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PhD thesis

***The Anglo-American Reception of Georges Bataille:
Readings in Theory and Popular Culture***

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I, Eugene John Brennan, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Thesis abstract

The work of Georges Bataille is marked by extreme paradoxes, resistance to systemization, and conscious subversion of authorship. The inherent contradictions and interdisciplinary scope of his work have given rise to many different versions of 'Bataille'. However one common feature to the many different readings is his status as a marginal figure, whose work is used to challenge existing intellectual orthodoxies. This thesis thus examines the reception of Bataille in the Anglophone world by focusing on how the marginality of his work has been interpreted within a number of key intellectual scenes.

The original contribution of this thesis is as the first work to consider the popular reception of Bataille, including a range of original research, in comparative analysis with his academic reception. The popular cultural manifestations of Bataille examined here are not merely considered simplifications of the work's complexity. They amplify the tensions and contradictions we encounter in many academic readings. This thesis highlights the performativity of Bataille's work by examining his importance for entirely opposing and conflicting intellectual scenes. It argues against readings which idealize the 'uncorrupted' text and similarly argues that Bataille's work does not 'belong' to any one cultural space, while simultaneously arguing for a specific 'internal conflict' which lends Bataille's work its impact.

The introduction contextualises Bataille's initial reception in France. The first chapter traces the initial dissemination of his work in English through popular publishing. The second chapter examines his reception through academic theory and argues that while his thought was partially depoliticized in translation it was re-politicized in different guises. The third chapter examines a historical scene of reception largely opposed to 'theory'. The fourth chapter examines his place within British music journalism, and develops the tensions between 'history' and 'theory', and between the political and anti-political, encountered in the preceding academic readings.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	8
Chapter Outlines	13
Critical Context.....	18
Editorial Considerations.....	19
The Reception of Bataille During His Own Lifetime	21
Base Materialism and Deconstruction	24
Increasing Intellectual and Personal Isolation.....	27
‘Un nouveau mystique’	30
‘Inconnue’, ‘méconnue’, ‘malentendu’	33
‘Célébration Posthume’	35
The Disputed Surrealist Legacy	38
Reading Practices: Against the ‘Nudity’ of the Text	45
CHAPTER ONE - BETWEEN LIBERTARIANISM AND RESTRAINT: COUNTER- CULTURAL READINGS	49
Early Reviews	50
The Olympia Press	57
Censorship and Pornographic Literature in America.....	64
The Literary and the Pornographic: Reading Bataille after Sontag	67
Cultural Provocation and the Libertarian Context	73
‘The Orgiasts’	75
Translations.....	79
Bomb Culture: Libidinal Politics and Counter-Cultural Disappointments	89
Curtains: A Shift in Counter-Cultural Readings	96
Close Readings: Death, Mourning and Inner Experience.....	97
Further Problematizing the Relationship Between Sexual liberty and Liberty.....	104
CHAPTER TWO - <i>INFORME</i>, CONTAMINATION, PURITY: <i>OCTOBER</i>’S RE-READING OF MODERNISM THROUGH BATAILLE.....	112
Introduction.....	112
A ‘Generalized Contamination’ – Derrida’s Bataille.....	114
Equivocations on the ‘Political’ – <i>Tel Quel</i> and the ‘Logic of Succession’	117
Subtle Subversion	121
Internal Externality	122
French Theory in America	125
The Beginning of <i>October</i>	127
Rosalind Krauss and the First Readings of Bataille at <i>October</i>	130
Dissemblance and the Dispute with Didi-Huberman.....	135

Logics of Separation	138
Contested Modernisms.....	146
Bataille's Modernism: 'Neither form nor content but...'	149
Modernism as Crisis of Self-Expression.....	153
Chapter Conclusion.....	157
CHAPTER THREE – 'UN BATAILLE DIFFÉRENT': THE HISTORICAL TURN	160
Jean-Luc Nancy, <i>La Communauté désœuvrée</i> and the Origins of the Historical Turn	162
The Historical Turn in Anglo-American Academia.....	166
'Un Bataille différent'	169
The Social and Ethical Imperative	170
'La communauté était un mot alors ignoré du discours de la pensée': The Impact of Nancy on the Historical turn	174
The Return of Hegel.....	177
Escaping the 'End of History'	184
Hauntology: Mourning Lost Futures.....	186
A 'Passion for the Real': Bataille 'Beyond Language'	197
Separation and Fetishisation: Bataille Consistently Set Apart.....	203
CHAPTER FOUR - 'ENTRYISM' AND 'MARGINALITY': EXPLORING A COUNTER-TRADITION OF UK MUSIC JOURNALISM.....	208
Introduction.....	208
A Selective Prehistory of Post-punk	212
Post-Punk Politics: 'Time To Wake Up'	215
The Turn to Europe.....	217
'Theory' and 'Music': the renegades' critique of Cultural Studies	218
'The Violence of the Sacred': The Birthday Party.....	223
'The Dionysian Spirit': Hoskyns and Reynolds.....	226
'The Ethics of Violence'	227
The Anti-Political.....	230
'Marginality' and 'Entryism': A New Chasm Between the Underground and Overground	233
The Objects	235
The Origins of the Object	238
'Object Pop'	241
Fetishizing the Object: Chris Bohn, David Keenan and Nocturnal Abjection.....	242
Depoliticizing the Object: The Critique of Kristeva	250
Nick Land's Politics of the 'Outside'	251
Land's Epistemology: The Fetish for Primary Processes	253
The 'Passion for the Real' in Academic and Popular Readings	255

Alternative readings of Bataille by Simon Reynolds: Deconstructing the ‘Darkside’	261
Closing Reflections on Marginality	268
CONCLUSION	271
BIBLIOGRAPHY	278

Introduction

Readers of Georges Bataille have often highlighted their particularly conflicted position, commenting upon a text that is characterised by its resistance to both reading and commentary. As well as challenging the stability of meaning in language, Bataille's writing challenges any stable notions of authorship. As Jean-Luc Nancy has remarked, "'Bataille'", is *nothing but* a protest against the signification of his own discourse.¹ As Nancy highlights, 'Bataille', to a certain extent, signifies the absence of authorial presence. In this sense, the gathering of his writings, many unpublished, unfinished, and written under pseudonyms, under one collection of *Œuvres complètes* seems like a contradiction and betrayal of the writings' attempts to subvert authorship. Bataille's writing, however, never stops turning over the question of its own betrayal. His two major projects, *La Part maudite* and the unfinished *La Somme athéologique*, seek to communicate ideas which appear largely antithetical to the written, discursive means through which they are communicated.² *La Part maudite* is a critique of political economy which argues for a reconsideration of social life on the basis of excess waste. However, by productively expending energy through the means of writing a book he was betraying its very message of *nonproductive* expenditure, as he noted in the preface: 'Un livre que personne n'attend, qui ne répond à aucune question formulée, que l'auteur n'aurait pas écrit s'il en avait suivi la leçon à la lettre, voilà finalement la bizzarrerie qu'aujourd'hui je propose au lecteur.'³

Similarly, the non-discursive experience of the sacred sought in *L'Expérience intérieure* is contradicted by the persistence through discourse and writing. However, the

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Exscription', *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), p.62.

² *La Somme athéologique* was a project for a collection of texts which explored the paradox of religious atheism. At one point the project was planned to consist of 'I. L'Expérience intérieure, II. Le Coupable, III. Sur Nietzsche, IV. Le Pur Bonheur, V. Le Système inachevé du Non-Savoir'. See Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes* VI (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p.362. Further references to the twelve volumes of the *Œuvres complètes* will be abbreviated to *OC*.

³ *OC* VII, p.21.

tensions generated by such contradictions are a central part of the appeal and challenge of Bataille's work. As Maurice Blanchot noted in the essay 'L'Expérience intérieure' (1943), 'Sans la volonté angoissée qui lutte contre le discours, sans le recours à des techniques qui dégagent la sensibilité de l'action où elle est prise, l'homme arrive difficilement à une mise en cause véritable et il s'éparpille dans une recherche oisive où il ne traque que son ombre.'⁴ This is why, for Blanchot, Bataille's book 'est la tragédie qu'il exprime'.⁵ The intensity and difficulty of Bataille's thought partially derives from the 'angoisse' encountered in the face of such paradoxes and contradictions.

Many of the strongest readings of Bataille's work develop specific approaches to the internal conflict and 'angoisse' of the text. Philippe Sollers, for example, considered the paradoxical nature of Bataille's thought under the image of writing confronting its own limitations as a sloped roof in which the negation of linguistic meaning was accompanied by a simultaneous reaffirmation of language.⁶ The text thus appears to point in two opposing directions. Following Foucault's landmark essay 'Préface à la transgression' (1963), Sollers argues that the strength of the transgressive experience derives from the tensions generated by such limits.⁷ Such tensions and contradictions in Bataille are not limited to the linguistic however. The internal conflict of his work has been described by Denis Hollier in more epistemological terms as a dualist materialism, a certain attitude of thought characterised by its resistance to system and homogeneity, while Allan Stoekl has described Bataille's thought on more political and social terms as 'bicephalic', in that it can simultaneously lead in completely opposing directions, both social and asocial.⁸ The two opposing directions which

⁴ Maurice Blanchot, 'L'Expérience intérieure', *Faux pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p.52.

⁵ Blanchot, *Faux pas*, p.52.

⁶ See Philippe Sollers, 'Le Toit', *Tel Quel*, 29 (1967), 24-45. Reprinted in *Logiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1968) 164-197, and *L'Écriture et l'expérience des limites* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), 104-138. See chapter one for further discussion of this essay.

⁷ See Michel Foucault, 'Préface à la transgression', *Critique*, 195-6 (1963), 751-69.

⁸ See Denis Hollier, 'Le Matérialisme dualiste de Georges Bataille', *Tel Quel*, 25 (1966), 41-61, and Allan Stoekl, 'Introduction' in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1985), p. xxiii.

Peter Tracey Connor highlights in *Georges Bataille and The Mysticism of Sin* (2003) are the philosophical and the mystical. If Bataille's thought refuses the authoritative closure of the former with its often problematic separation between thought and experience, it also refuses the potential quietism and deferential theology of the latter. Any approach which reads Bataille according to one specific perspective or another will end up with a partial and highly diluted interpretation of his work. Similarly, however, as Connor highlights, any approach which attempts to read Bataille as 'oscillating' between the two also misses the point.⁹ There is not a 'balance' or 'synthesis' between two opposed perspectives. Reading Bataille, rather, requires what I describe as a 'methodological excess', demanding the co-existence of apparently incompatible perspectives which are in fundamental conflict with one another and do not simply resolve into a synthesis.

Readers of Bataille have often been sensitive to such contradictions and challenges posed by his text. But any one reading of his work is unavoidably compromised to some extent by its situation within a reading economy, against a backdrop of a complex history of reception. This thesis examines the Anglo-American reception of Bataille's work through popular and academic readings. The thesis asks how has his dissident status and the internal conflict of his work been received and reconstructed across a number of key intellectual scenes. It shows how Bataille's reception has been characterised by repeated attempts to justify, rescue and intellectually realign his work.¹⁰ The defensiveness of many readers towards Bataille takes place within a reading economy partially generated out of the complexities and controversies of the initial reception of his work during his own lifetime. The secret society Acéphale (1936-1939), for example, represents one of the strangest

⁹ Peter Tracy Connor, *Georges Bataille and The Mysticism of Sin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p.46.

