleachers and copulate wildly; thereafter Simone is served a plate with the whitish testes of the sacrificed bull. The apotheosis is reached in the final scene, which takes place in the cathedral of Santa

Caridad, where the three ambush a weak-willed priest, Don Aminado, and make him the prey of a deadly joust —a symbolic corrida, in which this time the Church, by proxy of the priest, is the frenzied bull harassed by the acephalic matador, impersonated by the subversive trio. The young, handsome Don Aminado is baited in the confessional by Simone, who rises to masturbate in his face; utterly stupefied, the priest is subsequently dragged in the sacristy, where Sir Edmond first makes him urinate in a ciborium, and therefrom forces him to drink his own urine. Then, while the narrator sodomizes her, Simone proceeds to masturbate Aminado's "fat, rosy rod" until, "bawling like a pig being slaughtered," he ejaculates on the eucharistic bread. Sir Edmond and the narrator finally immobilize their victim, allowing Simone to straddle and ride him; speedily, she drives the cleric to the climax, and chokes him to death while he orgasms. That done, Simone, moist and ecstatic, collapses next to the priest's cadaver, and the narrator, wanting to violate her in turn, is suddenly immobilized by the "love" he feels for the woman and by "the death of the unnamable." In the spur of the moment, he confesses: "I have never been so happy." An eye of the priest is eventually gouged; it finds itself juggled and then clasped between the sucking navels of the lovers as they resume intercourse, before being swallowed by Simone's vagina.⁷⁵

Admittedly, a classic.

Bataille would repeatedly attempt to emulate Sade, making his porn either mystical with, say, *Madame Edwarda* (1937), or crass in *Le Mort* (1943),⁷⁶ but to little avail. As a *romancier* (of

Reign of Discursive Terror

smut or else), hard as he (and Penguin) tried, he never quite made the cut.

Le mort (The Dead), comments Bataille's biographer, is the "most obscene" of his narratives, "but also the most austere and the most holy."⁷⁷ *Le mort* is a fractured tale of a woman, Marie. After an encounter with death on a stormy, dreary evening, Marie walks out of the house, feverish and naked under her raincoat, and wanders into an inn—to slather herself as muck on the brink of the abyss. In the inn she finds the devil in the guise of an oversexed dwarf—the Count—a lusty youth, Pierrot, and a chorus of barflies led by a stodgy patroness. After the threesome of Marie-Pierrot-the Count is finished with a preliminary crossfire of booze shots and jets of urine and sperm, Marie demands to be "fucked" ("*baise moi*") by Pierrot. The chorus lays her on the table, spreads her legs, and "overcome by the tumult of the [ensuing] body-to-body, of incredible violence," watches, breathing heavily. "The scene," narrated Bataille, "in its slowness, reminded of the slaughter of a pig, or the interment of a god." Pierrot achieves the sacrifice in a slobbered roar, while Mary "answers him with a spasm of death." Thereafter, Marie looks at the count and vomits.

The devil, said Mary, I shit before the devil!" . . . She squatted and shat on the vomit.⁷⁸

In *Madame Edwarda*—the other novels are truly not worth the mention—similar themes are broached. Madame Edwarda is the madam of a whorehouse—the goddess-vestal of Bataille's temple. To the drunken narrator one day she exposes the folds of her vagina with methodical care. From a sitting position, she kept a leg up and spread out: so as to widen the

slit more comfortably, she pulled the flesh with both hands. Thus the “tatters” (*les guenilles*) of Edwarda stared at me, hairy and pink, full of life like a repugnant octopus.⁷⁹

The tumescent and blushing carnality of her genitals beckon like the gaping grimace of a gangrened sore. The pace and thoroughness of the exhibit is such that the patron, stammering, questions Edwarda’s intent. She replies: “You see, I am GOD.” In the fashion of Christ presenting to view his stigmata to the doubting apostle, Edwarda bids the narrator touch and kiss the “festering wound” (*la vive plaie*).⁸⁰ He complies and realizes: “She was black, wholly, simple, anguishing like a hole [...], I then knew that she hadn’t lied [...], that she was God.”⁸¹ And here is the pointed exegesis of Bataille’s biographer: “Edwarda knows, and what she knows is duly God’s: what only God would know if he knew but he doesn’t know, and that is why he doesn’t exist. What a prostitute knows God ignores and that is why only a prostitute is holy when God is, in fact, a farce. If he knew he’d die [...]. He’d be unmasked. Edwarda is not only an exceeding animality [...]. She is GOD revealed DEAD.”⁸²

This a variation on the theodicean theme of the impossibility of reconciling the two faces of sacredness: on the one hand, foulness (the profane), symbolized in this Bataillean bas-relief by the carnose purulence of human genitals; and, on the other, purity, represented instead by mutual aid and all art animated by Olympian ideals. In the production of Bataille, this uncouth coexistence in Man of ideal aspiration and the tumultuous swarming of vermin—which is backed by all that deep cosmos of rage, murder, defilement, and decay—ushers in these lurid

aporias, whose game of illusory perspective is always the same. We have seen the sketch of a God dreaming of being a man eaten by bugs, metamorphosing then into these disgusting insects —for are these not God’s creatures themselves? — to be annihilated by the same anguished man. And this man, in turn, is supposedly fashioned by a God, and designed by God also to experience anguish, which, God, however, because He is by definition imperturbable, cannot Himself feel, if not, that is, by incarnating into his creation (man). And when God does, He becomes one with despairing solitude. Given that such could not have been one of creation’s anticipated sentiments, God, through the anguished man, discovers that there can be no benevolent, all-seeing God.

Likewise in the cameo of *Madame Edwarda*; if God were the God of physics and filial piety, how could he spare the energy to conceive something as unfathomable as a vulva, which, aside from its comprehensible generative function, truly exudes power and awe on the strength of its being sacred harlotry’s pyx of erotic squander? Again, if God the geometrician were to embody Himself into the madam of a bordello, He would experience through her the filth of the orgy, which could never have been one of the archetypal wishes of the mathematician-God, and which proves therefore that in this world of ours, a wholesome, omniscient God is an impossibility. For Bataille, what is left is anguish, base matter, emptied sand, the sacred mystery of eroticism, and neither “high” nor “low.” All of which clues imaginatively combined, yielded the allegory of the headless monster —the mannequin

of dirt, bowels, motion, and commotion traversed by laughter in the dead-end of the black of night.

Aside from the “sulfur” of his poor novels, eroticism is nonetheless a fundamental component in the economy of Bataille’s sociological theory of power, which is the centerpiece of his opus. From Sade, as we saw, Bataille derived the crucial notion of *sovereignty*, which he treated like an excrescence, a physiological throwback to a time when the sentiment of destruction and ruin was a longing

clearly present to the conscience of men. “But sovereignty,” he added, “is nonetheless [...] sin. No, it is the power to sin, without the sentiment of having missed the objective, or it is itself the missing turned into the objective.”⁸³ Sovereignty is an ancestral recollection of our divine desire to set the world aflame, gratuitously, without expected return, without utility.⁸⁴ It is that particular mood that lifts our gaze beyond the conventional categories of good and evil. Sovereign beings move with the convulsive flow, taking life as she naturally shows herself. The knight possessed of a “sovereign sensitivity” is unafraid of pain or misfortune—he wishes, instead, to stare both in the face, and to live up to them, free of rational restraint like an animal, careless of the morrow, and living only in the present.⁸⁵

The impulse of the sovereign man makes him a murderer [...]. Murder is not the sole means to recover the sovereign way, but sovereignty demands the force to rape; [...] it also calls for the risk of death [...]. The sovereign is the one who *is*; as if death were not. And he is even the one who does not die, for he dies but to be reborn [...]. Sovereignty is essentially the refusal of embracing the limits, which the fear of death enjoins us to

Reign of Discursive Terror

respect in order to ensure, under the auspices of a laborious peace, the life of individuals.⁸⁶

For Bataille, the trial of the modern epoch is to repossess the sacred black, and that, he believed, can only be achieved by a ritual embrace of what our minds conditioned by tradition, consider revolting, disgusting, repulsive, horrifying. The leap into darkness may be accompanied by vertigo and nausea — think of the spectators breathing heavily in *Le mort*— but that very giddiness, said Bataille, is the incontrovertible sign that we are crossing over into the methodical and tangible realm of “evil,” with its sacrifices, processions, incantations, liturgies, and *active* principles.

Rot, decomposition, stench, are attributes of death, which is one such principle that must be espoused in order to initiate the inner experience, as intimated by the program of *L'Acéphale*. “Laughter, tears, poetry, tragedy, comedy, play, anger, drunkenness, the ecstasy of dance, music, combat, the funereal horror, the charm of childhood, the sacred, the divine and the diabolical, eroticism (violent or delicate, cerebral or vicious), beauty, fright, disgust,”⁸⁷ “dead flies, blood, menstrual blood,”⁸⁸ spit, shit, muck, scum, sweat, and maggots are all divine secretions of the “sacred impure” that lives with and in us, and beckons to us in our ever more frequent moments of panic and fear.

Of all sovereign forms, *eroticism* was for Bataille possibly the most important.⁸⁹ Unlike sex, eroticism is “diabolical.”⁹⁰ As sexual play severed from possession (of the spouse) and procreation (e.g., the fixation with anal penetration), eroticism is a chief symbol of loss and dissipation (of sexual energy and

fluids); a pure act of perdition, an expenditure of force demanding and expecting no remuneration other than a rapturous wish to lose oneself in ecstasy. Hence the religious connection between death and eroticism, the latter mimicking in a brief span the crescendo and annulling culmination of the other.

Sexuality and death are but the climactic moments of a feast that nature celebrates with the inexhaustible multitude of beings, one and the other understanding the sense of unlimited squander, wherewith nature requites the desire to last, which belongs to every being.⁹¹

Hence the accord between horror and desire, “which gives to the sacred world its paradoxical character.” The object of sacred smut is “fetid, gooey and boundless, swarming with life and symbolizing death.” “If our desire had not so much trouble overcoming our undeniable repugnance, we wouldn’t have thought it so strong.”⁹²

Prostitution, erotic vocabulary, the inevitable locus of sexuality and of filthiness still make the world of love a world of forfeiture (*déchéance*) and of death. We experience real happiness only when we expend vainly; we always want to be sure of the uselessness of our expense, to feel as remote as possible from a world of seriousness, for which the growth of resources is the rule [...]. We want to be the opposite of such a realm: there is commonly in eroticism a movement of hatred, a movement of treason. That is why it is tied to anguish, and why, in return, when hatred becomes powerlessness, and treason failure, the erotic element is risible.⁹³

Here Bataille isolated the subversive nature of eroticism, its rebellious character. The potential for perennial rebellion

issues from the sexual fount of voluptuous energy of which women, as Sade had explicitly acknowledged, appear to be the privileged, sacred vessels—for example, the sex of Madame Edwarda as God. Hence the determination of forbidding devoutness (e.g., Islam) to keep woman under strict surveillance—a power wire to insulate cautiously with the *hijab* (the veil) and male stewardship. Erotic dissipation is, as known, most arousing if twined with violence; it seems most authentic then. That is why, for instance, much pornography stages the constant reenactment of a collective rape, which features a feminine prey as a hub fueling the raging thirst of masculine spokes; the suggestion of brutality and agony has to become ever more pronounced for the viewer to get off. Violence, said Bataille, frightens, but fascinates.⁹⁴ He warned, however, that if such a performance is deprived of its hating, violent sentiment, of its vertiginous power to disorient the senses and to stab prudes in the chest, the attempt founders in ridicule, and the energy flows out of it, echoed by mocking laughter: the porn is cheap.