¹⁰ In this respect, as Francis Marmande has noted, Bataille's own reception has parallels with Bataille's rescuing of Nietzsche from associations with fascism and Nazism, with readers often aligning themselves with Bataille with a similar intensity and defensiveness as Bataille did to Nietzsche. On this point see Francis Marmande, 'Sous le soleil noir de la poésie', *Lignes*, 1 (2000), p.30.

moments in French intellectual history, in which Bataille went so far as to explore the possibility of human sacrifice as a means of reigniting the sacred in contemporary society.¹¹ During the same period Bataille developed an idiosyncratic critique of fascism which many perceived as troublingly ambivalent.¹² These controversies have generated the necessity for some readers ‘à innocenter Bataille’, as Michel Surya puts it.¹³ More broadly however, where he was understood or read at all during his own time, it was primarily as an antagonist, and a dissident or outsider, to the hegemonic intellectual currents of his time, surrealism and existentialism. His initial notoriety during his lifetime was mainly as a subject of vehement critiques by Jean-Paul Sartre and André Breton.¹⁴ Hollier has remarked of Bataille’s initial reception that ‘Pour les gens qui lisaient, Bataille était d’abord connu pas par ce qu’il avait écrit mais parce que Breton l’avait condamné.’¹⁵ This has meant that his posthumous reception, in both France and the Anglophone world, has often come from a position of defending Bataille while at the same time seeking to maintain the potency of his intellectual and cultural dissidence.¹⁶

Often framed as a ‘dissident’ surrealist, Bataille’s posthumous academic reception in the Anglophone world was initially mediated through ‘theory’. Bataille’s ‘dissidence’ to

¹¹ See, for example, Georges Bataille, *L’Apprenti sorcier*, ed. by Marina Galletti (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1999).

¹² As Sollers remarks on Bataille’s position towards fascism, ‘il ne s’agit pas d’être simplement “contre”, mais de savoir sur quels mécanismes psychologiques le fascisme s’agit’, Philippe Sollers, *Éloge de l’infini* (Paris : Gallimard, 2001), p.507. On Bataille’s relationship to fascism, see for example, Bernard Sichère, ‘Bataille et les fascistes’, *La Règle du jeu*, 8, (1992), 152-180 and *La Règle du jeu*, 9 (1993), 80-94. The texts gathered by Marina Galletti, as well as her introductory essay to the volume *L’Apprenti sorcier*, provide a thorough riposte to accusations of Bataille’s complicity with fascism. Jurgen Habermas also accused Bataille of latent fascism in *The Philosophic Discourse of Modernity* (1987) and *The New Conservatism, Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate* (1990). For a retort to this, see Andrew Stein, ‘The Use and Abuse of History: Habermas’ MisReading of Bataille’, *symplokē*, 1 (1993), 21-58. On the fascism question see also Allan Stoekl, ‘Truman’s Apotheosis: Bataille, “Planisme,” and Headlessness’, *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), 181-205.

¹³ Michel Surya, for example, suggests that Blanchot’s sympathetic reading of Bataille’s involvement in *Acéphale* was an attempt to ‘innocenter’ Bataille, and by doing so to implicitly ‘innocenter’ Blanchot himself to some extent of his political trajectory during the thirties. ‘Innocentant Bataille, Blanchot aurait cherché à s’innocenter aussi. Surya, *Sainteté de Bataille* (Paris: Éditions de l’Éclat, 2012), p.105.

¹⁴ See below for discussion of these critiques.

¹⁵ Hollier, in *Bataille*, ed. by Philippe Sollers (Paris: U.G.E., 1973), p.193.

¹⁶ Similarly, Jean-Michel Besnier has written, ‘Fascist, Stalinist, mystic – three labels of accusation which all in different ways denounce the influence wielded (even today) by the author of *La Part maudite*.’ ‘The serious reader of Bataille is condemned to an eternal advocacy in his defense’. Jean-Michel Besnier, ‘Bataille, the emotive intellectual’, *Writing the Sacred*, ed. by Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 13.

surrealism was often reactivated by posthumous readers as a means of disrupting, and sustaining marginality towards, contemporary hegemonic intellectual currents and discourses. Just as Bataille's writing was characterised by its resistance to system and closure, theory has largely been understood as a resistance to the authority and closure of philosophical and institutional discourses. One of the principal overarching imports of Bataille for theory is the insistence on a lack of any ontic truth status.¹⁷ We cannot definitively say what Bataille's text 'is' and this is one of the principal ways his work gets employed to challenge and self-reflexively elude stable and authoritative discourses, as we will see in many of the major readings of Bataille, such as those of Jacques Derrida and Sollers, discussed below.

However, as well as the specific challenges of Bataille's text which resonate with theory, a number of later readings of Bataille came from an 'anti-theory' perspective. The influence of leading figures of French theory such as Derrida and Foucault, their prominence within the Anglo-American academy, and their central role in the reception of Bataille, meant from an 'anti-theory' perspective, that the 'outsider' had become an 'insider'. For readers with an aversion to theory, Bataille's thought had become domesticated and a starting point for reconstructing a 'dissident' Bataille was by re-aligning his thought with the surrealists, thus returning to a 'pre-' or 'anti-' theory assertion of 'history'. The introductory history to Bataille's reception outlined below will show how many of Bataille's readers through theory were compelled to 'rescue' or defend his work from the initial denunciations and misreadings

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson writes on similar terms of the affinity of the dialectic to theory rather than philosophy. While Bataille's thought bears a complex and fraught relationship to dialectical thinking, raised in chapter two, Jameson's elaboration of the dialectic here contains an important distinction between theory and philosophy: 'the dialectic belongs to theory rather than philosophy: the latter is always haunted by the dream of some foolproof self-sufficient system, a set of interlocking concepts which are their own cause. This dream is of course the after-image of philosophy as an institution in the world, as a profession complicit with everything else in the status quo, in the fallen ontic realm of "what is". Theory, on the other hand, has no vested interests in as much as it never lays claim to an absolute system, a non-ideological formulation of itself and its "truths"; indeed, always itself complicit in the being of current language, it has only the vocation and never-finished task of undermining philosophy as such, by unravelling affirmative statements and propositions of all kinds.' Fredric Jameson, 'First Impressions: *The Parallax View* by Slavoj Žižek', in *London Review of Books*, 17 (September 2006) <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n17/fredric-jameson/first-impressions>> [Accessed online 1 June 2013].

his work initially received, while some later readers of Bataille found themselves in the strange position of ‘rescuing’ Bataille from his strongest intellectual supporters. Bataille’s ‘marginality’ has thus been reconstructed according to entirely opposing intellectual orientations at different moments. This reconstruction of marginality partially emerges from the paradoxes and bifurcations of Bataille’s text, it is also partially attributable to the ideological backdrop of specific reading moments, and has also been partially generated from Bataille’s initial reception during his own lifetime. This thesis introduction will thus trace a selective history of that initial reception after firstly establishing an outline of the chapters and main arguments of the thesis.

Chapter Outlines

This thesis asks how Bataille’s work has been understood in the Anglophone world. It does so by comparative analysis of a number of key conflicting readings in academia and popular culture. I identify two principal routes of the dissemination of Bataille’s work in English, a ‘popular’ and an ‘academic’ route. The former dates from 1953, the publication of his first book in English, *Histoire de l’œil*, translated as *A Tale of Satisfied Desire* by Austryn Wainhouse for the Olympia Press.¹⁸ Chapter one thus examines the ‘popular’ reception of Bataille stemming from the Olympia Press publications and then considers Bataille’s place within non-academic writing in relation to a variety of counter-cultural readings with a libertarian orientation.¹⁹ The sexual and cultural libertarianism informing many of these readings raises major interpretive problems given the often more conservative emphasis upon restraint encountered in Bataille’s theory of eroticism. Similarly, the classical and restrained prose style of Bataille’s original texts are compared to unexamined translations of his work which tend to deflate the anguish of the text and lend it a more liberal and less restrained

¹⁸ Pierre Angélique [pseud. for Georges Bataille], *A Tale of Satisfied Desire* trans. by Jacques Audiart [pseud. Austryn Wainhouse] (Paris: Olympia Press, 1953).

¹⁹ The other noteworthy Olympia Press publications are Pierre Angélique, *The Naked Beast at Heaven’s Gate*, trans by Jacques Audiart (Paris: Olympia Press, 1956), and ‘Desire by the Castle: an excerpt from *A Tale of Satisfied Desire*’, in *The StripTeaser*, ed. by Maurice Girodias (Paris: Olympia Press, 1956).

literary style.²⁰ The chapter examines similarly overlooked translations of Bataille's poetry at the British journal *Curtains* in the nineteen seventies. The chapter's overarching argument is that while much of Bataille's work is strongly dissonant with the cultural libertarianism informing the various readings explored here, this does not mean the mean these readings should be necessarily dismissed as 'misreadings'. We do encounter libertarian moments in Bataille and these readings, rather, usefully amplify the tensions between restraint and release immanent in Bataille's text, thus helping us refine a number of conflicting readings of Bataille's work.

The second principal route of dissemination is through theory, and entails primarily, though not exclusively, academic readings. It is more difficult to pick a specific starting point for this route of dissemination. We could begin with the first Anglophone academic journal dedicated to Bataille, with *Semiotext(e)* in 1976. Or we could go back earlier to the 1972 *Tel Quel* 'Artaud/Bataille' conference, which took place in French and in France but instigated a surge of interest in Bataille from the American academy. The multidisciplinary journal *Substance*, for example, published three articles on the conference, including one by *Semiotext(e)* founder Sylvère Lotringer. And in a 1975 article for *Diacritics* James Creech notes that the 1972 conference signalled 'an extraordinary shift which has brought Bataille to the centre of the French scene'.²¹ We could go back earlier again to the 1963 issue of *Critique* dedicated to Bataille one year after his death. The issue contained essays by contemporaries of Bataille, such as Michel Leiris and Pierre Klossowski, as well as a newly emerging generation of thinkers. Michel Foucault's 'Préface à la transgression' and Roland Barthes' 'La Métaphore de l'œil', both published here, became some of the most widely cited essays on Bataille, and Foucault and Barthes became central thinkers in the canon of 'French

²⁰ As well as the Olympia Press translations, a major overlooked publication is 'Madame Edwarda by Georges Bataille', trans. by Austryn Wainhouse, *Evergreen Review*, 34 (1964), 63-67.

²¹ James Creech, 'Julia Kristeva's Bataille: Reading as Triumph', *Diacritics*, 1 (1975), p.62.

Theory'.²² A comprehensive history and analysis of Bataille's place within French theory would thus be too broad to examine. Instead, I will be narrowing the focus to a particularly important and exemplary case of Bataille's reception through theory by looking at the *October* journal.

October provides a particularly exemplary case study as Bataille's theories of the abject and the *informe* were substantially referenced and became central to the development of book projects by leading critics Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois. *October* dedicated a special issue to Bataille in 1986, but I will be primarily focusing on readings of the *informe* by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois in a number of key articles and books between 1985 and 1997. I argue that the readings of *October* critics such as Krauss and Bois demonstrate a simultaneous de-politicising and re-politicising orientation. The explicitly political aspects of base materialism are overlooked and often actively disavowed in Krauss and Bois's readings.²³ However I also argue that the use of Bataille's theory, by Krauss in particular, to pursue a sophisticated rereading of modernism and its formal innovations carries a highly political potential, even if the political aspect is only implicit in Krauss's account. The primacy of formal and conceptual analysis in Krauss's readings of *informe*, as opposed to often essentializing and territorialized readings associated with the abject in art theory, generates a sometimes progressive and adventurous reading of Bataille. Chapter two thus examines the reception of Bataille through theory by looking at the development of Bataille as a 'dissident' figure through which to reread modernist theory and aesthetics, readings which contain simultaneously de-politicising and re-politicising orientations.

²² François Cusset, for example, cites the appearance in 1966 of Barthes' *Critique et Vérité* and Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses* as focal points in the emergence of post-structuralism. See Cusset, *French Theory* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013), p.38. It is worth mentioning here recent research which has further problematized the narratives around structuralism and post-structuralism. Tom Eyers, for example, notes that it remains commonplace to distinguish between structuralism and post-structuralism 'despite the distinction having little purchase in the French context'. Tom Eyers, *Post-Rationalism: Psychoanalysis, Epistemology, and Marxism in Post-War France* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.8.

²³ See below, section entitled 'Deconstruction and base materialism' for an elaboration on this point.

In *October's* reading of Bataille, his distance from the surrealists is accentuated. However, the initial reception through theory contrasts with another milieu of reception which often expressed an antipathy to theory. The most exemplary cases of this perspective are that of Michael Richardson and Andrew Hussey.²⁴ In order to elaborate an 'anti-theory' version of Bataille, both Hussey and Richardson attempt to disentangle Bataille's thought from its posthumous advocates, and reposition him alongside the surrealists. His dissidence to surrealism is thus less pronounced than dissidence to postmodernism in these readings.

In a reading of 'inner experience' which over-privileges the latter term, Hussey argues it moves 'beyond language into an encounter where the sacred and sovereign status of poetry saves the experience from recuperation in "l'écriture"'.²⁵ In the same way as Hussey sees *écriture* as a recuperative force from which Bataille's text needs to be 'saved', Michael Richardson targets Deconstruction for having appropriated Bataille's text. Both readings, as elaborated upon in chapter three, represent a deeply problematic approach to reception studies and seek to enact a simplistic separation between a text and its reception, attempting to return Bataille to a 'pre-theory' moment. However, the work of Hussey and Richardson amplifies problems that are often only subtly implicit within what I identify as a 'historical turn' in Bataille's reception. This is a scene of reception that is consolidated by two review specials, *Stanford French Review* 12 (1988) and *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990). Where chapter two will highlight the neglect of certain essential historical and political factors in reading Bataille, the readings analysed here assert the importance of historical considerations. However, I argue that this reassertion of the historical disavows a critique of teleological conceptions of history raised in the previous chapter. This culminates in a simplistic separation between 'Theory' and 'History'. In this chapter I refer to the work of Jean-Luc

²⁴ Andrew Hussey, for example, proposes that 'the lingering resonance of Bataille's work may well not be found in theory, but rather the active negation of theory'. *The Beast at Heaven's Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, ed. by Andrew Hussey (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), p.12.

²⁵ Andrew Hussey, "'The Slaughterhouse of Love': The Corpse of 'Laure'", *The Beast at Heaven's Gate*, p.90.

Nancy who raised the importance of neglected historical considerations while not disentangling history from theory. An over-privileging of ‘history’, or of ‘real’ experience, I argue here in relation to the Anglophone academic readings, often represents a retreat from the challenges posed by theory. These separations exemplify a theoretical puritanism, where intellectual spaces are cordoned off from one another. I argue that the ‘contamination’ of Bataille’s base materialism means that abstraction cannot be completely disentangled from ‘real’ ‘experience’, and history cannot be considered separate from the concerns of ‘theory’. However, I also go on to show the surprising affinities between opposed perspectives, in that both postmodern and historicist readings often converge in their attempt to set Bataille apart as an outsider figure in relation to different intellectual and cultural hegemonies. Despite the wide contrasts of such perspectives, Bataille’s work is used as an attempt to substantiate a polemical break with dominant intellectual orientations.

The emphasis upon formal ‘contamination’ and self-reflexivity is applied to reading Bataille through popular culture. The final chapter argues that the counter-culture which arose from post-punk music journalism (1978-1984) proved far more receptive to, and consonant with, the work of Bataille than the counter-cultural perspective explored in the first chapter. I examine Bataille’s place within a ‘renegade tradition’ of music journalism, as defined and exemplified by the journalist Simon Reynolds.²⁶ The emphasis upon restraint, as opposed to libertarianism, the antipathy to idealism, the often antipolitical worldview, the embrace of alienation, and aesthetic orientation towards a ‘darkside’ are some of the qualities of Reynolds’s ‘renegade tradition’ which make for more receptive cultural terrain to Bataille’s work than the counter-cultural orientation explored in chapter one. However, readings of Bataille through ‘darkside’ popular cultures often parallel the tendency of certain academic readings to fetishize simplistic non-discursive conceptions of the real, and

²⁶ The ‘renegade tradition’ is discussed in Simon Reynolds, *Blissed Out* (London: Rock’s Backpages, 2011), [Amazon Kindle e-book, ‘Introduction’, para 6, location 101]. See opening section of chapter four for an elaboration of this.

overestimate their own position on an ‘outside’ apparently uncontaminated by mainstream popular culture. Readings of the theory of the abject in particular throughout the ‘renegade tradition’ seek to carve out an outsider position following Bataille’s theory. The simplistic separation between a cultural ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ is again not necessarily a popular culture ‘misreading’, but it does take a problematic tendency of reading Bataille encountered throughout academia and amplifies the tensions and contradictions of such an approach. The first extensive study of Bataille’s place within popular music journalism provided here thus raises important critical insights when placed in dialogue with academic perspectives. Aside from the theoretical contradictions encountered, this chapter also questions the territorialisation of theory within any one cultural space. My research unearths a number of counter-intuitive readings of Bataille’s theory, in the context of more effeminate or explicitly politicised musical styles, which disrupt our expectation of where Bataille’s text belongs, and disrupts the predictability of a ‘darkside’ nihilist orientation. The fact that we encounter Bataille in the writings of Simon Reynolds at different moments as both nihilistically anti-political and more politically engaged is an illuminating manifestation of the unpredictability and uncertainty Bataille’s text gives rise to. If a post-punk counter-culture proved more receptive to Bataille’s work, I argue that we should also simultaneously resist any implication that this is *the* popular culture space in which his work ‘belongs’. This thesis is guided by the conviction that we cannot definitively say what Bataille’s text ‘is’ and thus we should be distrustful of any implications as to where it ‘belongs’.

Critical Context

This is not the first work to consider Bataille’s ‘marginal’ or outsider status, and it is not the first work to consider the reception of Bataille. Benjamin Noys’s PhD thesis on the reception of Bataille, focusing on post-structuralist readings, is an important precedent and like Noys, my reading of Bataille is indebted to Jean-Luc Nancy as the final section of this introduction

elaborates.²⁷ On the question of marginality Mario Perniola's *L'Instant éternel: Bataille et la pensée de la marginalité* also foregrounds my work. Perniola notes that Bataille has often been considered a marginal or dissident thinker in relation to various intellectual hegemonies. However at the same time, 'La notion de marginalité suppose l'existence d'une centralité d'un corps social organique et cohérent, structuré concentriquement, idéologiquement cohérent, au sein duquel pouvoir et savoir sont étroitement liés.'²⁸ With implicit reference to a postmodern cultural turn since the seventies, Perniola goes on to note that 'Si la marginalité signifie une separation et une exclusion de la vie sociale, on ne comprend plus de qui l'on est séparé ou exclu.'²⁹ The diverse perspectives of Perniola and Noys converge on their consciousness that any one construction of 'marginality' is contingent and fragile. My work is partially indebted to and extends that of Perniola and Noys here by showing how Bataille's marginality regularly gets reconstructed according to shifting and often ambivalent constructions of intellectual and cultural hegemonies, highlighting the complicity and precariousness of claims to marginality within each intellectual scene. However, the major original contribution of my work is as the first thesis to examine the popular reception of Bataille in comparative dialogue with his Anglophone academic reception. Through consolidating and analysing a number of key scenes of reception, through looking at unexamined translations, through original research on Bataille's prominence in music journalism, and through comparative readings of existing scholarship this thesis asks how Bataille has been understood in the Anglophone world.

Editorial Considerations

Before continuing, a brief note on referencing, sources, and the constitution of Bataille's œuvre is necessary. The limits of any one methodological approach to Bataille are reflected

²⁷ Benjamin Charles Noys, 'The Reception of Georges Bataille: Post-Structuralist Readings' (Unpublished Doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 1998).

²⁸ Mario Perniola, *L'Instant éternel: Bataille et la pensée de la marginalité* (Paris: Méridiens/Anthropos, 1982), p.8.

²⁹ Perniola, p.8.

by the instability of his corpus. As suggested above, the pseudonymous, the unfinished and fragmentary nature of his work constitutes an elusive body of work. The publication of Bataille's twelve-volume *Œuvres complètes* took place over an eighteen-year period between 1970 and 1988. Even though Bataille's first book in English, *A Tale of Satisfied Desire*, appeared in 1953 under pseudonym, and his first works under his own name appeared in 1955,³⁰ his major theoretical works comprising *La Somme athéologique* and *La Part maudite* were only translated beginning from 1988.³¹ The delay in publication of many of Bataille's works in France as well as in translation means that a degree of sensitivity is required to what texts were available to different readers at specific reading moments. The methodological arguments for reading Bataille through his reception outlined at the end of this introduction will argue that we cannot definitively say what Bataille's text 'is' as it resists any static ontological status. Similarly, different reading moments, and the availability of different sets of texts give rise to different 'Bataille's'. While I argue for a methodological excess in reading Bataille which holds the many paradoxes and contradictory perspectives of his work in play, it is necessary to retain a consciousness of the limited versions of 'Bataille' available to readers at different moments. This means that while the majority of references to Bataille's work in this thesis are from the *Œuvres complètes*, occasionally quotations are used from English translations. The Anglophone and non-French speaking music journalists writing in the nineteen eighties examined in chapter four, for example, would have had highly restricted access to the full range of Bataille's work. It will thus be useful in certain contexts to refer to the same texts or translations as the readers in question.

³⁰ Georges Bataille, *Manet*, trans. by Austryn Wainhouse and James Emmons (New York: Skira, 1955), and *Lascaux: or the Birth of Art: Prehistoric Painting*, trans. by Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Skira, 1955).

³¹ One of the first major theoretical translations in this regard was *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988). See chapter three for a further list of these publications.

The Reception of Bataille During his Own Lifetime

This section traces a number of key moments in the reception of Bataille's work during his own lifetime, highlights selective but key moments which resonate through his posthumous reception, particularly his marginality in relation to various intellectual currents.

Bataille's earliest intellectual engagements and writing endeavours largely unfolded through a relationship to surrealism. As Henri Ronse wrote for *L'Arc* in 1967, 'En un sens, l'œuvre de Bataille est née à l'intérieur du surréalisme : pour s'en révéler dès l'abord différente, bientôt dissidente.'³² A perception of Bataille as dissident in relationship to intellectual orthodoxies thus first emerged through his polemic with André Breton. His relationship to surrealism was initially through the mediation of Michel Leiris whom he met in 1924 and who later introduced him to Breton. It was also through Leiris that Bataille had his only publication in *La Révolution surréaliste*, a translation of the thirteenth century poems 'Fatrassies' published in 1926. Around this time Leiris facilitated a meeting with Breton which did not go well. Breton thought Bataille was an 'obsédé'.³³ A sense of both personal and intellectual isolation emerges from accounts of Bataille during this period.³⁴ Leiris and Bataille had initially discussed the possibility of forming a literary movement but Leiris's sudden immersion in the surrealist group left Bataille feeling alienated. He describes his admiration for the life of meaning and belonging the surrealists seemed to live and his enviousness at that time of 'la vie plus vraie de ces écrivains reconnus'.³⁵

Bataille was given another opportunity to participate in the group when Breton issued him an invitation to attend a meeting in 1929. Bataille's response, 'trop d'emmerdeurs

³² Henri Ronse, *L'Arc*, 31 (1967), p.2.