Bataille stated that he always wanted “to overturn everything.” To overturn is to break the taboo. And the taboos are the interdictions planted in the course of history by the (high priesthood “in the service” of the) traditional God. Bataille made us believe that he had rid himself of the cumbersome, taboo-making godhead by tossing it into the trash can of profanity along with rational pretense (discourse). His claim, however, was no more convincing than that of his pious opponents, who pretend to have reserved successfully the same treatment to Satan, because Bataille wrote indeed that

the attraction of transgression is that “*it lifts the interdiction without suppressing it.*”⁹⁵

The truth of the interdiction is the key to our human attitude [...]. We feel, at the moment of transgression, the anguish without which the interdiction would not exist: it is the experience of sin [...]. It is *religious* sensitivity, which always ties tightly desire to fright, intense pleasure, and anguish.⁹⁶

Thus, if transgression is the “expected complement”⁹⁷ of the forbidden, in other words, if one cannot be without the other, Bataille was in fact admitting that the pleasure to surrender to the “meditated cruelty” of the monstrous archons would not exist without there being, say, Jehovah/Zeus/Christ imposing the taboo in the first place. Bataille needed the One no less than the Evil One. He did not seem to desire the resurrection of the Aztec regime after all (unrealistic, indeed): like a virus, his project rather felt designed to infect a traditional society, which is erected upon taboos, with the mischievous intent to harass and perturb its system of prohibition. And this is a difference of some import, which qualifies his *work essentially as one of discursive derangement*, rather than unqualified matriarchal/ Dionysian revival. It is thus no wonder that Foucault’s frustrated followers have so often lamented the inconclusiveness and irresoluteness of his politics of transgression, which does not contemplate any emancipation from the System.

So, God is not dead after all; it’s alive and kicking and forbidding, as always. Yet, in spite of this, Bataille appeared to believe that there would be still much time and room for impunity. Undaunted, and still pessimistically hopeful, he

invited everyone to expose his life to *danger*,⁹⁸ exhausting forces and resources through erotic activity, especially its high-powered manifestations, such as the orgy, which derived from “fundamental violence,” as he characterized it, its “calm and majestic character.”⁹⁹ And for the time being, Christianity—this inveterate enemy of transgression and eroticism—may be held in check.

Bataille explained his early seduction: when Christianity was itself a movement of revolt, it attempted to suck the whole of demoniac brutality into the body of the redeemer, and build thereby a vision *overcoming entirely* the madness of violence by inverting its charge—that is, from the state of perennial war to the kingdom of meekness. “There is something sublime and fascinating in this dream,” he wrote.¹⁰⁰ Christ valued “the poor, the pariahs, the foul ones”; he threw himself “into play” as the defender of criminals, indeed, allowing the authorities to treat himself like one. He thus identified with the sacred of the “left”—the impure side.¹⁰¹ And he ultimately communed with God through the paroxysm of evil, which is the torturing agony on the cross. “Communication amongst beings,” Bataille concluded once more, “is ensured by evil.”¹⁰² And the final truth is that it was “humanity” itself, as the mobs of Palestine, that tormented Christ and clamored to see him die; the throng, yet again, demanded that the king-son be put to death. This, for Bataille, is the sacred unfolding of “tragedy.” And tragedy, in turn, demands that we identify with the criminals and not with the victim, however shocking and harrowing his torment may be.

Christianity proposes [to man] to identify himself with the victim, to the slain king. It is the Christian solution that has hitherto carried the day. But this whole movement takes place in a world that is at variance with it.¹⁰³

Bataille saw Christianity as a dream besieged, with greatly diminished powers of attraction and persuasion, despite its bloody worship of martyrdom and the stories of Jesus's gentle heroism.

In synthesis, Bataille's Dionysian challenge consists in finding means through which sovereign violence may find a role to play in a world that the once promising dream of Catholicism has gradually handed over to Liberal power. This concern with religious subversion, which is directly tied to the *viral* objective of his project, may be further evinced from Bataille's insistence on the dual nature of modern societies. That is, he insisted on their hosting within their outwardly benevolent, humane structure of "human" rights and "democratic," civilized deportment an utterly alien core of brutality, turpitude, and hate. Bataille recognized the epitome of this spiritual schizophrenia in the cliché of the family man: an angel of gentility by day, and a fiend wallowing in debauch by night—a "civilized barbarian."¹⁰⁴ A description applicable, by the bye, to Bataille himself, and Sade, of course. The lasting testament of Sade, for Bataille, is to have reminded the world that violence was the aboriginal affair of humanity, and that from the moment that men ceased to voice this sovereign desire to *destroy* they began to live *mendaciously*; Sade uncovered the lie.¹⁰⁵ He uncovered the fact that "human life is made of two heterogeneous parts that never join. One of

reason, whose sense is given by useful ends [...]: it is this part that appears to the conscience. The other is sovereign: on the occasion, it takes shape as a perturbation of the former, it is obscure, or rather if it is luminous, it blinds; it thus evades conscious perception by all means.”¹⁰⁶

So, once the origin of the desire to transgress (as well as to rape, ejaculate “sovereignly,” kill, sacrifice, and destroy) has been found in a substratum of base and monstrous matter revealed to the conscience by the inner experience, what remains to be done is to voice this call from the darkness, *not* as the proud cry of a Liberal libertine soloist —as Sade had done— but as the impersonal tongue spoken by a community of beings united by the selfsame spiritual, Dionysian communion under the sign of transgression.

The sacred [...] is essentially communication, it is contagion. There is sacredness when, at a given moment, something is being unleashed which should absolutely be stopped but cannot be, and which is going to destroy —something which risks of troubling the constituted order [...]. Profanity, it seems to me, corresponds exactly to reason [...]; and reason is essentially the account that introduces the notion of equality.¹⁰⁷

“Being,” Bataille specified, “is never *I alone*, it is always *I and my fellow creatures*.”¹⁰⁸

The emblem and symbol of Bataille’s sovereign eroticism is the knight of the French renaissance Gilles de Rais (1404–1440). Gilles De Rais, Lord of Machecoul, is an historical personage: the martial prowess of this nobleman was so extraordinary that by age twenty-five, he had returned to his castle acclaimed as a glorious *maréchal de France* after having liberated the city of Orléans with his companion-in-arms,

Joan of Arc. Upon his elevation, observed Bataille, he appeared headed toward an “incomparable destiny.”¹⁰⁹ But, then, inexplicably, he went astray. Possibly the wilderness of war had taken on him a terrible vengeance. Suddenly de Rais found himself burning with the “necessity to shine.” It overtook him like “vertigo”: “he [could not] resist the impulse to dazzle, he [had to] subvert by way of an incomparable splendor.”¹¹⁰ He began to lavish his immense fortune, without rhyme or reason, doggedly, chasing as it were his own complete ruin.”¹¹¹ “Capable of vile cruelties,” which he learnt to inflict well in the carnage of war, he was “incapable of calculation.”¹¹² To an admiring Bataille, Gilles de Rais was the purest expression of sovereignty, of sacrality. He squandered, he did not reckon or thrive. In everything he would do, Gilles de Rais abjured Reason, which, in Bataille’s inverted system of worship, is *profanity*. “The realm of *reason*,” he wrote, is the realm of “the *identity* of *things*, of duration, of calculation,”¹¹³ whereas sovereign captains are born to unreason, to decumulate, to burn, fast, in a timeless bout of fury and disappear in the blaze. While blasting his riches as the most munificent of chieftains, Gilles de Rais began, with the complicity of a handful of loyal retainers, to kidnap village boys, whom he would kill, dismember, and decapitate after having tortured and raped them.

Doubtless [Gilles de Rais] sat on the stomach of the victim, masturbating, and dispersed on the moribund the semen of life; what mattered to him was less the sexual enjoyment than witnessing death at work (*la mort à l'oeuvre*). He loved to watch: he had the bodies opened, a throat slit, the limbs dissevered, he loved to see blood.¹¹⁴

Swine-drunk and armed with a “glaive vulgarly named Braquemard,” Gilles incised the vein in the neck of his preys, and relishing the violence of the squirting blood, he strove to mesh the ejaculation with the death spasms of the boys. The heads he would sever from the trunks, and elect “the most beautiful” of such skulls, which he would kiss. Thereafter, nonplussed, drained by the night of abandon, the sire of Rais collapsed to the floor. “The servants tidied up the halls, washed off the blood, and while the master slept, they burnt the bodies in the fireside.”¹¹⁵ Because he antagonized a powerful notable of the Church, and because

the (true) rumor spread in the county that he had been strenuously attempting to conjure up Satan—who did not bother, however, to manifest himself to the devout Gilles—he came under the scrutiny of the feudal judicature. De Rais was tried and condemned rather for these two offenses than for the sexual murders, whose authorship and details did indeed surface during the proceedings of the trial. Overcome with grief, Gilles de Rais thrust himself at the mercy of the authorities imploring as well the forgiveness of the mob. In delirious sessions of guilty cries, tears, and the fascinated commiseration of the villagers, this very plebs—deeply moved and inclining toward its sympathetic affinity for the criminal—granted to Gilles a symbolic acquittance, as if passing judgment in its own proletarian tribunal. Gilles de Rais was burnt at the stake at age thirty-five.

Two years before his death, Bataille could perfectly encase this exceptional episode within the innovative architecture of his “theopathy.” First, Bataille saw a confirmation of his theory

in the singular and chance manifestation of these “dominating, seductive forces,” whose “nobility possesses the sense of a violence” that knows no bounds.¹¹⁶ This force is a reflection of that peculiar virtue, which in French goes under the name of *désinvolture*. Its English translation, “off-handedness” (“ease” or “coolness”), doesn’t quite capture the quality of this sovereign attitude.

This man is threatened by a rapid ruin, ceaselessly does he hover on the verge of remorse, he walks over the abyss: he deports himself nonetheless with ease (*il n’en a pas moins ce mouvement désinvolté*), availing himself of this incongruous confidence, which renders catastrophe inevitable.¹¹⁷

Ernst Jünger —whom Bataille admired, and whose religious outlook is, indeed, remarkably similar to his (Jünger’s opus will be dealt with in chapter 8)—froze the mood in an axiom: “*désinvolture* is the innocence of power —It is a countenance of the higher nature, adorning the free man, who, unfettered, shifts around in the costume God has rented him out.”¹¹⁸

Second, Bataille acknowledged with silent approval the overall sovereign *Zeitgeist* of the feudal, premodern era: of an epoch, that is, that found far more to reprobate in the evocation of the Devil, or, worse, in the affront of a sovereign prince of the Church, than in the orgiastic butchery of a score of ragtag adolescents (of what worth were these, wonders Bataille’s biographer, “compared with the impressive fortune of the Lord of Machecoul?”).¹¹⁹

The human kind was in the eyes of Gilles but an element of voluptuous trouble.¹²⁰

Third, the striking savagery of the populace, which was found cheering for the monster, is a phenomenon, Bataille remarked, *not at all* aberrant or “contrary to Christianity of the truest sort, which itself has always been a terrifying cult!” Indeed, Bataille insisted, religion has been for most of its life violence and blood, and, as a rule, the loose body of the believers has never been truly afraid of disorders as troubling as those incarnated by the likes of Gilles de Rais. Bataille mused: “Perhaps, deep down, couldn’t Christianity be the exigency of crime, the exigency of a horror, which, in a sense, it needs in order to be its forgiveness? [...] Without the extreme violence that is offered to us in the crimes of a sire de Rais, could we understand Christianity?”¹²¹

Fourth and last, the economics of crime: as Bataille noted, “the decline of Gilles de Rais” featured “certain aspects of funereal magnificence. This thug,” Bataille continued, “who missed the game of war, found himself needful of a compensation. He seemed to have found it in the game of ostentatious expenditure.”¹²² For to squander and wield power with innocence—that is, impunity—is the sovereign privilege of the *désinvolte* knight: it is thus he, and he alone, that makes war; consequently, it is everybody else’s duty to forage these lords with the food and cuirasses they need for the holocaust to be consummated. In brief, the unprivileged, propertyless masses *work and are cannibalized* while the debauched paladins squander.¹²³ Nowadays, it takes indeed an institutional machine of formidable complexity to sustain likewise the madness of techno-wars: our very own Liberal *economy*.