³³ Bataille says he learned this from Leiris. He writes, 'je n'appris de lui que bien plus tard que Breton m'avait très défavorablement jugé. Je n'étais selon lui qu'un obsédé, c'est du moins le mot que Leiris employa'. 'Le Surréalisme au jour le jour', *OC VIII*, p.177.

³⁴ See for example Michel Leiris, *À propos de Georges Bataille* (Paris : Fourbis, 1988), Bataille, 'Le surréalisme au jour le jour', *OC VIII*, pp.169-84, and Michel Surya, 'Seul, Saint, Idiot, Fou', *Sainteté de Bataille*, pp.7-16.

³⁵ *OC VIII*, p.177.

idéalistes', exacerbated a rupture between him and Breton.³⁶ In the *Second manifeste du surréalisme* which contained a series of denunciations and exclusions, Breton famously attacked Bataille as an excremental philosopher. Not for the last time, Bataille would be subject to an attack which combined intellectual denunciation with personal and clinical diagnoses regarding his mental health. 'Un état de déficit conscient à forme généralisatrice, diraient les médecins',³⁷ Breton says before also adding that his writing displays 'un signe classique de psychasthénie'.³⁸ Where the Surrealists loved the marvellous, Bataille 'aime le mouches', and his interest in the morbid and the base rendered him a sick man for Breton.³⁹ Bataille and many of the former surrealists denounced by Breton signed a pamphlet entitled 'Un cadavre' in retaliation. When Bataille took up the editorship of *Documents* in 1929 he was joined by former surrealists, many of whom also frequented André Masson's studio. This group came to be known as the 'dissident' surrealists, though Bataille notes of their loose affiliations only *Documents* was the 'collaboration qui faisait la preuve de leur très faible cohésion'.⁴⁰

Bataille's heterodox and idiosyncratic articles for *Documents* developed his critique of the surrealists and wide-encompassing critiques of the entire category of art and aesthetics. In one of his last articles written for *Documents*, 'L'Esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions', Bataille takes his far-reaching critique of art to its logical conclusion, arguing that art is inherently sublimatory and thus an idealist betrayal of the disordering intensity of experience. Art and literature are compared to pharmaceutical products which alleviate pain and distract us from the harsh reality of death. Bataille writes, 'On entre chez le marchand de tableaux comme chez un pharmacien, en quête de remèdes bien présentés pour des maladies

³⁶ Bataille quoted in Michel Leiris, *À propos de Georges Bataille*, p.26.

³⁷ André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme*, (Paris: J.J. Pauvert, 1994), p.134.

³⁸ Breton, p.135.

³⁹ Breton, p. 134.

⁴⁰ Georges Bataille, 'La Publication d'"Un Cadavre"' (15 juin 1930) in Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, *Échanges et correspondances* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p.76.

avouable’, and ‘je défie n’importe quel amateur de peinture d’aimer une toile autant qu’un fétichiste aime une chaussure’.⁴¹ This was quite an extreme position: the avant-gardes, from surrealism to the situationists, advocated the fusion of art and everyday life, harvesting the revolutionary potential of the former in dialogue with the possibilities of political emancipation. While Bataille, in contrast to the surrealists, insisted on art’s negativity and non-utility in service of neither politics, a culture industry nor worldly transcendence, his critique of art for its incapacity to reach the intensity of obsessive experiences, for its apparent failure to completely jettison representation, suggested a more all-encompassing hostility to and dissatisfaction with art.

This critique of art, and development of base materialism, primarily emerged out of a critique of the surrealists. In a key essay from 1930, ‘La “Vieille taupe” et le préfixe *sur* dans les mots *surhomme* et *surréaliste*’, Bataille describes Breton’s view of all existence as being ‘*purement littéraire*’, an aesthetic sublimation.⁴² This extends his critique, made across numerous writings, against the surrealists’ tendency to convert the material into an ideal abstraction. We get a succinct account of this point in the short *Documents* entry, ‘Cheminée d’usine’ in which Bataille is scornful of how the ‘très misérables esthètes, en quête de placer leur chlorotique admiration, inventent platement la *beauté* des usines, la lugubre saleté de ces énormes tentacules m’apparaît d’autant plus écœurante, les flaques d’eau sous la pluie, à leur pied, dans les terrains vagues’.⁴³ What provokes a degree of fear and visceral disgust is often turned into a pleasing object of aesthetic contemplation, removing its original potency. In this case Bataille criticises the romanticization of the post-industrial but a parallel point is made in his critique of the surrealists’ tendency towards aestheticization. While surrealism was fascinated with sexuality, the unconscious, and the filth and detritus of the everyday, its prefix ‘*sur*’ indicates its tendency to valorize the ethereal and the icarian. The base becomes

⁴¹ OC I, p.273.

⁴² See OC II, p.105. Discussed in further detail below.

⁴³ OC I, p.206.

aestheticized and purified. The perspective of Breton's surrealists is thus beholden to a will towards overcoming and transcending the base. In 'La "Vieille taupe"' Bataille contrasts this icarian view of revolution as rising 'above' the world, or above social classes, with his own vision of a 'base' materialism starting with Marx's image of the 'vieille taupe', an image of revolution as an immanent geological decomposition from within, rather than a transcendence or flight from the ground. This materialism is manifestly anti-utopian. Where surrealism converts matter into an ideal form, base materialism attempts to continuously disrupt form and architecture.

Base Materialism and Deconstruction

Across various writings from this period it is regularly stressed that base materialism does not imply an ontology of the base or the object: 'j'entends d'un matérialisme n'impliquant pas d'ontologie, n'impliquant pas que la matière est la chose en soi'.⁴⁴ If Breton tends to convert material complexities into an ideal abstraction, Bataille's response is not to assert *real* experience as an authentic reality in opposition to theory. Base materialism, rather, aims to continuously disrupt and deconstruct any opposition between experience and theory, or the material and the abstract. From this perspective everyday experience is always already abstract and conceptual, partially because it is never fully present to itself. At this point it is worth underlining one of the manners in which base materialism foregrounds Derrida's work. In one elaboration of *écriture*, for example, Derrida explains that 'Le jeu des différences suppose en effet des synthèses et des renvois qui interdisent qu'à aucun moment, en aucun sens, un élément simple soit présent en lui-même et ne renvoie qu'à lui-même'.⁴⁵ Similarly Bataille's 'L'Anus solaire' (1929) stresses that 'le monde est purement parodique, c'est-à-dire que chaque chose qu'on regarde est la parodie d'une autre'.⁴⁶ The parodic nature of all being, which can never be fully present to itself, is developed here by Bataille on a

⁴⁴ OC I, p.225.

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), p.37.

⁴⁶ OC I, p.81.

cosmological level, considering the rotation of the earth in erotic terms. Derrida begins from a more linguistic level but the initially textual engagement entails a deconstruction of the relationship between language *and world*.⁴⁷ While often attentive to the contradictions of language, Bataille often focuses on the same issues of spectrality and absence but often from a more macro-level cosmological perspective than that commonly associated with Deconstruction. For example, where he later writes in *Sur Nietzsche* (1943) that ‘La terre est dans le ciel où elle tourne’, he echoes the cosmological perspective of ‘L’Anus solaire’. However at other times when he addresses similar themes of cosmological parody and spectrality, his starting point is often from the perspective of our entrapment within language, as when he writes in ‘Le labyrinthe’ (1936), ‘Toute l’existence, en ce qui concerne les hommes, se lie en particulier au langage, dont les termes en fixent les modes d’apparition à l’intérieure de chaque personne.’⁴⁸ ‘Being’ from a human perspective can only be defined as being mediated by language, and this is one of the reasons why ‘being’ can only be defined as ‘être en rapport’. From a cosmological and linguistic perspective then, for Bataille each thing is contaminated by what it is not. The earth depends upon the sky within which it rotates; the non-discursive real, which Bataille yearns for, is nevertheless contaminated by the discursive means through which it is initially mediated, and existence cannot be ontologically fixed. This is why I define Bataille’s materialism as both relational and highly conceptual. Accounts of materialism which too quickly dispense with the contradictions of language, or disavow the abstractions and spectrality inscribed within worldly experience in a quest for primitive intensity or a fragment of the ‘real’, are thus treated with critical suspicion throughout this thesis.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ In this sense I critique the tendency of many ‘anti-theory’ readers of Bataille, such as Andrew Hussey and Michael Richardson, to depict Derrida’s work as simplistically linguistic whereas linguistic idealism was a precise target of deconstruction. This point is explored in chapter three.

⁴⁸ *OC I*, p.436.

⁴⁹ These points are given more thorough treatment in chapters three and four.

Two more fundamental points of tension between Bataille's materialism and Derrida's deconstruction should be underlined here. Firstly, the importance of dread and horror occupies a more central place in Bataille's thought. This is another central point of his materialist critique of the surrealists. In 'La Valeur d'usage de D.A.F de Sade' he critiques the surrealists' veneration of Sade in a manner that again aestheticizes the repellent, deflates the capacity of Sade's work to provoke fear and visceral disgust, and instead converts him into an object of worthy adoration. 'Le comportement des admirateurs à l'égard de Sade', he writes, 'ressemble à celui des sujets primitifs à l'égard du roi qu'ils adorent en l'exécrant et qu'ils couvrent d'honneurs en le paralysant étroitement'.⁵⁰ From this perspective admirers of Sade are similarly compared to Christians before Jesus. They follow the same route as contemporary religion which has suppressed what Bataille sees as an essential religious experience, horror. The experience of the sacred is characterised by a dualism between high and low, which Bataille would later theorise according to the right-hand and the left-hand, or the pure and impure.⁵¹ The former is characterised by attraction and purity, an experience of veneration often before the celestial and divine. The latter is characterised by the base and repugnant, encompassing experiences of disgust, fear and horror before objects of taboo. The trajectory of modern religion has been to create a scission and repression within this dualism, separating out these experiences and giving priority to the high and pure experience of the sacred. Surrealism repeats what Bataille sees as a disappointing trajectory of modern religion by homogenizing the sacred, making of the base an object of divine and pure veneration, removing its capacity to provoke horror.

Another point of differentiation with Derrida is that Bataille developed his materialism in explicitly politicised terms. For example, the development of his materialism

⁵⁰ OC II, p.56.

⁵¹ The lectures comprising *Le Collège de sociologie* (1937 – 1939) tend to frame the sacred according to the left and right hand, while in later works such *Théorie de la religion* (1948) the distinction is between the impure and the pure sacred.

in ‘La Vieille taupe’ was based on Marx’s image from the *Communist Manifesto* of an old mole as a starting point for an anti-utopian image of revolution, one of immanent materialism. After his wide-ranging critique of art in *Documents*, Bataille spent most of the nineteen thirties writing about the political and its relationship to the sacred, firstly with Boris Souvarine’s dissident communist group the ‘Cercle communiste démocratique’, publishing in the review *La Critique sociale* (1931-34), collaborating with the far left review *Masses* (1933), briefly reconciling with Breton’s surrealists for the anti-fascist *Contre-attaque* (1935-36), and the *Acéphale* review (1936-39) which, while being an organ ‘farouchement religieux’,⁵² also argued, in the words of Kierkegaard, that ‘Ce qui avait visage de politique et s’imaginait être politique, se démasquera un jour comme mouvement religieux’.⁵³ Bataille’s thought at the Collège de Sociologie, between 1937 and 1939, and his development of a ‘sociologie sacrée’, often displayed a seemingly anti-political trajectory, but at the same time the group’s considerations of the sacred developed with a distinctly political consciousness, particularly in relation to the contemporary rise of fascism in Europe.⁵⁴ Bataille’s increasingly religious thought, and anti-political sentiments during this period, also entailed a deconstruction between the religious and the political. As the Kierkegaard quote implies, a turn away from an explicitly political engagement was partially motivated by the insight that the political is underpinned by the religious.