Bataille’s fundamental reflection on “ostentatious

expenditure” affords his entire vision a connection to the fundamental question of political economy, which investigates what uses a society makes of its surplus. This is the theme of the next section. In this instance, Bataille correctly understood that the holocaust and the realm of the profane (sacrality, to him) of war, prostitution, the maldistributed property of oligarchic regimes and seigniorial extravagances are all economic manifestations observable within communities pervaded by the same spiritual makeup: that is, by a sovereign, *barbarous animus*. In this sense, Bataille effected a significant methodological shift vis-à-vis the conventional approach of the social sciences. He showed that it is only by conducting a preliminary analysis of a society’s religious foundations that a realistic account of its economics may be provided.

Three are the spheres of social activity: the spiritual, the economic, and the political; now that the first (the spirituality of worship and eroticism) has been detailed, there remains to see how Bataille gave expression to his peculiar conception of “community” through economic and political organization. To these two domains of collective action the following sections are respectively devoted.

5.4. Expenditure

Bataille once described his thinking “as a prostitute undressing.”¹²⁴ The prostitute is the metaphorical crossroads of Bataille’s project, it is the busy intersection of his recurrent thoughts on forfeiture. The prostitute is a first emanation of erotic power, but of an eroticism that vests itself of economic valence: the pleasure is to be purchased. Prostitution works to

erase the mutual and *exclusive* attraction between subjects, which according to the orthodox commandment, is the precondition leading to the bond of matrimony, conjugal passion (Inshallah), and procreation. “If the need to love and of losing oneself is stronger than the worry to find each other,” Bataille argued, “there is no other issue than laceration, and the perversions of tumultuous passion.” For he thought that “lovers seek an annihilation without measure in a violent expenditure in which the possession of a new woman or a new man is but the pretext for an expenditure even more annihilating.”¹²⁵

The “notion of expenditure” (*dépense*) is one of Bataille’s most famous constructs. It is the direct application of his conception of erotic activity to the field of economics. And it begins with a direct attack upon the utilitarian principles of Liberal economics. Bataille takes exception, and rightly so, to modern economics’ persevering refusal to acknowledge the fundamental role that *dissipation* plays in economic activity. In principle, Liberal economists conceive the economic sphere as one consisting of investment, production, and consumption. All their pseudo-theorems (the mathematized State catechism known as “microeconomics”) are devised to justify governmental policy and rationalize the prevailing distribution of wealth, which, notoriously, is always skewed, more or less obscenely, in favor of the elite —that restricted nucleus of financial, bureaucratic, and military interests commanding a vastly disproportionate share of a nation’s wealth. In the political economists’ theological representation of the self-regulating market system, poverty is regarded as an

epiphenomenon, and taxes are accounted as something of a nuisance with no significant impact on welfare, other than providing for the State's basic commodities (laws, security, and defense).

There exists another tradition of political economy, rooted in anthropological analysis and featuring some of the most insightful observers of modernity (e.g., Thorstein Veblen, Marcel Mauss, Karl Polanyi, and Rudolf Steiner), which analyzes economics from a vantage point that is the obverse of that of classical Liberal economics. Instead of considering economics, as the Liberals do, the problem of managing efficiently *resources that are assumed to be scarce*, the other school—let us call it “the political economy of the Gift”—observes that resources are not scarce but bountiful, and that the economic problem arising from such abundance (i.e., the surplus), *is how best to employ this miraculous gift*—the joint bounty of Nature and human ingenuity. The economics of Bataille represents, in a sense, the cursed complement to the economy of the Gift. Unlike the other exponents of this school, whose approach he nonetheless shared, Bataille was not interested in the *benevolent* uses of the surplus, but rather in its employment within those communities that happened to find themselves under the spiritual drift of violent Dionysian worship. Barbarous civilizations, of the flamboyant sort, have made singular use of their surpluses, indeed: they have *squandered* unspeakable amounts of resources in pageantry, sacrifice, monumental splendor, and war. It is this aspect of the gift economy that enthralled Bataille: the financing of sovereign waste and religious rage—this aspect alone; not the

wholesome gifting to the arts and sciences, and least of all the Liberals' utilitarian preoccupation with thrift and capital accumulation, which he loathed as "a miserable conception."¹²⁶ What Bataille found truly extraordinary in the process of economic creation is not the accumulation and the immense technological resources that have been immobilized for the sake of production so much as the *uses* that are made of this production in excess. And, clearly, this is a problem of metaphysical magnitude: the distribution of the excess reveals the "soul" of the community under observation.

All in all, a society always produces more than is necessary to its sustenance, it disposes of an excess. It is precisely the usage it makes of [such an excess] that determines [its physiognomy]: the surplus is the cause of the agitation, of the structural changes of so much history. And growth itself has many forms each of which, in the long term, hits upon some limit. Contrasted, demographic growth turns military [...]: having reached the military limit, the surplus assumes the sumptuary forms of religion, from which derive games and spectacles, or the personal [ostentation] of luxury.¹²⁷

Through the allocation of the surplus (be it to war, instruction, sanitation, art, etc.), one may detect whether a given collectivity prays to Aztec divinities, Apollonian ones, an uncouth mix of both, other deities, or none at all: this is a fascinating and difficult investigation, which, despite the censorship imposed by the Liberal school of political economy against opposing views, has yielded some remarkable studies, including Bataille's, and which presently stands as possibly the only truthful, interdisciplinary, and insightful kind of economic analysis.

What is, then, “expenditure?” “Luxury,” replied Bataille, “mourning, wars, cults, monumental and sumptuary construction, games, spectacles, the arts and perverse sexual activity (that is to say diverted from procreative finality) represent as many activities that [...] have their end in themselves.” Decorative extravagance, the jewelry and gaudy apparel of prostitutes, and sodomy are all forms of dissipate expense expecting no counterpart. “All production of sacred things [i.e., sacrifice] —demands a bloody squander of men and beasts.”¹²⁸ This is Bataille’s notion of “creation by way of loss”: in essence, an earmarking of human, earthly, and animal life for the celebration of the monstrous and obscene archons. What of misery, poverty?

...The poor you will always have with you...

Why, Bataille legitimately wondered, wasn’t the surplus throughout the ages systematically devoted to fixing distributional imbalances? Why was there always in man’s world tremendous waste existing side by side with utter wretchedness? The answer, said Bataille, is to be found again in the human collective’s archetypal propensity to squander sovereignly —for show, ostentation, rank, pleasure, hate, or whim. No matter how much the sight of misery might offend our sensitivities, the urge to blast resources in the air, giving in to our erotic disposition, appears to have been always, historically, the stronger impulse —in truth, we happened to have lived hitherto like the monsters of Sade’s novels.¹²⁹

Matthew, 26:11; Mark, 14:7; John, 12:8.

There are cathedrals in the desert, skyscrapers in the ghettos, and mass sacrifices in times of “peace”: Bataille’s argument appears unassailable. Specifically, his inspiration for these economic reflections was Marcel Mauss’s famous 1925 *Essai sur le don* (published in English as *The Gift*), in which the French anthropologist dwelt on the power of unrequited donation. Munificence, as Mauss observed, gave rise to the so-called economics of the potlatch, which governed, in two notable instances, the practices of the Pacific islanders and of America’s natives. Mauss followed the tokens of gifting, as they circulated among the sister tribes in its pristine form, spurring growth and strengthening goodwill along the chain of exchange. Liberal textbooks always begin by teaching that modern monetary regimes were preceded by a barter economy. But that is false. Mauss showed how by an act of donation made by one tribal chieftain to another, and passed on from the latter to yet another neighbor, a web of promises came to link the islands of the archipelago: a circle was formed along which the offering journeyed endlessly effacing as it went the notion of origin or destination, and cementing thereby the communal bond of the participant isles.

The gift did not have to be, and should not have been, mutual; it had to be given away, and in time, through the circle, it would have assuredly returned in other form, often greatly magnified by a game of emulation, which triggered a dynamic of munificent growth. The gift is the sacred manifestation of economic exchange and, as such, Mauss revered it as the vestigial analogue of the Greek, Apollonian “liturgy” (*leitourgía*: the obligation of the rich to fund the *polis*’s

arts and defense), the Buddhist and Christian alms, the Jubilee of the Old Testament, and the Islamic *zaqat* (one of the five pillars of the faith). As religious offering, contribution to science, and streamlining of excessive wealth concentration, the gift, by perpetuating the life of the all communities, renews the life of our race.

Of the stories told by Mauss, Bataille lingered exclusively on the perverse variants of the gifting cycle. He relished those accounts of clan leaders competing with one another in an orgy of squander of life and wealth to affirm their *status*. As always, Bataille was concerned with the realm of the chthonic, not that of the Apollonian gods, whose taboos he urged to transgress. His objective in this regard was twofold: to prove that the excess exhausts itself on a one-way street, and to undermine the traditional conception that the surplus regenerates itself virtuously along a circular process of gifting. For the religious feeling, be it Apollonian or Dionysian, Bataille stated that “every creation springs from abundance.” “The Gods create out of an excess of power, an overflow of energy. Creation is accompanied by a surplus of ontological Bataille substance.”¹³⁰

What to do with this overflow of Being? “The ultimate question for man,” according to Bataille, was the following: “Being is an effect constantly solicited in two directions: one leads to the formation of durable ordinances and of conquering forces; the other leads by means of the expenditure of force and excess to destruction and death.”¹³¹ In this dichotomy we find the standard Bataillean schema positing the “true” sacred Dionysian-Aphrodisitic forces of dissipation vis-

à-vis the profane power of discourse and accumulation (the God of the Christians and the middle-class regime of reason). The latter is the world of utility, and *work*, the former is the sovereign sphere of idleness, war, eroticism, leisure, and sacrifice. The leisure, which affords prostitution, is not the same thing as beauty; often beauty coexists with work, ugliness with leisure. But never is work propitious to beauty, whose very meaning is to escape from overwhelming constraints. A beautiful body, a beautiful face have the sense of beauty if the utility which they represent has in no manner altered them, if they cannot warrant the idea of an existence devoted to *serving*.¹³²

In his commentary on the trial of Gilles de Rais, Bataille had similarly argued that “for the majority of mankind it is necessary to work, so as to allow the privileged ones to play, even to play, sometimes, the game of killing one another.”

The sweat pouring down the brow of the masses is in the eyes of the sovereign individual but the effort preceding *play*. “We tend to forget this often,” Bataille pressed on, “but the principle of nobility itself, what it is in its essence, is the refusal to suffer the degradation, the forfeiture, which is the inevitable effect of [manual] work! In a fundamental manner, for the society of yesteryear, work is shameful.”¹³³

A quarter of a century before the publication of Mauss’s essay, Thorstein Veblen had already fully developed in his masterpiece *The Theory of the Leisure Class* the late Bataillean notion of “*dépense*,” by offering a detailed description of “wasteful expenditure” (or “conspicuous consumption”) under

the influence of what the Norwegian-American social scientist called the *barbarian spirit*.

But the French, then, did not read English.

As known, Veblen imputed all noxious waste, war, games, spectacles, rituals of brutal overbearance, outlandish luxurious dissipation, and seemingly inexplicable, absurd fashion styles to the survival of archaic, that is, barbarous traits in a modern machine-driven society.¹³⁴ More than thirty years before Bataille, Veblen had written about the decisive transition from the Demetrian tutelary stage of husbandry and tillage to the masculine “predatory culture” of war and its economic pendant, slavery. What factors had been responsible for this particular transition, Veblen, and even Bataille, did not precisely know, though both authors averred that the shift has signaled a “spiritual difference.”¹³⁵ “Until the advent of war and slavery,” Bataille wrote, “the embryonic civilization rested upon the activity of freemen, essentially equal. But slavery was born of war.”¹³⁶ Likewise, Veblen spoke in connection to this age of “primitive technology” of “masterless men” and “group solidarity.”¹³⁷ But with the coming of the predatory warriors, labor had become “irksome.”¹³⁸

Then modern man entered the stage. Veblen portrayed him as a refined toolmaker, who transferred his archaic, emulative bent—including the propensity to fight and kill—to the acquisition of wealth, an excess of which, thanks to the technological shift, was presently available for the taking. Bataille, on the other hand, tinting the account with his customary morosity, narrated that man, “by abandoning his original simplicity, chose the doomed path of war.” From war

was issued slavery, which eventually begot prostitution.¹³⁹ Both authors agreed that the primal drive of man in a social environment is his *desire for standing, for status*. This is a corroborated finding of anthropological investigation and it lies at the foundation of the political economy of the gift.

Karl Polanyi gave it a definitive formulation in his classic, *The Great Transformation* (1944). Unlike the biased myths of Liberalism—which were first articulated by thinkers such as Adam Smith, Hobbes, and Rousseau—the political economy of the Gift rests, instead, on the fundamental and *realistic* assumption that the first element of collective interaction is *the individual's the yearning for recognition*. The savage state of society, Polanyi objected, was characterized by neither the pursuit of self-interest nor benevolent communism, nor the state of war of man against man.¹⁴⁰

A Russian Hegelian named Alexander Kojève shared this conviction as well. He had moved from analogous premises in order to craft a singular interpretation of German idealism. This Russian émigré would make a name for himself in the intellectual Paris of the Thirties, where his courses on Hegel at the Sorbonne came to be attended by a devout coterie, which included Bataille himself. Kojève's work would also become a fount of inspiration to a fringe of *conservative* scholars headed in America by another émigré, Leo Strauss. This interesting junction would give rise to a whole different filiation in the field of postmodernism. As a further installment of our story, it will be dealt with in a separate chapter (chapter 8).

When *squander* is the theme being broached, it is inevitably of *gods* that one will soon have to speak. A Demetrian —

egalitarian, feminist, and collectivist—yet afflicted by a disdain for jocose animism and a passion for machines, Veblen could not but employ terms such as “spirit” or “genius” when it came to identifying the prime engines of these squandering moods. Interestingly, he, like

Bataille, had no liking whatever for the “vengeful God of the Book” (e.g., Jehovah or Allah), which he classified with no afterthought as one the highest and most repulsive forms of barbarism. However, if exposed to the anatomical mysteries of Dionysism, and of Bataille’s and Sade’s sovereign principle, Veblen would have in all likelihood found himself speechless. This son of immigrant Scandinavians believed passionately in the ethic of workmanship, in the elegance and truth of science, in aesthetic linearity, and in “the fulness of life.” To him, more than distasteful, Bataille would have been unfathomable. Veblen was the most insightful social scientist of the modern era (he will resurface in chapters 7 and 9), but, like all Victorians, he did not believe in the Devil: Satan and the

White Goddess could only have been the primitive expression of superstitious, “inchoate animism.”

As we saw and shall have occasion to reiterate, Bataille did not acknowledge the existence of barbarian gods but only of Dionysian power on the one hand, and of a modern degenerate, rational usurpation of this *primordial, wild power* on the other. Sovereignty *is* barbarism. When a whole civilization is constructed on the basis of such usurpation of “primordial power,” the result, so thought Bataille, *is the foundation of modern society itself*: God and bureaucracy are shoved together into this category. Because Veblen waged his

scholarly battle in the name of universal cooperativeness, workmanship, science, peace, and the conservation of life, his vision is irreconcilable with that of Bataille; however, one could still say that Bataille completed the Veblenian investigation by fashioning the economics of the monstrous archons, which Veblen, out of materialist superstition, had altogether ignored. In this sense, Bataille is Veblen's sinister double.

"The gift," Bataille wrote, "is not the only form of potlatch. It is equally possible to defy rivals through spectacular destruction of wealth. It is by the intermediary of this latter form that the potlatch rejoins religious sacrifice, the acts of destruction being theoretically offered to the mythical ancestors of the beneficiaries." From Mauss's book Bataille quoted in this connection the example of a chief who, as a savage display of one-upmanship, summoned several slaves from his train and paid homage to a peer by slashing their throats before him.¹⁴¹ Bataille seemed to find this "offering" far more significant than the chain of gifting per se, and it brought him to *redefine* the matter entirely.

The gift must be considered a loss and thus as a partial destruction: the desire to destroy being in part carried over onto the beneficiary. In the unconscious forms, such as psychoanalysis describes them, it symbolizes excretion, which itself is tied to death, in accordance with the fundamental connection of anal eroticism and sadism.¹⁴²

By now Bataille's method is transparent: it consists in tackling traditional sacred symbols, one by one, defiling them, creating new meaning therefor, and finally proceeding to

discard them as the profanities of the philistines' "universal pettiness," thus mixing up deliberately, once again, middle-class feeling with traditional religiousness.¹⁴³

Eventually, Bataille would develop the notion of expenditure into the more elaborate theory of the "Accursed Share" (*La part maudite*). In this later, important work, which he considered his most accomplished, he expanded the general idea of dissipation within an articulate description of the power structure involved.

First of all, he distinguished between *heterogeneous* and *homogeneous* behavior. The "heterogeneous" —another concept he borrowed from Sade— is but a synonym of "sovereign": it is the religious acceptance of man's composite, dual nature (sweet, and yet, savage), as well as a proud reconciliation with this spiritual schizophrenia, which is finally upheld and cherished as a fount of inhuman strength. Thus understood, the warrior society of the Aztecs, with its religious performance of the holocaust, is a pure instance of a heterogeneous regime.

In contradistinction to the latter stands the "homogeneous" society: that is, the contemporary social organization of the bourgeoisie, with its "ghastly hypocrisy"¹⁴⁴ and "greed," whose overarching sentiment is an all-consuming "fear of death."¹⁴⁵ Homogeneity is a *caption for a new spiritual force*: in the theory of Bataille it marks the advent of the new mechanical epoch.

The basis of social homogeneity is production. *Homogeneous* society is productive society, that is to say, utilitarian society. All useless implements are excluded, not from society as a whole, but from its *homogeneous* component.¹⁴⁶

Reign of Discursive Terror

Bataille did say it: modernity was built with slave labor. Therefore, production, along with its attendant submenus (saving and investment), is the preoccupation proper of the slave, never of the warrior. It is the former that sweats for the latter. It follows that, today, the mentality of the thrifty, middle class is a servile one.

Industrial wealth, which is presently enjoyed by the world, is the outcome of the millenary toil of the enslaved masses, of the unhappy multitudes.¹⁴⁷

It was with glee that Bataille observed capitalism's periodic shows of impotence, as when it is cyclically forced to burn the crop in order to salvage profits. This was to him but the miserable treatment that a homogeneous society has in store for the overflow of nature (*le trop-plein*). There just seems to be *too much* around us, Bataille reasoned; and despite the shameless bonfires of "excess produce," and the dumping of staples to the bottom of the ocean to prop up prices on the marketplace, there is no resisting the damnation, the surplus, the curse of this exceeding quota, which is inevitably funneled toward orgiastic dissipation. Dionysus and Daphoene always take their due. Again, Bataille seemed to intimate, one should surrender to this state of affairs.

Resuming his Aztec romance, Bataille wrote that the overflow of men, beasts, crops, food, and life is the effect of the "radiating sun, which expends without compensation."¹⁴⁸ This is the true gifting, "the incessant prodigality" of the sun: an initial radiation of solar energy requited by sacrifice. No virtuous cycle, no circular, cementing growth comes out of it. For Bataille, the excess can only be suppressed with an effusion of

blood: thus, the Aztecs had to reciprocate the solar donation by liquidating the “excess population.” And so, it generally goes with wars, massacres, and ravages of all kinds. It is in the sad eyes of Bataille the accursed surplus of life that begs, in the final instant, to be annihilated through a blind act of violence. It is an accursed share, a damnation rather than a bounty; it is an excrement, one of those divine secretions that must be hallowed and consumed as an initiatory step in the horrifying cult of the archons.

Bataille acknowledged that we are all deeply frightened by this fateful “movement of dilapidation”; its “consequences are anguishing from the outset,”¹⁴⁹ but there appears to be no escape —no escape from the sacrifice and the suffering. This is the economics of tragedy.

The economic history of modern times is dominated by the epic, but disappointing attempt by ravenous men to wrest from the Earth her wealth. The Earth has been disemboweled, yet from the inside of her stomach, what men have extracted is above all iron and fire, with which they never cease to disembowel one another [...]. The Earth-Mother has remained the old chthonic divinity, but with the human multitudes, she has also brought down the lord in the heavens in a never-ending uproar.¹⁵⁰

Published after World War II, *La part maudite* featured at the end a discussion of the Marshall Plan, which, though cryptic, left no doubt as to the author’s (not so secret) intentions and (perverse) expectations. “This achievement,” he wrote slyly of the Marshall Plan, was tied “to the increase of the level of welfare [and] to an earnest repositioning of social existence

[...]. *Blindly [President] Truman, is today laying the groundwork for the ultimate and secrete apotheosis.*"¹⁵¹

In other words, Bataille feared the gift, but felt no dread whatever for America's 1948 imperial plan to attract a devastated Europe in her orbit by way of a very self-interested, and rather paltry, gifting plan, which amounted to 2 percent of the American GDP, less than the annual consumption of alcohol in the United States for 1947. Almost delighted, Bataille seemed to have braced himself for the great U.S. imperial ride, "blindly" set in motion by the Liberal President Harry "Giv'em hell" Truman, preparing for the "ultimate secret apotheosis": a promise of unspeakable carnage, which the new means of industrial production and the atom bomb seemed to guarantee, and which the obscene archons would inevitably take as their accursed due. Dionysus loves the Liberal order, after all. Was Bataille hoping then for the final nuclear holocaust? Who knows.

There is something frightening in the destiny of the human being —something that always stood at the limit of this unbounded nightmare, which has been heralded by ever more modern armament, and by the nuclear bomb.¹⁵²

5.5. Power

Violence, disproportion, delirium, madness, characterize by varying degrees the heterogeneous elements: as persons or as crowds, they manifest themselves actively by breaking the laws of social *homogeneity* [...]. *Heterogeneous* reality shocks, with a power unknown and dangerous. It presents itself as a charge, as a value, passing from one object to the other in a more or less arbitrary fashion [...]. While the structure of knowledge

in a homogeneous society takes the form of science, it is easy to notice that the knowledge of a heterogeneous society, instead, will be discovered in the mystical imagination of the primitives and in the representation of the dream: it points to the structure of the unconscious.¹⁵³

This passage adumbrates Bataille's theory of power. A true social science concerns itself with the *collective* dynamics of social aggregates, of groups. From this vantage point, the behavior of individuals is significant so long as it inscribes itself into a *coherent whole*, so long, that is, as one sees in it the singular reflection of a herd mentality. Humans are indeed swayed by forces —of opinion, of religious fervor, of sylvan festivity, of solar euphoria, of martial enthusiasm, and the like. These forces have been far more potent than, *and qualitatively alien from*, the mere instinctual, psychological reflexes that govern our short-range day-to-day activity, and which we think are the alpha and omega of our lifetime's vicissitudes.

There exist sweeping waves of collective organization that set us all in orderly motion with one another, as in a swarm of bees —whose buzzing undulations Bataille addressed¹⁵⁴ —or as in a school of fish.