Increasing Intellectual and Personal Isolation

The dissipation of the Collège de Sociologie in 1939 was a key moment of a turn in Bataille’s thought away from explicitly political considerations. This is also a significant moment of intellectual and personal isolation in Bataille’s life. Given that this thesis considers how various readings of Bataille as an intellectually and culturally marginal figure it is important

⁵² OC I, p.443.

⁵³ Kierkegaard quoted in OC I, p.442.

⁵⁴ For example, the Collège published a response to the 1938 Munich accords in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. ‘Déclaration du Collège de Sociologie sur la crise internationale’ *NRF*, 302 (1938), 874-76. Reprinted in Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie* (Paris : Gallimard, 1979), pp. 98-104.

to highlight such specific moments when he encountered an enhanced sense of isolation and intellectual marginality during his own lifetime. At this point Bataille had not yet released a book under his own name.⁵⁵ He was known and read by a small but influential group of Parisian intellectuals. Meetings of *Le Collège de sociologie* were advertised in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and attracted up to fifty people, including figures such as Sartre and Walter Benjamin. Patrick Waldberg similarly describes Bataille's audience at this time as small but qualitatively significant. In an essay originally published in *Le Quinzaine littéraire* in 1995, Waldberg begins by describing Acéphale, of which he was a member, as the result of a trajectory of thought that 'on peut suivre la trace manifeste depuis 1929', before continuing:

Bataille, en ces quelques années, s'était constituée une audience. Rien de comparable à la vogue universitaire et 'contestataire' qui dilue aujourd'hui son œuvre dans une marée d'exégèses abstruses et généralement abusives, mais une audience faible en nombre, certes, quoique qualitativement appréciable.⁵⁶

In contrast to a figure like Walter Benjamin, whose reception has almost been entirely posthumous, Bataille does have an audience in nineteen-thirties Paris which, as Waldberg highlights, is numerically small but 'qualitativement appréciable'. However, that limited reception reaches an ebb in 1939 when a number of significant events contributed to an enhanced sense of personal and intellectual isolation. Bataille's lover Laure died in 1938 and in 1939 the dissolution of Acéphale and the Collège de sociologie, in both cases largely against his will, left him in a pronounced position of isolation. The last meeting of the Collège had been scheduled to be delivered by Bataille and the other founding members, Michel Leiris and Roger Caillois. However, Bataille was left to deliver it alone. His colleagues found his deviations from more conventional sociological principles deeply problematic, and were particularly concerned by the increasingly mystical tenor of his

⁵⁵ Unless one counts the publication of the short essay *L'Anus solaire* (Galerie Simon: Paris, 1931).

⁵⁶ Patrick Waldberg, 'Acephalogramme', *L'Apprenti sorcier*, ed. by Marina Galletti (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1999), p.586.

thought. Similarly, Bataille was left alone at the last meeting of *Acéphale* with none of the other members willing to grant his request for sacrifice, according to Waldberg's account:

À la dernière rencontre au cœur de la forêt nous n'étions que quatre et Bataille demanda solennellement aux trois autres de bien vouloir le mettre à mort, afin que ce sacrifice, fondant le mythe assurât la survie de la communauté. Cette faveur lui fut refusée.⁵⁷

Bataille's sense of abandonment and isolation during this period comes across in his own writing. He writes, for example, in the last communication to the members of *Acéphale* 'certains d'entre vous m'avaient *abandonné*. Ce qui me fait mal dans cet abandon, c'est qu'il avait de brutal et de sourd'.⁵⁸ Soon after the outbreak of the war and the dissolution of *Acéphale* and the Collège, Bataille began writing *Le Coupable*, a text which accentuates his sense of isolation and solitude. In his 'Notice autobiographique' he writes that 'Une mort l'a déchiré en 1938. C'est dans une solitude achevée qu'il commence d'écrire, dans les premiers jours de la guerre, *Le Coupable*, où il décrit à mesure une expérience mystique hétérodoxe, en même temps que certaines de ses réactions devant les événements'.⁵⁹ *Le Coupable* marked a distinct turn in Bataille's work. Where his pursuit of a 'sociologie sacrée' at the Collège was, to a large extent, a collective endeavour, and the culmination of an ongoing dialogue between the sacred and the political in his work, the pursuit of 'inner experience' was done largely in isolation. In 1942 he published *L'Expérience intérieure*, the first book published under his own name. The book was reviewed by Jean-Paul Sartre in the essay 'Un nouveau mystique', published in two parts in *Cahiers du sud* in November and December of 1943. Bataille was still barely known at the age of 47, while Sartre was on the brink of becoming one of the most influential intellectuals of his generation. As the first long article on Bataille it is thus a crucial moment in the reception of his work. The fact that Sartre dedicated such a lengthy review to this first book by Bataille lends his initial reception a historical weight, and as we

⁵⁷ Patrick Waldberg, 'Acéphalogramme', *L'Apprenti sorcier*, p.597.

⁵⁸ 'Georges Bataille aux membres d'Acéphale', *L'Apprenti sorcier*, p.565. Use of italics within quotations are authors own, except where otherwise stated.

⁵⁹ *OC VII*, p.462.

will see it is an article that critics repeatedly feel compelled to address throughout the posthumous reception.

‘Un nouveau mystique’

If many of the posthumous advocates of Bataille in France and America, from *Tel Quel* to *October*, were to contextualise him as a dissident opponent to surrealism, it is noteworthy that Sartre’s denunciation of Bataille situates him in close proximity to the group. Sartre writes, ‘Enfin M.Bataille a passé tout près du surréalisme et personne autant que les surréalistes n’a cultivé le genre de l’essai martyre.’⁶⁰ One of the striking aspects of reading ‘Un nouveau mystique’ now, given the volume of posthumous appraisal of Bataille’s originality as a thinker, is precisely the extent to which Sartre denies Bataille’s originality. ‘À vrai dire, cette forme qui paraît encore si neuve a déjà une tradition’, writes Sartre attempting to familiarise the strangeness of Bataille’s text. His ‘mépris fiévreux’ finds a predecessor in Pascal, while certain pages of *L’Expérience intérieure*, he continues, ‘avec leur désordre haletant, leur symbolisme passionné, leur ton de prédication prophétique, semblent sorties de *Ecce homo* ou de *La Volonté de puissance*’. Countering the apparent strangeness and originality of the book Sartre says it can actually be situated within a definite tradition: ‘Les *Pensées*, les *Confessions*, *Ecce homo*, *Les Pas perdus*, *L’Amour fou*, le *Traité du style*, *L’Age d’homme*: c’est dans cette série de “géométries passionnées” que *L’Expérience intérieure* prend sa place.’⁶¹ Sartre even points to passages where he claims Bataille ‘s’amuse à pasticher le style de Pascal’.⁶² *L’Expérience intérieure* attempts to communicate ‘une expérience particulière de l’absurde’, but Sartre denies that particularity, writing that in reality ‘cette expérience se retrouve, de façon ou d’autre chez la plupart des auteurs contemporains’.⁶³ The only

⁶⁰ Further contextualizing Bataille amongs the surrealists Sartre continues, ‘pour ces auteurs impatients de s’engager et qui méprisaient le calme métier d’écrire, chaque ouvrage devait être un risque à courir’. Sartre, ‘Un nouveau mystique’, *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p.174.

⁶¹ Sartre, *Situations I*, p 176.

⁶² Sartre, *Situations I*, p.176.

⁶³ Sartre, *Situations I*, p.183.

originality Sartre grants Bataille is on highly derogatory terms. In his conclusion he writes, 'Mais la critique littéraire trouve ici ses limites. Le reste est l'affaire de la psychanalyse'⁶⁴, implying that Bataille's originality is rather in the mental instability his writing betrays. Like Breton, Sartre pathologizes Bataille mixing the intellectual with the personal.⁶⁵ Sartre's article highlights a central paradox of Bataille's reception that although his writing style is often marked by an aggressive tone, he finds himself in the position of a victim, or a defendant. He is yet again in a markedly isolated position. Where his original limited notoriety was as a subject of denunciation of Breton's surrealism, now he was again being received as a subject of denunciation of the newly emerging intellectual hegemony in Paris in the form of Sartre's existentialism.

In March 1944, only four months after the publication of 'Un nouveau mystique', Bataille presented a part of *Sur Nietzsche* under the title 'Discussion sur le péché'. An edited version of Bataille's presentation and the subsequent discussion was published in the book itself the following year.⁶⁶ Somewhat like Bataille's readership, the audience was small but significant. There was a mixture of Christians, leading thinkers who at that time were intellectually closer to Sartre than Bataille, including Simone De Beauvoir and possibly Albert Camus, friends of Bataille such as Blanchot and Leiris, and others occupying a more ambivalent position such as Pierre Klossowski. Bataille defended his work against various accusations, that he was too Christian or not Christian enough, and the text is marked by the absence of any intervention from friends more sympathetic to his work such as Blanchot and Leiris. Klossowski occupied an ambivalent position as he was a friend of Bataille and collaborated with him at the *Collège de sociologie* and in *Acéphale* but now seemed more markedly distant, in intellectual terms at least. Along with Sartre's 'Un nouveau mystique'

⁶⁴ Sartre, *Situations I*, p.213.

⁶⁵ He also refers to Bataille's 'orgueil maladif', Sartre, p.213.

⁶⁶ It was also published in a Christian journal, *Dieu vivant* no.4, 1945. The section of *Sur Nietzsche* entitled 'Le Sommet et le déclin' is a revised version of Bataille's presentation.

and Blanchot's 'L'Expérience intérieure'⁶⁷, another major early article to appear on Bataille was 'L'Expérience de la mort de Dieu chez Nietzsche et la nostalgie d'une expérience authentique chez Georges Bataille' in Klossowski's *Sade mon prochain* (1947). Klossowski contextualised Bataille and his accomplices alongside the surrealists but stresses their dissidence, primarily their privileging of myth. He writes, 'Rétablir la détermination de l'existence par le myth, c'est à quoi vont se rallier les jeunes gens autour de Bataille'. He clarifies that 'Ces jeunes gens avaient dépassé le surréalisme en ce sens qu'ils ne se faisaient plus d'illusion quant au rôle que l'intellectuel peut jouer par rapport aux événements'.⁶⁸ For Klossowski then, Bataille's dissidence was partially defined as anti-political, or as 'un nihilisme politique absolue'.⁶⁹ He went on to critique Bataille's view as lacking in authenticity. For Klossowski, Bataille was attempting to relive the death of God experienced by Nietzsche. His project was thus shrouded in nostalgia and lacking in authenticity as 'il n'a pas eu le *privilège*, si j'ose dire, du châtement nietzschéen'.⁷⁰

During the 'Discussion sur le péché' Klossowski introduces Bataille but does not intervene in his defence under Sartre, nor gives any indication of alliance.⁷¹ While Bataille manages to communicate a sense of authenticity to at least some of the audience,⁷² he ends with a striking statement of his feeling of isolation before his interlocutors:

⁶⁷ Blanchot, 'L'Expérience Intérieure', *Faux pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), pp. 51-56.