Is society a Being? Is it an organism? Or is it simply a summation of individuals?¹⁵⁵

As an exoteric front to his secretive brotherhood of the *Acépahle*, Bataille conceived the creation of a scholarly outfit comprising a team of researchers and literati, whose task would be to investigate the theme of social collective movement.¹⁵⁶ He named the enterprise the *Collège of Sociologie*; its curriculum would span a series of seminars to be

hosted in a variety of Parisian venues between 1937 and 1939. The programmatic lectures drafted by Bataille for the occasion contain the near totality of his powerful and bewitching *sociologie sacrée*.

Sacred sociology may be considered as the study not only of religious institutions but of the totality of the communal movement of society.¹⁵⁷

As detailed in the previous section, Bataille distinguished two chief macro-forces of collective (social) behavior animating the world today: heterogeneity and homogeneity. The former is the power of the inner experience and of communion with “evil,” whereas the latter is the dour sphere of rational production and prohibition. A tug-of-war ensues between the two. “The heterogeneous thing,” Bataille warned, is “charged with a force unknown and dangerous.”¹⁵⁸ Imagine then heterogeneity as a warm undercurrent, which, circulating through a system of metal pipes, periodically builds up enough pressure to jet out of the joints by rupturing them. The image further suggests that this soupy, heterogeneous current might have a subversive goal. That, indeed, of corroding the pipes so thoroughly that, by gushing out with violence, the sacred fluid might end up flooding the entire system.

The unleashing of the passions is the only good [...]. From the moment that reason is no longer divine, from the moment that there is no god, [there] is no longer anything in us that deserves to be called good, if not the unleashing of the passions.¹⁵⁹

The undercurrent is “the unleashing of the passions” under the sacred suggestion of the archons; to Bataille, *they* are the only gods left, and it is our duty to clear them through the rusted walkways of our oppressive, middle-class maze.

How is one to corrode the pipes, break the homogeneous laws and unleash the sacred rage?

By means of the “project,” the words, and laughter.

The whole of existence, as far as men are concerned, is in particular tied to language [...]. Being in its [private existence] can be mediated only by words, which can yield it as “autonomous being” only arbitrarily, but profoundly as “being in relation with.”¹⁶⁰

For Bataille, no one speaks for himself; humans are wounded valves, scarred release points through which flows the sacred energy of violence. The words, however, may be ordered to form a language, which can become a common idiom for all. And speaking this peculiar idiom, the individual would realize that he is but a “particle inserted within sets, unstable and tangled.”¹⁶¹ To know oneself, according to Bataille, is to lose oneself into the knowledge of others: one precipitates into a “*labyrinth* formed by a multitude of knowledges (*connaissances*) with which expressions of life and phrases may be exchanged.” In the labyrinth man is a “satellite,” a “peripheral element gravitating round a *core* where Being hardens.”¹⁶² Concrete instances of the peculiar vernacular that is spoken in the “labyrinth” may be gleaned from Bataille’s poetic output, in all those bits of delirious prose where boundaries are erased and deliquescent imagery is indulged, and in the Sadean exercises of articulating turpitude. It seems that Bataille was inviting the

reader to try his hand at embracing the horror by jotting it down, speaking it, much as one learns a new foreign language. Foucault would achieve superlative fluency in this field. It is also an invitation to share among peers similar experiences in which all sense of self has disappeared into something alien: into that very world of the sacred impure that Bataille himself has attempted to fathom in his entire production.

I write to erase my name.¹⁶³

Of fundamental importance is the mention of the “core” (*le noyau*). The “core,” or “social core,” is “a set of objects, places, creeds, persons and practices having a sacred character,” which belongs to a peculiar group of individuals and no other. “The social core is, in effect, taboo: untouchable and unnamable; it partakes from the outset in the nature of cadavers, of menstrual blood or of the pariahs.”¹⁶⁴ So Bataille suggested that there exist *primordial* creeds—he said so explicitly in connection with heterogeneity—of an infernal (degenerate) nature, cults of death that are animated by a core: it is the correct chanting of these particular prayers and mantras by particular people in particular places that set in motion these great waves of collective participation. They issue from this kernel. The latter projects bizarre geometrical nests, such as this “labyrinth of ‘knowledges’” within which the believers gather, losing themselves and sharing, as a result, one common lore that mediates by means of words the variety of inner experiences contributed by the participants. Bataille took the core as a given: it is there always; from the moment that two beings enter into its “terrifying” orbit, their mutual relationship will find itself greatly altered, and perennially filtered by the energy

emanating from the core.¹⁶⁵ The core exerts a double movement of attraction and repulsion, “which maintains [the] unanimous adhesion [of the believers] at a respectful distance.” Communion is achieved through the spiraling motion of a “peripheral laughter, excited by the continual emissions of specific energy, of sacred forces, which are issued from [this] central core.”¹⁶⁶ The phenomenon described by Bataille is not unknown to modern individuals; they frequently experience a faint echo of these powers of sacred radiation, as when, finding themselves exposed to strong, “graphic” images (be it pornography, slasher movies, or death on the screen), they often react by *laughing* —they laugh to deflect, at first, the gripping yet vertiginous pull that those images exert upon them.

This, in embryo, is a discursive account of the liturgy necessarily active behind all “tragic” rituals and ceremonies consummated in honor of deities that demand bloodshed in the form of a taboo-breaking crime.¹⁶⁷ “Blood,” said Ernst Jünger, “has its own laws. It is untamable as the sea.”¹⁶⁸ Ancient sovereign empires might have disappeared but Bataille still believed that for man nothing was more important than “to recognize himself tied to what horrifies him the most”¹⁶⁹ —one way or another these heterogeneous prayers had to be re-evoked. As he journeyed through the past to survey the evolution of this “core,” Bataille considered that if “an agglomeration is characterized by centrality, as in the primitive and feudal societies, it still features a movement towards concentration of power, [which is itself] tied to the movement that revolves round sacred things [...]. It is power

that creates the force of the police and not the police that creates power.”¹⁷⁰

Bataille was conceivably much attracted to warrior societies; not just the Aztecs or the cannibals of Melanesia but also, and especially, the fastuous cavaliers of the Christian Middle Ages. Medieval Europe, with its separate agglomerations of sacred and military power, and its devotion to the sword, shone like the fieriest of rubies in the great book of sovereign history.

But it was already a decadent phase of that history; the sun was setting over Gilles de Rais. In these societies “the core” may be observed in its integrity: it is solidly, roundly held in the hands of a caste of priests-warriors. Military might and religious might are united to create a stable configuration of *power*: power coalesces when religious and military authority coincide in the body of a single leader, who wields them, in sovereign fashion, over, if not against, the heads of the people.¹⁷¹

Then, something of extraordinary momentum came to pass: “To this hard core of power was added a formation, which derives from it, but which remains exterior to it.” This alien “formation” has been capable of siphoning off the core all the energy it needs to engage in its operations *outside* the sphere of the core.

This usurpation, “this fatal alteration of the collective movement” as Bataille characterized it, has given power its new, and nowadays preeminent, form. Between “the creative agitation of the sacred forms” and this new protagonist, there suddenly arose a confrontation: the sacred felt “a profound aversion” for everything that this novel political reality was

absorbing within itself “for the sake of *conservation*.”¹⁷² In other terms, there came a point in history when the old sovereign empires came to suffer the birth and encroachment of the modern States. The modern State came to rule through laws that were not those of erotic splendor, but of thrift and capitalistic accumulation. The “bourgeois” ethos, unlike the sovereign one, sought to *conserve* rather than dilapidate.

This was, in brief, Bataille’s prologue to a general theory of the rise of modernity. He eventually came to define “power” what Weber, for instance, identified as the “spirit of capitalism” or “bureaucratic, instrumental rationality,”¹⁷³ Veblen as the “the machine process,”¹⁷⁴ Steiner as the “Ahrimanic spirit,”¹⁷⁵ Marx as “Capital,” Polanyi as “the great transformation,” Sombart as “the bourgeois spirit,”¹⁷⁶ Jünger and Heidegger as “nihilism” (see chapter 8), and Guénon (whose account is curiously closest to that of Bataille) as “temporal power” or “the reign of quantity.”¹⁷⁷

The rise of “the Mechanical Age” is the great divide in the collective memory of the Western culture. In the last one hundred and fifty years the West has indeed been subjected to

* For Guénon, the royalty, “in order to ‘centralize’ and to absorb in itself the powers that belong collectively to all the nobility, enters into a struggle with the nobility and works relentlessly toward the destruction of the very feudal system from which it had itself issued. It can do so, moreover, only by relying on the support of the third estate [...]. The very phrase “State religion” is a deliberate equivocation signifying fundamentally nothing else than that religion is used by temporal power to ensure its own domination; it is religion reduced to no more than a factor of the social order” [René Guénon, *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power*, Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 1929, pp. 59, 61].

Reign of Discursive Terror

a wholesale mechanization, not just of its economic metabolism, but of its collective mind as well—all is number, rules, discipline, steel and glass, cost & benefit, time & money, routine, and schedule. The lifeblood of humans has been trapped in a grid. For Bataille, “power,” was thus this “fatal alteration of the collective movement,” which had crowded the warrior-kings out of the core with an administrative machine.

Likely, power is the institutional union of the sacred force and of military might (*puissance*) in a single person, who wields them to his personal advantage and thereby to the exclusive advantage of the institution.¹⁷⁸

Power, in other words, is the institutional (and historical) outcome of a process of appropriation, or better, of usurpation: the sovereign temples of the Elders were ransacked, and the sacred force, which they guarded, was first diverted by the kings of the medieval era, before finding itself entrapped and hardened into the steel apparatus of the modern-day bureaucracy. In the Middle Ages, this duality found expression in the notions of “*spiritual power*” and “*secular power*.” According to Bataille, the disquietude engendered by this separation gave way to an obsessive representation of the sacrifice of the king, which may be witnessed in the quasi-industrial production by Catholic workshops of crucifixes and portrayals of the anointed/king (the Christ) slain on the cross.¹⁷⁹ *Heterogeneity itself bifurcated into an ethos of the Master and an ethos of the Slave, and the two were irreconcilable.*

Bataille speculated that if the condition of the slave conforms with the filth in which he is doomed to live, the master acts to

repel the vermin from his sovereign domain. The act of exclusion—which Bataille named “political sovereignty”—“appears first of all as sadistic activity that is clearly differentiated.” In other words, the prince may give vent to his instinctive revulsion for the scum through sadistic acts of cruelty, as in Gilles de Rais’s “orgies of blood,” or he may find sublimated egresses for it: this is how “in a great number of religious attitudes, sadism thus accedes to scintillating purity (*pureté éclatante*).” In general, and as time progressed, “the royal imperative form” chose to compromise by shunning out unclean heterogeneity through homogeneous devices: re-education, lenient sentences, conservation of life in short.¹⁸⁰ And wars of foreign conquest came to be a favorite among all “sublimated egresses.”

It is thus that the destructive passion (sadism) of the imperative instance is, in principle, directed exclusively either against foreign societies (“the foe”), or against the wretched classes, against all the elements, internal and external, that are hostile to *homogeneity*.¹⁸¹

Bataille’s general theory of power may be likened to a social map covered by the complex interplay of three forces: the sovereignty of the pontiffs, the wrath of the rabble, and the emerging, flattening power of homogeneous modernity. Such a model allows one to characterize the evolution of societies from their sacred beginnings to their late institutional arrangements. Arrangements such as those of, say, modern-day Britain, which exhibits vividly the signs of the fatal “alteration” in its passage from kingdom to a Liberal/industrial democracy crowned by the hollowed-out sovereignty of

Reign of Discursive Terror

Buckingham Palace and bottomed by the scum of the hooligans. It is an important theoretical piece also because it affords fascinating connections to America's present War on Terror (see chapters 8 and 9), and especially because this very glimpse of power's evolution is the aperçu that Foucault would steal and pass off as his own.

What is "power" in a modern framework? It is an authoritarian nightmare, such as that dreamt by Dostoyevsky in the tale of Jesus visiting Seville at the time of the Inquisition ("The Grand Inquisitor," in *The Brothers Karamazov*) — in which, the exigencies of crowd control & and public safety compel Church officials to imprison Jesus himself. In life, said Bataille, Power takes the shape of a regime that "attempts to paralyze [the Dionysian frenzy] by conjuring, when threatened by [sacred] crime, the counterthreat of the henchman's axe: *power* is the only force that seeks blindly to eradicate crime from the earth when, in fact, all religious forms are impregnated with it."¹⁸² By striving to wipe religious worship clean of all criminal activity, Bataille argued, power has gradually given way to "rationalism" and lost in the process the solidity of its erstwhile sacred and military authority. Thus, the belligerent, sovereign empires of yore have suffered an alteration, a corruption of their original energy, which has crystallized itself instead into a rigid, icy ministerial organ: *the State*.

The "State" is the profane and "cowardly" tool of the middle-class philistines — the emerging and victorious class of the modern epoch. "Cowardly," for it is "too interested," too avaricious in conserving life to its advantage without having

the courage to look crime, or death, in the eye.¹⁸³ The modern *Liberal* regime has made punishment by death a sterilized feat, which it administers by casting crime and the criminals *out* of the system; likewise, the homogeneous society, as seen, repels from its sanitized apparatus all human excretions and the kindred swarms of trash and vermin. It is incapable of assimilating the heterogeneous, sacred material of the primordial core: “mobs, warrior castes, aristocrats and wretches, the violent ones —madmen, rabble-rousers, poets, etc.”¹⁸⁴ This tumultuous shuffle of religious sentiment, political strife, and spiritual dissension ends up yielding three main human types: it inspired Bataille to paint a triptych featuring: (1) the armed thug (*le butor*); (2) the tragic man; and (3) the man of law and discourse.

The “*butor*” is the modern-day tyrant: a ruffian that solves with violence everything that agitates him by deflecting, diverting it “*outwardly*”; death for him is a form of exterior enjoyment, something reserved for the enemy. The *butor* is the swaggering *condottiere*: from Gilles de Rais to Mussolini. One could then say that, e.g., Lyndon Johnson or George W. Bush (the presiding “kings” of the Vietnam War and 9/11, respectively), on the other hand, are but televised simulacra of such types.

The tragic man is the one, instead, who has reconciled himself with the violence of life; who does not spurn the stench of its decay and the juice of its rottenness. He is the sovereign individual. It is Bataille himself, and Foucault’s idol.

Finally, the man of law and discourse is the middle-class employee of the great industrial complex (corporate or

otherwise). The latter, said Bataille, can easily be hired by the butor, but in no manner can the man of tragedy be made subservient to the tyrant:¹⁸⁵ there thus appears to be a diehard rebel in the skin of every postmodern Bataillean. We may take the liberty to doubt the truthfulness of this presumption. In reality, of all white-collar employees, the man of tragedy seems to be no less pliable to the thug's wishes than the man of discourse. We shall explain why shortly.

This tripartition is not surprising, or original: Bataille had reiterated a truism. As mentioned earlier, all societies, in every epoch and everywhere, consist of but three constituent parts: the State, that is the sphere of rights; the economy; and the spiritual sector, namely, the arts and sciences (i.e., the spiritual sector). Bataille's thug represents the governmental sphere; the man of law and discourse is a creature straddling the bureaucratic and economic domains; and the man of tragedy is Bataille's token representative of the spiritual sphere; he is the contemporary coryphaeus of the ancient chthonic cults. Again, Bataille purposely erased the Apollonian tradition, and thanks to his special treatment of the "fatal alteration" of power, he subsumed *all non-Dionysian traditions* into the rationalistic degeneration of the machine era. Clever. He made a slip, though.

In the late thirties, at the time he was elaborating his sacred sociology, he leaned on his work to sing the praise of (Italian) Fascism.

The Fascist, *heterogeneous*, action belongs to the realm of the superior forms. It appeals to those sentiments traditionally defined as *lofty* and *noble*, and tends to construe authority as an

unconditional principle, situated above all utilitarian judgment.¹⁸⁶

In Fascism Bataille saw a pure expression of heterogeneity. Here was a militarized party, commanded by a sovereign chief (Mussolini the Duce), which, allegedly, had succeeded in rallying the wretched masses —*les classes misérables*¹⁸⁷ and the corporate bosses of the economy (the “homogeneous” element) to a supreme principle of unquestioned authority—the authority that enabled the ruler(s) “to dominate over if not oppress one’s fellow-creatures, by reason of their age, of their physical weakness, etc.” Wasn’t this a genuine embodiment of the “royal” prerogative, “in which are manifest, to the highest degree, the cruel tendencies and the need to idealize order?”¹⁸⁸ These, for Bataille, were all sovereign, positive traits.

To Nazism, on the other hand, he took no liking whatever, though not on account of its martial truculence: that was a trait he approved. It was rather Nazism’s racialism that annoyed Bataille, for he found it devoid of any scientific basis. Moreover, he resented the disparaging remarks about the cult of the Great Mother that Hitler’s chief ideologue of the race, Alfred Rosenberg, made in his *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*.¹⁸⁹ Bataille understood that Rosenberg, despite his high public rank, was indeed peripheral to the sacred custodianship of the Nazi lore, though at the time he obviously failed to notice that this very Nazi lore, in its highest esoteric elaboration, was not at all hostile to the Great Mother and Lucifer the Sun god; if anything, the very opposite was true.¹⁹⁰

Bataille should have exercised more caution. As we shall have occasion to recount the episode in chapter 8, when

Bataille wrote an enthusiastic commentary to Ernst Jünger's apocalyptic, yet lewdly enthralled, depiction of the carnage of the Great War, he came, in fact, to endorse an author that was, even if obliquely, indisputably enveloped in the obnubilating haze of Nazism. Yet this fact should astound no one: if one espouses the cult of blood too strongly and for too long, one will soon reconnect oneself with the lore of all holocaust-practicing regimes, including Nazism. It is inevitable. To back out of this position, which is today unbearably "incorrect," Foucault himself would later have to offer a contorted apology (see following chapter). One way or another, this tryst with fascism is a piece of Bataille that his devoted critics systematically try to ignore, and when they cannot, they gloss over it as swiftly and briefly as they can.

Bataille saw in the progressive mechanization of the modern regimes a complete surrender and disintegration of "the core." Modern States did usurp the sacred energy of the ancient heterogeneous agglomerations, but managed for some time to keep a semblance of the old sacred order by investing, say, the "love for one's country" (*la patrie*) with the solemnity that is typical of ancient sacred power.¹⁹¹ As the technicized bureaucracy rendered progressively all such sentiments obsolete and ultimately incomprehensible, the core became then "*mobile and diffuse, and it is impossible to speak of anything other than a set of places, objects and persons [...]. The diffuse character alters but little in the rhythm of the movement.*"¹⁹² So we return to our metaphor of the viscous undercurrent pressuring to break free from the stricture of the iron maze.

In sum, what is the final engagement in our world? “In the last analysis,” Bataille prophesied, “the *empire* will belong to those whose life will be bursting to a degree such that they will love death.”¹⁹³ These lovers of death, bearers of the chthonic tradition, *are* the diffuse core; they animate its rhythm and form a broth of “knowledges” that circulate in the underground, and whose vitality the “regime of power” vampirizes to survive. The project is to allow the unrestricted circulation of the energy of the core, and see to it that it corrodes the pipes of the disciplinarian grid. One will have to convert, convince those on the outside that they themselves are but the mouthpieces of forces greater than they —convert them to the cult of death, or at the very least to the disbelief in compassionate cooperativeness. There is no place on this earth for *sensiblerie* (sentimentalism); man should stand his sovereign ground like an animal.¹⁹⁴ Whether many or few are gained to the cause, Bataille was assured by the sheer growth of resources produced in an industrial setting, that in one form or another this immense throughput would by itself entice the accursed explosion of protracted and unlimited hecatombs.

By slaughter, and through slaughter, the project could not but be enormously facilitated.

Bataille would have clearly accepted the expostulations of SS Major-General Otto Ohlendorf, the scholarly commander of *Einsatzgruppe D*, who was responsible for the death of 90,000 Jews on the Eastern front. Ohlendorf insisted at his trial that “posterity would be unable to perceive the difference between his mass executions on the Russian Front and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”¹⁹⁵ From a bird’s

eye view, holocaust the one, holocaust the other —it's all the same to Bataille, and, in principle, he wasn't wrong.

If the disasters of Hiroshima are freely envisioned from the standpoint of a sensitivity that may not be duped, they cannot be isolated from the others. The tens of thousands of victims of the atom bomb are on the same plane as the tens of millions that annually Nature offers to Death. One may not deny the differences in age and suffering, but the origin and the condensation are of no consequence to the end-result: the horror is everywhere the same.¹⁹⁶

He concluded and prescribed:

The man of the sovereign sensitivity, staring affliction in the face, does not say rashly: "Let us suppress it, at all costs," but rather, "Let us live it." Let us elevate our daily life to a form attuned to the worst [...]. It is better to live up to the challenge of Hiroshima than it is to whine and to be unable to bear the thought of it.¹⁹⁷

Again, he refused to rebel and embraced the violence forever. A conservative till the end.

All the elements conjured to organize the discussion of the Bataillean system may be grouped graphically in a schema (see figure 5.2).

This is in essence a cycle of economic production, which begins, in abstract, with the surplus. From this point of origin resources transit into the realm of "Sacred Authority."

Divine worship may be divided (node A) either into Apollonian practice (that is, recognizing a transcendent principle of orderly and harmonic beauty, corroborated by a testimony of compassion and pacifism),* or chthonic practice,

* One may include the pacific Demetrian cult in this component.

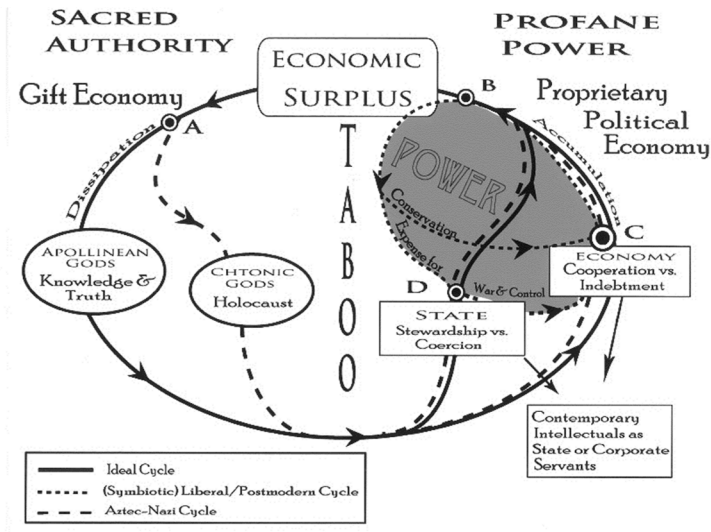


Figure 5.2 A scheme of Bataille's sacred sociology

that is Dionysian–Aphrodisiac cults of violence and holocaust. The offerings to these different, opposed sets of principles are reciprocated in their characteristic forms (bountiful harvests, rain, and knowledge charged of different, opposite valence). This is the movement of dissipation: the offering devoted to the gods.

The required gift flows back into the profane realm of the “Profane (or temporal) Power,” crossing over the barrier of the taboo (the interdiction), which delimits the two worlds. The profane realm is that of accumulation and production. The gift expended for the gods finds its way back into the profane domain by feeding the other two spheres of social activity: the State and the economy. The administration (node D) receives its laws from the priesthood (which resides in the sacred), and

the economy (node C) processes anew the bounties of nature and ingenuity, which also accrue as gifts from the sacred.

Together, State and economy set into motion a new cycle of accumulation, which will expend itself in the way just described.