⁶⁸ Pierre Klossowski, 'L'Expérience de la mort de Dieu chez Nietzsche et la nostalgie d'une expérience authentique chez Georges Bataille', *Sade mon prochain* (Paris: Seuil, 1947), p.160.

⁶⁹ Pierre Klossowski, *Sade mon prochain*, p.163 Patrick Waldberg offers a parallel perspective to Klossowski regarding the increasingly anti-political orientation of the group around Bataille: 'Toutefois, pour certains, dont je suis, l'expression "changer la vie" avait cessé d'être une formule creuse. Quant à la "transformation du monde", il est devenu de plus en plus clair qu'elle demeure à jamais sans pouvoir sur la nature profonde de l'être humain', Waldberg, *L'Apprenti sorcier*. p.597.

⁷⁰ Klossowski, *Sade mon prochain*, p.176.

⁷¹ At another conference on Surrealism in 1947, Klossowski provokes Bataille's ire by saying 'Je vous ai trouvé catholique à certains moments', to which Bataille replies, 'Je ne me sens pas d'accord pour protester contre cette qualification de catholique. Si on me dit quelque chose de tout à fait insoutenable, je ne réponds pas.' Bataille, 'La Religion surréaliste', in *OC VII*, p.397.

⁷² Some remarks are made about the sincerity of his tone, and Hyppolite comments at the end, 'Je ne vous connaissais pas, vraiment je suis mieux arrivé à comprendre votre position ici que par votre livre'. 'Discussion sur le péché', in *OC VI*, p.357.

Je me sens placé vis-à-vis de vous comme le contraire de celui qui regarde tranquillement depuis le rivage les vaisseaux qui sont dématés. Je suis sûr que le vaisseau est dématé. Et je dois insister là-dessus.⁷³

Michel Surya highlights the extent of Bataille's isolation during the evening of the presentation. Blanchot's silence is particularly striking given his close friendship and his deep understanding and involvement in Bataille's development of inner experience.⁷⁴ Surya writes, 'Le Silence qu'il observe ce soir-là n'en est que plus surprenant. Il laisse Bataille seul face à l'accusation qui lui est faite (quelle qu'elle soit, d'être trop chrétien ou de ne pas l'être assez, selon les partis qui l'accusent et, incidemment, le jugent), il l'y abandonne.'⁷⁵ Here Bataille is not only subject to his audience's 'méconnaissance', he is again portrayed as being 'abandonné', as a victim in the reception of his own work. Surya concludes, 'Blanchot, ce soir-là, a fait que Bataille ne put compter sur personne, qu'il se sut seul qu'il ne fut *commun* à nul autre, *pas même à Blanchot*.'⁷⁶

'inconnue', 'méconnue', 'malentendu'...

Bataille found himself in a defensive and isolated position for his intellectual stance on numerous occasions. A similarly striking episode occurs much later in 1957, a key year in the reception of his work when he released three books with three different publishers, *La Littérature et le mal* with Gallimard, *L'Érotisme* with Éditions de Minuit, and *Le Bleu du ciel* with Jean-Jacques Pauvert. Bataille presented a version of the introduction to *L'Érotisme* at a conference and subsequent debate on February 12th, attended by Breton, André Masson, Hans Bellmer, and Jean Wahl among others. As noted in the published debate which followed the conference, 'Bataille est violemment pris à partie par ceux des participants qui s'opposent à ses propositions (la fascination de la mort, le rôle de l'homosexualité, le point de

⁷³ OC VI, p.358.

⁷⁴ Conversations with Blanchot form part of *L'Expérience intérieure* while Blanchot also wrote an important early review article 'L'expérience intérieure' (1943) referenced above.

⁷⁵ Michel Surya, *Sainteté de Bataille* (Paris: Éditions de l'éclat, 2012), p.141.

⁷⁶ Surya, *Sainteté de Bataille*, p.142.

vue exclusivement masculin, rejet de la psychanalyse)'.⁷⁷ Bataille feels compelled to make an aggressive defence against Héraud's critique of his failure to represent the point of view of the collective. He says, 'Il me semble qu'il y a eu malentendu et vous m'excuserez d'avoir répondu avec un peu de violence.'⁷⁸ Like his posthumous celebrants discussed below, Bataille is here in the position of correcting another 'malentendu'.

Upon the publication of his three books in 1957, a birthday celebration was organised for Bataille by the three editors. This earned coverage in an article in *France Littéraire*, where his works were described as 'bien autre chose que de la critique littéraire'. Interviewed for the article, Bataille pointed towards his dissatisfaction with institutional and philosophical discourse. 'Ce que la philosophie exprime sur le plan universitaire, dit-il, ne va pas jusqu'au bout. La philosophie ne peut s'exprimer que d'une façon littéraire.'⁷⁹ Marguerite Duras interviewed Bataille the following month in December 1957 for *France Observateur*, he appeared in a television interview to discuss *La Littérature et le mal* in 1958, and that year a new review entitled *La Ciguë* published an 'Hommage à Georges Bataille'.⁸⁰

Despite this increase in media attention, Bataille remained a relatively unread and unknown figure beyond Parisian intellectual circles. He once remarked to his friend Georges Delteil, 'Tu sais, il n'y a que quatre cents personnes qui me lisent',⁸¹ while *La Part maudite*, which he considered his most important work, only sold approximately fifty copies in its first year.⁸² His obituary in *Combat* anticipates an overdue posthumous appreciation, noting his relatively small readership, speculating 'Mais il y a à parier que

⁷⁷ OC X, p.692.

⁷⁸ OC X, p.694. On this occasion Bataille has at least one ally, Jean Wahl, who defends his position: 'Rien de ce qu'a dit Georges Bataille ne m'est étranger. Je pense que beaucoup d'entre nous ont pu suivre d'un bout à l'autre son admirable conférence.' OC X, p.693.

⁷⁹ Bataille quoted in Pierre Mazars, "'La Littérature est du côté du mal'" explique Georges Bataille', *Le Figaro Littéraire*, 12 Octobre 1957, p.3.

⁸⁰ *La Ciguë* 1 (1958).

⁸¹ Extract from a letter addressed to Jean Piel from Georges Delteil in *Critique*, 195-6 (1963), p.675.

⁸² Alfred Métraux writes 'Georges Bataille m'a souvent répété qu'il considérait *La Part maudite* comme son œuvre la plus importante', Métraux, 'Rencontre avec les ethnologues', *Critique*, 195-6 (1963), p.680.

Georges Bataille ne sera plus longtemps un auteur pour les happy few'.⁸³ The title of the *Combat* obituary 'Georges Bataille écrivain méconnu' is indicative of the starting point for the trajectory of his reception in France and abroad. Bataille, it is often suggested, was consistently 'méconnu' during his own time, generating a necessity to correct the many misunderstandings and dismissals. The various 'méconnaissances' in the initial reception of Bataille as well as the major critiques and experiences of intellectual isolation thus create a structural reading economy for his posthumous reception whereby readers are often in the position, consciously or not, of correcting the misunderstandings of the initial reception.

'Célébration Posthume'

Upon the 1967 *L'Arc* special issue dedicated to Bataille, perhaps the most significant moment in reception since the 1963 *Critique: hommage à Georges Bataille*, editor Henri Ronse was interviewed for a long article in *Le Monde* entitled 'Georges Bataille: une pensée à découvrir' where it is noted:

Le dernier malentendu sur l'œuvre de Bataille serait donc celui-là : une pensée dont l'éclat est affirmé dans toutes les manifestations les plus avancées de la pensée contemporaine et qui demeure pourtant, elle-même, largement inconnue, méconnue.⁸⁴

Bataille has remained largely unknown but now, as Ronse highlights, the emergence of recognition brings with it the threat of misunderstanding, or recuperation and domestication. Where his work is not 'inconnue', it is often 'méconnue'. The reception of Bataille's work is caught in a double-bind at this stage. On the one hand, the difficulty of locating all of Bataille's writings and the, at this stage, far from complete editorial task involved in collecting his work into one body contributes to various misunderstandings, Ronse suggests, due to limited access to the wide scope of his writings. As Ronse writes, 'Cette œuvre qui attend encore d'être complète, puisque subsistent de nombreux inédits, est rien moins qu'une

⁸³ Vittorio de Villabruna, 'Georges Bataille, écrivain méconnu', *Combat*, 5626, 26 Juillet 1962, p.7.

⁸⁴ Henri Ronse. (Propos recueillis par Roger Borderie) 'Georges Bataille : une pensée à découvrir', *Le Monde*, 21 Juin 1967, p.111.

“œuvre”, ce qui autorise toutes les exploitations, et tous les malentendus’.⁸⁵ Yet as we have noted the very idea of gathering Bataille’s work into one ‘œuvre’ is problematic in itself, to an extent betraying the subversion of authorship sought by the texts’ use of the fragmentary and the pseudonymous.

Ronse was even more conscious of these contradictions four years later when *L’Arc* published a second special issue on Bataille in 1971. In his editorial comments, Ronse stresses the disparity between the reception of Bataille’s work during his own lifetime, either ignored or misunderstood, and the ‘célébration posthume’ which Ronse notes has vastly accelerated in the four years since the last *L’Arc* special issue. The increased interest in such a short space of time is attributed to ‘la multiplication des commentaires et hommages qui en font l’une des références obliges d’un nouvel espace littéraire’.⁸⁶ Ronse continues:

Cette célébration posthume – qui peut surprendre, succédant à une méconnaissance obstinée (dont témoignent identiquement, à vingt ans d’intervalle, les ‘critiques’ de Breton et de Sartre), et prend soudain la forme d’une levée des interdits – ne marque-t-elle pas l’heure de la récupération de l’œuvre de Bataille dans l’une des impasses ou des clôtures auxquelles son outrage systématique lui permit d’échapper ?⁸⁷

Bataille’s ‘méconnaissance’ and subsequent marginality operates in a number of ways. It is passive in one respect because he simply does not receive the attention many felt he should have, including himself as the expression of surprise at his limited readership to Georges Delteil suggests. He is also more actively marginalised because of the denunciations of his work. This then permits the embrace of that marginalisation, the use of an outsider status to

⁸⁵ *Le Monde*, 21 Juin 1967, p.111.

⁸⁶ At this point the key texts and hommages between 1967 and 1971 would include ‘Le Group le rupture’, *Change*, 7, 1970, which focused on the surrealists. It included Bataille’s ‘Le Surréalisme au jour le jour’, a letter from Bataille to Artaud, ‘Texte envoyé à “3^e Convoi ”’ and Pierre Klossowski’s ‘De “Contre-attaque” à “Acéphale”’. Key *Tel Quel* texts during this period include Philippe Sollers, ‘Le Toit’, *Tel Quel* 29 (1967), and Denis Hollier, ‘Le Savoir formel’, *Tel Quel* 34 (1968). See also Hollier, ‘Le Dispositif Hegel/Nietzsche dans la bibliothèque de Bataille’, *L’Arc*, 38 (1969). An increasing number of articles in the popular press were published during this period. For a list, see Daniel Hawley, ‘Bibliographie annotée de la critique sur Georges Bataille de 1929 à 1975’. 1971 also saw an exhibition and series of talks on Bataille at the Bibliothèque Municipale Orléans. See the catalogue collection *Bataille, etc ... hommage à Georges Bataille* (Orléans : Maison de la culture d’Orléans, 1971).

⁸⁷ Henri Ronse, ‘L’Apprenti sorcier’, *L’Arc*, 44 (1971), p.1.

reinforce a sense of dissidence and political legitimacy on posthumous readers of Bataille, which we see in many of the readings at *Tel Quel*, amongst other readings.

Whether or not readers chose, like Philippe Sollers and the *Tel Quel* journal, to actively embrace and utilise Bataille's outsider status, the notoriety and impact of the denunciations by Sartre and Breton to an extent created a structural reading economy whereby posthumous readers were pulled towards responding to, correcting, or in some sense orienting their readings around, these initial denunciations. In Derrida's landmark 1967 essay for example, there is little direct mention of Sartre in the text, but so many of his statements are implicit retorts to 'Un nouveau nystique'. Five footnotes refer back to Sartre's article,⁸⁸ making clear that many of Derrida's arguments are framed as corrections to Sartre's misreading, and at the end of the essay he states bluntly, 'Bataille n'est surtout pas un nouveau mystique' in retort to Sartre's essay.⁸⁹

Sollers is much more explicit about the conditions of Bataille's reception. He begins several of his interventions on Bataille by framing his reception as an outsider. In an interview in 1971 he says, 'l'entre-deux-guerres surréaliste puis l'après-guerre existentialiste ont chacun à son tour à la fois ignoré et rejeté, méconnu et refusé Bataille : Breton d'abord (en 1929), Sartre ensuite (en 1943) écrivent contre lui [...] cette situation place sous le signe de la malédiction ce que l'on peut désigner comme première époque de l'écriture de Bataille'.⁹⁰ Sollers consolidates this perspective at the 1972 *Artaud/Bataille* conference organized by *Tel Quel*. The pairing of Bataille with Artaud for the conference was partially motivated by their framing as 'dissidents' or outsider antagonists to surrealism. Sylvère Lotringer wrote a review article of the event for *Substance* in 1972 and offered the following justification for the pairing of the two writers:

⁸⁸ See footnotes 8, 12, 22, 24 and 25 on pp. 28, 31, 37 and 38 of Derrida, 'De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale : un Hégélianisme sans réserve', *L'Arc*, 32 (1967), 24-45. For further discussion of Derrida's important essay see chapter two.

⁸⁹ Derrida, *L'Arc*, 32, p.40.

⁹⁰ Philippe Sollers, 'Bataille et la littérature actuelle', *Bataille, etc...hommage à Georges Bataille*, p.13.

C'est que l'on est *autodidacte* (Bataille) et l'autre *fou* (Artaud), tous deux en somme déchets de notre culture et dont notre culture se passerait volontiers car si elle les a, de toute évidence, raté, eux, du moins, ne la ratent pas. Artaud, Bataille, donc *parce que* fou (hors du cercle répressif de la raison) et autodidacte (hors du circuit récupérateur de l'université).⁹¹

However, Bataille's status as an outsider was threatened by a potential revisionist recuperation within a surrealist narrative. Jean-Louis Houdebine's essay examined the problematic relationship to surrealism and attempted to re-inforce Bataille's distance from the movement against the proliferation of a number of revisionist narratives. Houdebine notes at the beginning of his published article, 'on le sait, les tentatives de réconciliation posthume, d'appropriation-absorption du texte de Bataille par/dans la vieillerie surréaliste, n'ont pas manqué ces dernières années, de *Change* à *Opus international* et aux *Lettres françaises*. Sur ce plan, l'effectuation de l'en-jeu est aussi une lutte.'⁹²

The Disputed Surrealist Legacy

The debate over Bataille's disputed proximity to surrealism largely stemmed from the reevaluation of his relationship to the movement after the war, displaying a more complex and ambivalent attitude. One of the earliest examples of his reevaluation of surrealism comes in *L'Expérience intérieure* where he wrote 'Je situe mes efforts à la suite, à côté du surréalisme'.⁹³ A renewed and more sympathetic interest was compounded by several key articles including 'Le Sens moral de la sociologie' (1946) and 'Le Surréalisme et sa différence avec l'existentialisme' (1946) which was published in the second issue of *Critique*, and 'À Propos d'assoupissements' (1946). It was the latter article from which Houdebine took the title of his essay. In the article Bataille explains that whenever the occasion has arisen he has found himself opposing surrealism. But he writes:

⁹¹ Sylvère Lotringer, 'Artaud, Bataille et le matérialisme dialectique', *Substance*, 5-6 (1972-3) p.207. Lotringer was the founder of landmark journal *Semiotext(e)*, which was the first Anglophone journal to dedicate a special issue to Bataille in 1976, *Semiotext(e)*, 2 (1976). See chapter two for further reference to this.

⁹² Jean-Louis Houdebine, 'L'Ennemi du dedans', in *Bataille*, ed. by Sollers, p.154.

⁹³ *OC* V, p.193.

Je voudrais maintenant l'affirmer du dedans comme l'exigence que j'ai subie et comme l'insatisfaction que je suis. Mais ceci d'assez clair ressort : le surréalisme est défini par la possibilité que son vieil ennemi *du dedans*, que je suis, a de le définir décidément.⁹⁴

Houdebine contextualises Bataille's revisiting of surrealism as being informed by a degree of intellectual and ideological solitude. He points to the political and ideological exigencies and pressures entailed in publishing a review like *Critique*, and also points to 'l'extrême solitude' of Bataille during this period.⁹⁵ A major factor in Bataille's more nuanced position towards surrealism between 1945 and 1950 then is partially because 'le champ idéologique est en train de se déplacer historiquement, que le surréalisme [...] n'est déjà plus la formation idéologique dominante dans le secteur de l'avant-garde'.⁹⁶ As Bataille remarked in a 1947 article, existentialism during this period benefited 'd'une vogue exceptionnelle',⁹⁷ and his contextualisation of his more sympathetic writings on surrealism in opposition to existentialism strongly support Houdebine's claims about ideological positioning. In 'À propos d'assoupissements', for example, he had an extended footnote about 'la littérature engagée' which he here claims to not be fundamentally opposed to it in principle. However just as Sartre attempted to reduce Bataille's originality to a number of precedents, including the surrealists, Bataille attempts a similar manoeuvre here. Following his comment on engaged literature, which he says is today 'reprise par Jean-Paul Sartre', Bataille continues, 'Il me semble néanmoins nécessaire ici de rappeler qu'il y a vingt ans Breton misa sur ce principe toute l'activité du surréalisme. Je dois en même temps rappeler que la seconde affirmation de l'école existentialiste – disant que l'existence précède l'essence – fut familière au surréalisme'. If existentialism follows surrealism in many respects, it lacks, for Bataille,

⁹⁴ OC XI, p.31.

⁹⁵ Houdebine, *Bataille*, ed. by Sollers, p.196.

⁹⁶ Houdebine, *Bataille*, p.159.

⁹⁷ 'De l'existentialisme au primat de l'économie', OC XI, p.279.

the religious sensibility of surrealism. He notes here that ‘bien que le surréalisme semble mort [...] *en matière d’arrachement de l’homme à lui-même*, il y a le surréalisme et rien’.⁹⁸

For Bataille, both surrealism and existentialism subordinated the complexities, contradictions, and experience of the present to a future goal. In existentialism, the concept of engagement subordinated writing to the future in the form of being in service of the political. In surrealism, the tendency to aestheticize experience betrayed a desire for a moment of transcendence that sublimated and smoothened over the contradictions of the present. However, revisiting surrealism in the context of an existentialist vogue, Bataille aligned himself, to an extent, with the religious impulses guiding surrealism.⁹⁹

If Breton reduced everything to the ‘*purement littéraire*’,¹⁰⁰ and Sartre reduced literature to being *in service* of engagement, or the political, then both surrealism and existentialism were fatally compromised by a functionalism, a subservience to the future. However, returning to surrealism, itself somewhat ‘outmoded’ in a postwar context, Bataille expressed an affinity for the religious sensibility and extracted certain possibilities from it as a somewhat outmoded movement. In an interview given near the end of his life, Bataille underlined the potential he saw in surrealism as outmoded. ‘Mes rapports avec le surréalisme’, he says, ‘je ne pourrais mieux les exprimer qu’en parlant d’une idée qui m’est venue, je crois hier ou avant-hier, de faire un livre qui porterait sur la première page de la couverture *Le Surréalisme est mort* et sur l’envers de cette couverture *Vive le surréalisme*.’¹⁰¹ However in the same interview he underlines his ongoing opposition to surrealism in a fundamental respect. While he expresses an affinity with the surrealist rage against reason, he

⁹⁸ OC XI, p.32.

⁹⁹ As Bataille says later in life ‘le surréalisme me paraît toucher à l’essentiel [...] il y a dans le surréalisme quelque chose de profondément religieux’, Madeleine Chapsal, *Quinze écrivains : entretiens* (Paris: René Julliard, 1963), p.16.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Il est regrettable, disons nous, que rien ne puisse entrer dans la tête confuse de M. Breton sinon sous la forme poétique. Toute l’existence, *purement littéraire*, de M. Breton le détourne de ce qui se produit autour de lui d’événements mesquins, sinistres ou plats, de ce qui constitue une décomposition réelle d’un monde immense’, OC II, p.93.

¹⁰¹ Bataille in Madeleine Chapsal, *Quinze écrivains : entretiens*, p.16.

underlines his ongoing contrasting deduction. Where the surrealists see a possibility for transcendence, reconciliation with the world, or in the vocabulary he uses here, 'réforme', Bataille sees that rage and discordance with the world as persistent and necessarily irresolvable. 'C'est peut-être d'ailleurs en ce point que je me suis toujours senti plus ou moins opposé aux surréalistes qui, eux, faisaient la part plus grande que moi à une possibilité de réforme.'¹⁰²

After his death, several of Bataille's contemporaries and friends cautioned against overstating Bataille's proximity to surrealism. Michel Leiris, for example, refers to the collaboration with Breton for *Contre-attaque*, and notes that this brief moment of alliance did not mean that 'il n'en demeura pas moins étranger au groupe'.¹⁰³ André Masson, speaking at the Bibliothèque Orléans in 1971, makes the same point arguing that *Contre-attaque* momentarily reunited them, 'mais sans les réconcilier'.¹⁰⁴ Masson is more forceful in discussing the postwar trajectory. He says that while Bataille wrote many articles on surrealism in the aftermath of the war he described them with the caveat that they were 'élogieux mais réservées'. Moreover, this apparent reconciliation was undermined to an extent by the brevity of Bataille's interest in surrealism, as Masson says 'après 1949 Bataille s'est désintéressé du surréalisme auquel il n'a pratiquement plus consacré une ligne'.¹⁰⁵

Masson here attempts to counter the claims to Bataille's affinity with surrealism in a concluding passage that underlines the difference between the attentions to contradiction as opposed to the surrealists' desire for 'reconciliation':

Le surréalisme en tant que fait littéraire et esthétique n'a pas été pour Bataille qu'une entreprise pour sublimer dans de beaux objets fétiches les contradictions réelles. En ce sens, le surréalisme lui-même est contradictoire. Le destin du surréalisme a été de se

¹⁰² Chapsal, p.16.

¹⁰³ Leiris, *À propos de Georges Bataille*, p.26.

¹⁰⁴ André Masson, 'Bataille et le surréalisme : entretien sur "Bataille et le surréalisme" dimanche 28 février à 17h', *Bataille, etc...hommage à Georges Bataille* (Orléans : Maison de la culture d'Orléans, 1971), p.7.