With the advent of modern times, a subloop (node B) manages to nest into the original system of accumulation by appropriating, or better, by diverting an ever-greater share of the surplus and *conserving* it. This is the modern, proprietary system of absentee ownership, which despises “taxes.” In this case, the gift is made to travel ever more infrequently in the sacred sphere, and is sequestered in a self-feeding cycle of: (1) swelling bureaucratic obtrusiveness and pervasive militarization (“Expenses for War and Control”); and (2) mere oligarchic perpetuation, effected through continuous banking and financial bleeding of the productive body. This subloop inscribes a subsystem (area in gray) within the main cycle, which is “power” in the Bataillean sense. In other words, Power is the new physiognomy of our modern “Liberal democracies.”

Under the aegis of power, the sacred role of the State degenerates from stewardship to coercion, and that of the economy from cooperation to indebtedness (of the weak to the oligarchs). Bataille’s ribald (*le butor*) becomes the leader of the coercive State, and the “man of law and discourse” becomes the corporate officer of the financial economy. The “man of tragedy” would be expected to be seen moving along the main cycle by way of the chthonic offramp, but our contention is that he is rather a “particle” fully immersed in the

Power field, in whose productive capacity and military buildup he foresees ideal scenarios of chaos.

So, in the final analysis, we have three streams: the ideal, Apollonian course, the chthonic course, and the proprietary/Liberal course. The stream that is *institutionally* dead, contrary to what Bataille tendentiously argued, is the cycle of the holocaust. Which does not mean that holocausts no longer happen, or else Bataille would not be in business. But as a sacred cult, the core of the Aztecs and that of like heterogeneous civilizations is extinct.

The proprietary system of absentee ownership is clearly the most vivid reality of the modern world: the Liberal creed that fuels it is based on materialism, a generalized drive to exploit people, resources, and opportunities through rent-extraction aboriginally anchored on money-lending, fierce competitiveness, and the gradual abolition* of gifting, cooperation, and mutual help. It is through and through an anti-cooperative system of thought that is also insidiously sympathetic to violence. Therefore, we realize that the “profound aversion,” which, according to Bataille, Dionysians like himself should putatively conceive for the thrifty bourgeois can only be superficial, if not altogether illusory.

* In its stead we now have *philanthropism*: that hallowed practice whereby those who have managed —by hook or by crook, on the magic and duly (i.e., politically) regulated field of the “free market”— to accumulate, to amass most of the game-board tokens (i.e., the cash), have the opportunity, most graciously to return, i.e., to *donate* (back) to the community some of those tokens, say, for the arts & sciences or projects for “the disadvantaged,” and be wildly huzzaed with eternal gratitude by the community for doing so: donors thus have auditoriums, buildings, even benches (!) named after them.

Reign of Discursive Terror

They might not “like” one another, but both factions ultimately find themselves united against mutualism and pacifism. And the object of such a joint antipathy —the Apollonian cycle— though greatly weakened for internal and external reasons, is still institutionally alive: it lives in all compassionate traditions of the world, and in the hearts of all individuals. Therefore, this potential for positive change may also be realized by clearing one’s mind of all those adversarial and noxious systems of thought, like Bataille’s, that have been assembled, and unscrupulously diffused, to cloud our judgment.

In the graph, we have drawn the streams in such a way as to make the whole argument of Bataille appear as a construction of barriers erected to fend off the spirit of harmonious order: Power, in fact, is represented as being moated by its self-serving cycle at one remove and by the chthonic stream at the next, as if to keep the Apollonian perennially “outside the city walls,” as it were.

Finally, there remains to explain, what could have possibly been the desire to promote a view like that of Bataille, in light of the fact that a true revival of chthonic worship in a Liberal system was, indeed, unachievable. Bataille did not gaze too far into the eventual intricacies of power networks in the modern era, and he certainly would have strongly rebuffed the accusation that he was pursuing, in collusion with Liberal intellectuals, a hostile maneuver aimed at a broad movement in favor of mutualism and cooperativeness. Bataille’s abhorrence for his epoch was genuine; but his plans were impracticable.

From the fringes of the Parisian scene, he wrote demoniacal fancies and imaginative social science in the key of death. He acquired a modest notoriety toward the end of his life, but no stardom. In March 1961, one year before his death, Bataille was interviewed by a journalist of *L'Express*, Marguerite Chapsal, the selfsame publicist who would be instrumental in launching Foucault's public career five years later. In the interview, Bataille confided that the intellectual contribution of which he was proudest was to have associated the most turbulent, shocking, and scandalous form of speech with the religious spirit of the deepest sort.

It is very clear that one way or another, whatever type of society we may have, ultimately this rage is to be found everywhere, because I don't believe that we can reach a state of affairs such as will allow us to overcome this rage.¹⁹⁸

It seems that a mass audience today can hardly develop an immediate taste for Bataille's morose and deliquescent artistry. *But if the latter is somehow masked*, and artfully presented, it is undeniable that there exists in our time an active and coordinated effort to diffuse such a philosophy of despair among as many individuals as possible. So, to repeat the question: Why would certain Interests be keen to publish and push the works of Bataille among the public? In itself, the production of Bataille makes certainly for an intriguing specimen of twentieth century literature; it is indeed a fascinating testimony. As science, most of it is irrelevant, except for his "notion of expenditure" and the excerpts from the "sacred sociology." So, it is in its *propagandistic form* that the opus of Bataille is here ultimately evaluated. As the

inspiring source of one of America's late intellectual patron saints (Foucault), the only reason that would justify the promotion and diffusion of his works—whether directly or indirectly, that is, via Foucault—is their peculiar iconoclasm. This iconoclasm is an odd brew of violence and *particularism*, as well as an irresponsible invitation to transgress, all of which stimuli have altogether no other effect, if touted deeply and long enough, than to numb the reader and to insinuate doubts as to the sensibility of protecting and conserving life at any cost.

The situation of the human being—the condition of his existence—is such as to belie his desire to identify himself with this universe, of which he is apparently but an accident: the perpetual dissension, the opposition pitting one tribe against another, a nation against another, a group against another, render man's pretension to universality derisory. [Such a dissension] has compromised the minds of men in a continual lie. Finally, is there anything more pathetic, from the standpoint of universality than to connect the latter to [...] the “ideas” and “types of existence” that only a certain number of men possess in common? Each world view, each belief and each heresy represented so many attempts to reduce [this yearning for universality] to something narrow, self-contained, particular.¹⁹⁹

Of course, there is no wish here to suggest that all decent, even-tempered individuals might, upon reading Bataille, convert instantly to the ways of sovereign dilapidation and violent eroticism, yet it is never imprudent to assess unambiguously, beyond the sexy language and the suggestive metaphors, what the authors we read truly stand for. And, the passage above, which could have been most easily penned

today either by a Foucauldian or a Neoconservative hawk, confirms yet again that there undoubtedly exists the will, by publishing and publicizing authors such as Bataille, to deride insistently our desire to know, to mock our yearning for communion across divides, and to suggest unrelentingly that separation and war are the ways of the world.

But shouldn't we all be free to pursue these yearnings for peace and knowledge, and categorically refuse the ways of war no matter how innate these might be in us? Apparently not. And so, precisely because Bataille's wish to reenact Dionysism was doomed from the start, as he well knew, it logically follows by a process of exclusion that the true *target of his postmodern attack, often echoed by the Liberals themselves, is not the Liberal State, but the streak of peaceable anarchism that survives in it*. No other viable policy, or clear design, emerges from his sociological sketches. One has but to look at the rapidity and depth with which this type of Bataillean ideology has spread by way of Foucault within the highest circles of academe and even political power in the United States—all of which regularly profess undying belief in the “highest human values”—to realize that something far more ominous is afoot than a mere, aesthetic call to orgiastic frenzy and delirious poetry for the weekend.

In 2007, I originally went on to write that “the plague has spread, but it has not taken over just yet.” At the time, I still harbored some hope that the tide could be stemmed by counting on “the inherent strength of the compassionate tradition, and on the other hand,” by taking advantage “of the

state of mental disorientation prevailing among postmodernism's recent recruits."

As for "the inherent strength of the compassionate tradition," alas, I can no longer articulate what exactly this means and translates to concretely: we are fewer and fewer, overwhelmed and adrift in a mass of uncomprehending fools ever more spun about by the potent suggestions of mainstream propaganda. So, I thought it fitting to replace the over-abused label of compassion / compassionateness, with similar expressions in the face of the fact that today (2025), packaged and ribboned in all sorts of lofty-sounding and thoroughly phony slogans and imagery of inter-racial, inter-sexual "inclusivism," Bataille's violence-loving gospel of "divide & conquer" has spread so incontinently that it appears all but unstoppable. As for the alleged "state of mental disorientation" I thought I was witnessing among "high-minded democrats" in the early 2000s, I was again deluding myself with the wishful supposition that these intellectuals "still [hadn't] resolved these issues in their hearts, and [that] their hesitation [had] made accordingly the subterranean Bataillean militancy weaker." Which was absolutely not the case: profound ignorance (most American-trained Foucauldians have never even read Bataille) and (caste-specific) unintelligence, coalesced by fear, made them even more prone to follow the party line. I then cautiously added: "But such indecision, even though it may act as a brake, clearly does not bode well for the future of American schools and society and the realm of dissent broadly defined." No, indeed. The state of inquisitorial terror that in the United States had already germinated into a full-

blown system at the time of this book's first edition, has, thanks to America's indefatigable effort to push the agenda through her imperial galaxy of proconsular offices, presently metastasized into a regime of discursive fear & dogma on a planetary scale. Advertence to these late, crucial developments pertaining to the morphology of America's (choice of) imperial speech, communication & subtle injunction will recur in the following chapters and be given fuller scope in the Afterword.

In synthesis, the story of Bataille is that of a French seminarian that in a night of delirium, holding an open umbrella under a sky without rain, had a vision, an *inner experience*. He experienced a reconciliation with a lost worship, which invited men to agree to the shedding of blood for the sake of religious communion. Not only did he begin thereafter to fathom the mystery of sacrificial surrender, but he also found himself able to reconnect and trace a multitude of otherwise inexplicable manifestations of bizarre or repulsive human conduct back to this creed of the Elders. Within the principles of this rediscovered inferno, all these clues reacquired meaning and a proper location. He became so entranced with the prospect of divulging the experience to his peers that he reinvented a series of rites, a society and, far more important, a brand-new "sociology of the holy" to serve as the book for his new-fangled cult. Understanding that this ancient religion might never relive in its original form, he devised means to graft its spiritual suggestion upon the conventional mindset. The method he followed to effect this transfer was to attack one by one all the taboos that tradition's erected:

Reign of Discursive Terror

promiscuousness, sodomy, murder, excretions, prepotence, mass murder, and intoxication. And he attempted to rehabilitate each in succession, by consummating them, inviting others to follow his example, and legitimizing through discourse all such acts of transgression as the orderly commandments of some monstrous angels. Archons that are but the complement of a world of light and creation, the two being manifestations of the aboriginal seed, symbolized by a muscular ghost without head wielding a glaive. As he called the world to commune, he also contrived a theory of Power, which emanated from a pulsating *core*. The core was the spark of the ancestral confession, which inspired men with *sovereign* behavior. In warrior-societies this kernel of sacred authority was in the custody of a militant priesthood, but in time modern State bureaucracy depleted the core to such a degree that it lost its solidity and slowly disintegrated. The fragmentation did not reduce its potential, but decentered its source of diffusion. Today the core is everywhere, waiting to speak through the actions of each one of us. Man is but a particle of this whirl of aboriginal knowledge, and he must use language to dissolve the consciousness of being who he is, and recognize at all time that he is but channeling the power of this fragmented core, which bespeaks the lore of those monstrous gods, with whom we must now make our long-lasting peace.

If this were a hoax, what a hoax that would be.

But, alas, it isn't. Many have taken this seriously.

"To dare to read Bataille," recites an epitaph by one of his many contemporary academic devotees, "is to *dare to live*

ethically and face death in a sovereign way."²⁰⁰ Bataille must be laughing in his grave, thrusting "into the void of life a gaze loaded with the mortal violence of being."²⁰¹

Another exalted fan of Bataille worriedly posed the anguishing question:

How [in the contemporary world] can the possibilities of heterogeneous society be re-opened? Would not any potential social myth run up against the brick wall of individualism? [...] If social solidarity was once founded in a sense of collective guilt in the primal crime that separated us from our roots in nature, can a joyful embrace of guilt—such as Bataille experienced through his inner experience—provide the possibility for a re-invigoration of society? How can individualism be transformed back into social belonging? These are issues that Bataille tried to tackle *in such a moving way*. To say that he was unable to answer them is hardly to diminish his work, but in the contrary reveals how important it was.²⁰²

"Social belonging" was never the issue: Bataille spoke occasionally of "community" but obviously had not the faintest interest in it; he would have lived in one, in silence, had he so desired. His objective, as he himself avowed, was to "overturn everything by all means." Admittedly, he did not quite find the proper means to bring this about during his lifetime. But he had shown the way. The theory was ready, now it was a matter of practice, experiment. That is when Foucault came in.

Notes

1. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* (OC) (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), vol.1, p. 82.
2. Ibid., vol.10, p. 610.
3. Quoted from Pierre Prévost, *Georges Bataille & René Guénon, L'expérience souveraine* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992), p. 15.
4. Ibid., p. 29.
5. Bataille, OC, vol. 5, p. 46.
6. Ibid., vol. 11, p. 19.
7. Ibid., vol. 5, p. 25
8. 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, 1998), p. 7.
9. Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Dover, 1954 [1912]), p. 9.
10. Ibid., p. 43.
11. Ibid., pp. 184, 122, and 193.
12. Ibid., pp. 46–47, 116, 167, 168.
13. Bataille, OC, vol. 5, p.139.
14. Ibid., pp. 140–41.
15. Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille, La mort à l'oeuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), pp. 120–21.
16. Bataille, OC, vol. 1. P. 550.
17. Ibid., vol. 5, p. 19.
18. Ibid., pp. 20, 21.
19. Ibid., vol. 11, p. 230.
20. Ibid., vol. 5, pp. 22, 24.
21. Ibid., pp. 30–31, 50, emphasis added.
22. Ibid., vol. 12, pp. 284; vol. 3, p. 30.
23. Ibid., vol. 5 p. 51.
24. Ibid., vol. 8. p.146.
25. Ibid., p. 25.

26. Ibid., p. 69.
27. Ibid., p. 99.
28. Ibid., p. 121.
29. Ibid., pp. 69, 73.
30. Ibid., p. 74.
31. Ibid., vol. 7, p. 265.
32. Ibid., vol. 8, pp. 74, 99.
33. Ibid., vol. 7, p. 271, emphasis added.
34. Ibid., vol. 12, p. 484.
35. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 211–12 and 443.
36. Ibid., vol. 8, pp. 109–11.
37. Ibid., pp. 112–13.
38. Evola, *Revolt*, p. 233.
39. Warwick Bray, *Everyday Life of the Aztecs* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968), p. 172.
40. Georges Bataille, *La part maudite, précédé de la notion de dépense* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967 [1949]), p. 90.
41. Bray, *Aztecs*, p. 174.
42. Jack Weatherford, *The History of Money* (New York: Three Rivers, 1997), p. 17.
43. Bray, *Aztecs*, p. 163.
44. Bataille, OC, vol. 1, pp. 152–57.
45. Ibid., vol. 7, p. 198.
46. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 201–4.
47. Archangels of evil, see p. 106 in this Chapter.
48. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 223.
49. Ibid., p. 224.
50. An obvious reference is Anton Lavey's *The Satanic Rituals* (New York: Avon Books, 1972).
51. Bataille, OC, vol. 1, pp. 224–25.
52. Ibid., p. 244.
53. Ibid., vol. 11, p. 67.
54. Ibid., vol. 7, p. 68.
55. Ibid., pp. 68–69.
56. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 43.

Reign of Discursive Terror

57. Georges Bataille, *L'érotisme* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit), pp. 134, 135.
58. Bataille, OC, vol. 5, p. 240.
59. Ibid., vol. 6, p. 116.
60. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 380.
61. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 557.
62. Ibid., vol. 8, p. 147.
63. Ibid., vol. 7, p. 273, and vol. 1, p. 441, emphasis added.
64. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 445.
65. Surya, *Bataille*, pp. 288, 303, emphasis added.
66. Champagne, *Bataille*, pp. 13, 15.
67. Bataille, OC, vol. 2, p. 274.
68. William S. Burroughs, see e.g., "Electronic Age" (*The Job*) in *Word Virus*, (New York: Grove Press, 1998), p. 310.
- 69 Ibid., vol. 3, p. 455.
70. Ibid., vol. 8, p. 114.
71. Ernst Jünger, *Eumeswil* (New York: Marsilio, 1993 [1977]), p. 208.
72. Surya, *Bataille*, p. 128.
73. Ibid., pp. 105, 158, and 178.
74. Prévost, *Bataille & Guénon*, p. 63.
75. Bataille, OC, vol. 1, p. 13–69.
76. Published posthumously in 1967.
77. Surya, *Bataille*, p. 392.
78. Bataille, OC, vol. 4, p. 47–50.
79. Ibid., vol.3, p. 22.
80. See Surya, *Bataille*, p. 372.
81. Ibid., p. 24.
82. Ibid., p. 374.
83. Bataille, OC, vol. 12, p. 280.
84. Bataille, *L'érotisme*, pp. 204–5.
85. Bataille, OC, vol. 11, p. 181–85.
86. Ibid., vol. 8, pp. 268–70.
87. Ibid., p. 277.
88. Bataille, *L'érotisme*, p. 60.
89. Bataille, OC, vol. 8, p. 12.

90. Ibid., vol. 10, p. 581.
91. Bataille, *L'érotisme*, p. 68.
92. Bataille, OC, vol. 8, pp. 81, 83.
93. Ibid., p. 152.
94. Bataille, *L'érotisme*, p. 57.
95. Ibid., p. 41.
96. Ibid., p. 43.
97. Ibid., p. 72.
98. Ibid., p. 96, and Bataille, OC, vol. 8, p. 90.
99. Bataille, *L'érotisme*, p. 125.
100. Ibid., p. 131.
101. Bataille, OC, vol. 2, p. 344.
102. Ibid., vol. 6, p. 43.
103. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 346.
104. Ibid., OC, vol. 8, p. 17.
105. Bataille, *L'érotisme*, p. 206.
106. Ibid., p. 213.
107. Bataille, OC, vol. 7, p. 369.
108. Ibid., vol. 8, p. 297.
109. Ibid., vol., 10, p. 295.
110. Ibid.
111. Ibid., p. 279.
112. Ibid., p. 294.
113. Ibid., vol. 9 p. 204.
114. Ibid., vol. 10, p. 278.
115. Ibid., pp. 310–11.
116. Ibid., p. 312.
117. Ibid., p. 327.
118. Ernst Jünger, *Das Abenteurliche Herz, Figuren und Capriccios* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1938), p. 124, and Ernst Jünger, *Heliopolis, Rückblick auf eine Stadt* (Tübingen, Germany: Heliopolis Verlag, 1949), p. 101.
119. Surya, *Bataille*, p. 561.
120. Bataille, OC, vol. 10, p. 311.
121. Ibid., p. 281.

Reign of Discursive Terror

122. Ibid., p. 318.
123. Ibid., p. 321.
124. Ibid., vol. 5, p. 200.
125. Ibid., vol. 8, p. 372.
126. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 303.
127. Bataille, *La part maudite*, p. 143.
128. Bataille, OC, vol. 1, p. 305.
129. Ibid., pp. 306–8.
130. Eliade, *Sacred & Profane*, p. 97.
131. Bataille, OC, vol. 2, p. 371.
132. Ibid., vol. 8, 126, emphasis added.
133. Ibid., vol. 10, p. 313.
134. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1899); see for instance chapters 8 to 10.
135. Ibid., p. 20.
136. Bataille, OC, vol. 10, p. 602.
137. See Thorstein Veblen, *Instinct of Workmanship*, and the State of Industrial Arts (New York: Macmillan, 1914), chapter 2, and *Leisure Class*, p. 219.
138. Veblen, *Leisure Class*, p. 18.
139. Bataille, OC, vol. 10, pp. 603–4.
140. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation, The Political and Economics Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 48–58.
141. Bataille, OC, vol. 1, p. 309.
142. Ibid., p. 310.
143. Ibid., p. 314.
144. Bataille, *La part maudite*, p. 38.
145. Bataille, OC, vol. 7, pp. 211, 217.
146. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 340.
147. Ibid., vol. 10, p. 604.
148. Bataille, *La part maudite*, p. 66.
149. Ibid., p. 76.
150. Bataille, OC, vol. 1, p. 472.
151. Bataille, *La part maudite*, pp. 224–25, emphasis added.

152. Bataille, OC, vol. 12, p. 515.
153. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 347.
154. Ibid., vol.5, p. 99.
155. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 291.
156. Surya, *Bataille*, p. 318.
157. Bataille, OC, vol. 1, p. 291.
158. Ibid., p. 346.
159. Ibid., vol. 7, p. 323.
160. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 436.
161. Ibid., p. 437.
162. Ibid., p. 438, emphasis added.
163. Cited in Surya, *Bataille*, p. 114.
164. Bataille, OC, vol. 2, p. 310.
165. Ibid., p. 311.
166. Ibid., p. 338.
167. Ibid., p. 331.
168. Jünger, *Eumeswil*, p. 250.
169. Bataille, OC, vol. 2, p. 319.
170. Ibid., p. 336.
171. Ibid., p. 341.
172. Ibid., pp. 342–43.
173. Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (In *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I*, Tübingen, Germany; J. C. B. Mohr, 1922 [1905]), and *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Gerth and Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 196–244.
174. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), pp. 196–244.
175. Rudolf Steiner, *Evil, Selected Lectures by Rudolf Steiner* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1997).
176. Werner Sombart, *The Quintessence of Capitalism, a Study of the History and Psychology of the Modern Businessman (Der Bourgeois)*, (London: T. F. Unwin, 1915).
177. René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Sign of the Times* (New York: Penguin, 1972 [1945]).

Reign of Discursive Terror

178. Bataille, OC, vol. 2, p. 342.
179. Ibid., pp. 345, 346.
180. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 351–53.
181. Ibid., p. 353.
182. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 342.
183. Ibid., p. 347.
184. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 346.
185. Ibid., p. 351.
186. Ibid., p. 350.
187. Ibid., p. 364.
188. Ibid., pp. 351, 352.
189. Ibid., pp. 457–58.
190. See for instance Otto Rahn's *La cour de Lucifer, Voyage au coeur de la plus haute spiritualité européenne (Luzifers Hofgesind/Eine reise zu den guten Geistern Europas)*, Puiseaux: Éditions Pardès, 1994 [1937]. Otto Rahn was a talented ethnologist who had joined the ranks of the SS.
191. Bataille, OC, vol. 2, p. 347.
192. Ibid., p. 326, emphasis added.
193. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 361, emphasis added.
194. Ibid., vol. 11, p. 182.
195. Edward Crankshaw, *Gestapo, Instrument of Tyranny* (New York: Viking, 1956), p. 232.
196. Bataille, OC, vol. 11, p. 180.
197. Ibid., p. 185.
198. Surya, *Bataille*, p. 597.
199. Bataille, OC, vol. 12, p. 223.
200. Champagne, *Bataille*, p. 103.
201. Bataille, OC, vol. 1, p. 440.
202. Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 130.