¹⁰⁵ Masson continues, 'plutôt que réconciliation, il s'agit d'une cessation d'hostilité. Aucun revirement ne se manifeste en effet dans l'attitude de Bataille qui ne cessera pas de se désolidariser du fétichisme dont, historiquement, le fait surréaliste est indissociable.' *Bataille, etc...hommage à Georges Bataille*, p.7.

contredire lui-même, de se trahir lui-même. Quant à Bataille, s'il est surréaliste, c'est dans la contradiction. Surestimer la réconciliation (c'est-à-dire sous-estimer l'expression 'à la suite du surréalisme'¹⁰⁶) serait prolonger ce fétichisme récupérateur.¹⁰⁷

Taking the attempt to disentangle Bataille from surrealism further than Masson, *Tel Quel's* readings should be understood in the context of a more pointed ideological project. Their development of *écriture* was often asocial and depoliticising. However, their position was broadly staked out in opposition to any idealist conception of 'art for art's sake'. The text is not free from worldly contamination and cannot be a disassociated space of purity. From the opposite perspective, they were opposed to any Sartrean conceptions of 'littérature engagée'. Neither literature in service of revolutionary politics, nor apolitical withdrawal, *écriture* was developed as potentially political in itself.

The vision of theory by Sollers in particular was developed out of a practice of *écriture*. Sollers wanted to break with the continuity of the 'histoire de la littérature' and used what might be called a counter-tradition made of the 'exclusions' of the history of literature, 'exclusions au sens de "refoulement" ou "dénégation" (Freud)'.¹⁰⁸ Given the resonances with Bataille's history of reception in terms of a series of 'exclusions' it is unsurprising that he held such a central a place for Sollers and *Tel Quel*. 'Dénégation' is the exact word Sollers used four years later at the *Bataille* conference to describe his treatment by Breton and Sartre.¹⁰⁹ Sollers justifies the choice of texts reinforcing his conception of 'theory' as follows:

La théorie envisagée a sa source dans les textes de la rupture et de ceux qui sont susceptibles de 'l'annoncer' et de la 'poursuivre'. Le choix de ces textes est fondés sur leur coefficient de contestation théorique – formelle (par exemple: Dante, Sade//Lautréamont, Mallarmé//Artaud, Bataille). D'où définition d'un avant/après qui doit renvoyer en fait et en même temps – par disparition de la position du discours comme vérité 'expressive' et l'affirmation d'un espace textuel – à un dedans/dehors défini par la référence occasionnelle à d'autres cultures.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Here Masson is referring to Bataille's quote, 'je situe mes efforts à la suite, à côté du surréalisme'.

¹⁰⁷ Masson, *Bataille, etc...hommage à Georges Bataille*, p.7.

¹⁰⁸ Philippe Sollers, *Logiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p.10.

¹⁰⁹ Sollers, 'Intervention', *Bataille*, p .9.

¹¹⁰ Sollers, *Logiques*, pp. 9-10.

Theory does not express a ‘truth’ but operates around a liminal position according to shifting perceptions of a cultural inside/outside. Literature is still important for *Tel Quel* but only defined as something that can ‘introduit la rupture’ in any literary-historical continuum. *Tel Quel* thus made frequent reference to a pantheon of transgressive, literary outsiders, partially as a means of supporting and developing their theoretical and ideological positions. ‘Bataille’ becomes a name in a (dis)continuum encompassing Sade, Artaud and Lautréamont among many others. Opening the landmark conference with a talk entitled ‘Pourquoi Artaud, pourquoi Bataille’, Sollers underlines their particular importance for his account of theory:

‘La théorie elle-même ne peut plus se faire sans partir d’eux’. Sollers’s use of Artaud and Bataille is marked by a specific political conjuncture however, as he also writes in the same text, ‘chacun sait que les questions clés qui se posent, après mai, au camp révolutionnaire dans le champ de l’idéologie tout entière sont, directement ou indirectement, déterminé par eux [...] Nous les rassemblons donc, sans ressemblance, mais selon la conviction que leur ennemi est commun’.¹¹¹ As ‘deux vieilles taupes’, *Tel Quel*’s politicized reading of Artaud and Bataille creates a correlation between the idealism of the surrealists and a post-68 ‘socialisme utopique’. In this context, Bataille perhaps held even more ideological purchase and cultural capital than Artaud because of his polemic against, and ‘dénégation’ from, both Sartrean existentialism and Bretonian surrealism, as well as his anti-institutional stance and auto-didacticism.

The reactivation and use of the surrealist polemic was most obvious in the *Tel Quel* issue in the summer of 1968. In this issue, the crucial ‘La “Vieille taupe”’ essay is published and Bataille’s polemic with Breton is repeatedly referenced in order to assert *Tel Quel*’s own materialism against what Sollers identifies in ‘La Grande méthode’ as the various reigning forms of idealism, which include both student anarchists and conservative voices. The

¹¹¹ Sollers, ‘Pourquoi Artaud, pourquoi Bataille’, *Artaud*, ed. by Philippe Sollers (Paris : U.G.E, 1973), p.10.

reference to a materialism '*excluante tout idéalisme*' is used as a means of justifying their distance from the position of the students and workers during the events of 68.¹¹² Patrick ffrench has noted that *Tel Quel*'s distance from the events of '68 is consistent with their essentially asocial literary theory. Their use of Bataille in this context draws on an aesthetic-political polemic to justify their own primacy of aesthetics over and above political concerns. As ffrench says, Sollers' and Hollier's essays in the '68 issue, 'respectively underline the distance between Bataille's Marxism and that of the surrealists, so that the issue reactivates an older polemic to justify its ideological position of the moment'.¹¹³

The various intellectual biographies of *Tel Quel* have shown the ways in which the group struggled to maintain consistent political legitimacy. Their silence on Algeria suggested indifference while their support for the PCF over the students and the workers after the events of 68 betrayed a political conservatism beneath a veneer of radicalism.¹¹⁴ The eagerness to stress Bataille's distance from the surrealists and use of that polemic in the context of 1968 similarly suggests a struggle to recast a somewhat ideologically mainstream position as a 'dissident' one.

Sollers's increasingly depoliticised intellectual trajectory has to an extent demonstrated and realised the potential conservatism latent in his political stance at *Tel Quel*. In a more recent text Sollers returns to 'les deux grands dissidents du surréalisme, Artaud et Bataille', both of whom, he elaborates:

sont peu à peu rejetés dans les marges de l'Histoire par les figures 'politiques' du temps (Aragon, Céline, Sartre, Malraux, Camus et les autres). L'Histoire ? C'est celle du grand basculement des années trente, stalinisme, fascisme, nazisme. Le décor est planté : totalitarismes d'un côté, démocraties de l'autre ; le noir-rouge, le blanc. Pas d'identité si l'on est ailleurs, dans le spectre entier des couleurs, par exemple. On sera taxé de délire, d'érotisme malsain, d'irresponsabilité enfantine, de nouveau mystique, d'immoraliste (Artaud est fou, Genet un saint retourné, Bataille un débauché extatique).¹¹⁵

¹¹² Sollers, 'La Grande méthode', *Tel Quel*, 34 (1968), p.22.

¹¹³ Patrick ffrench, *The Time of Theory: A History of Tel Quel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.118.

¹¹⁴ See Philippe Forest, *Histoire de Tel Quel: 1960-1982* (Paris : Seuil, 1995), p.98.

¹¹⁵ Philippe Sollers, 'La Société de Bataille', *L'Éloge de l'infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p.507.

In this narrative Bataille is no longer excluded by ‘idealists’ but by figures who are ‘politiques’. The use of inverted commas suggests a degree of self-reflexivity, that he is dismissing a particular humanist vision of the political that is compromised by a naïve faith in a teleological conception of ‘Histoire’. However, given the ambiguity of its use and Sollers’s own depoliticised trajectory, it suggests how Bataille’s work might be used to conflate idealism with all forms of the political. Dissidence would be recast here as not just a rejection of idealism, but a rejection of engagement with the political, and a legitimisation of that refusal of the political as a somehow dissenting position.

The reception of Bataille through theory thus consolidates two structural reading tendencies which recur in the Anglophone reception examined in the main body of this thesis. Principally Bataille’s work gets used to stake out and reconstruct marginality in relation to mainstream intellectual positions. A sense of marginality in any one reading can then be reoriented according to differing emphases given to what Stoekl refers to as the ‘bicephalic’ aspects of Bataille’s text. Shifting appropriations of the text according to sometimes political and sometimes anti-political ends will hence be examined. Any attempt to stake out a clear distinction between the two perspectives is, however, usually problematic as we will see. This thesis thus also explores an ambiguous tension between political and anti-political perspectives across a number of different reconstructions of Bataille’s outsider status.

Reading Practices: Against the ‘Nudity’ of the Text

In concluding this introduction a brief discussion of some of the specific challenges of Bataille’s text in relation to reception theory will help refine the reading methodology of the thesis. A reception theory critique of historicism underlines the illusions of objectivism implied in such a position. As Hans Robert Jauss has argued, the past cannot be understood without considering its consequences and a text or work of art cannot be separated from its effect. Jauss writes, ‘To believe that it is possible to gain access to the alien horizon of the

past simply by leaving out one's own horizon of the present is to fail to recognize the subjective criteria, such as choice perspective, and evaluation have been introduced into a supposedly objective reconstruction of the past.¹¹⁶ As opposed to 'classic historicism' Jauss provides the useful alternative of a 'historicity of understanding' which underlines the contingency and compromise of any one reading position. These problems of reception are exacerbated in the case of Bataille. Any attempt to definitively *fix* Bataille's text usually amounts to a failure to engage with its challenges. As Bataille writes in *Le Coupable*, 'vouloir enfermer *ce qui est là* dans une catégorie intellectuelle est se réduire au défaut d'hilarité fière qu'a pour effet la foi en Dieu'.¹¹⁷ The certainty implied in neat intellectual categorisation and philosophical closure represents another form of theological faith. Similarly, any account of truth in Bataille is protean and elusive, defined primarily by movement and slippage. He explains at one point in *Le Coupable* that 'la vérité n'est pas là où des hommes se considèrent isolement: elle commence avec les conversations, les rires partagés, l'amitié, l'érotisme et n'a lieu qu'*en passant de l'un à l'autre*'.¹¹⁸ A similar perspective should inform the reception of Bataille's text. To over-privilege the original text, isolated from its reception, would be a reactionary response to the relational conception of 'communication' advocated by Bataille. In one way, this sensitivity to reception is specifically accentuated with the case of Bataille, given his repeated suggestion that truth can only be glimpsed in transition, that the essence of communication is largely constituted by the formal means of communication itself rather than any truth 'content' which is communicated. At the same time, the rejection of textual isolation in reception study should extend far beyond Bataille as overarching historical objectivity would entail a disavowal of the historically contingent reading practices, and the

¹¹⁶ Hans Robert Jauss, 'The Identity of the Poetic Text in the Changing Horizon of Understanding', *Reception Study: from Literary Theory to Cultural Studies*, ed. by James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein (New York: Routledge, 2001), p.7.

¹¹⁷ *OC V*, pp.255-6.

¹¹⁸ *OC V*, p.282.

implicit ideologies, of any one historical moment, which we are all, to some extent, determined by.

We can refine the specific challenges of Bataille's text to reception theory with reference to the metaphors of nudity and undressing in relation to his text and thought. When Bataille writes about nudity in *L'Histoire de l'érotisme*, he emphasises that it is not an isolated state of nudity of which he's speaking. The obscenity of nudity is constituted by the *process* of undressing. This leads to a definition in which 'La nudité a donc le sens, sinon de la pleine obscénité, d'un glissement'. Elaborating on how the 'glissement' is constituted of nudity, Bataille writes :

Ce glissement est souvent difficile à saisir en ceci que la nudité est la chose du monde la moins définie : c'est à la vérité le glissement qui la constitue, et le glissement est la raison pour laquelle l'objet du désir, dont la réalité est provocante, se dérobe néanmoins sans trêve à la représentation distincte [...] Si nous réfléchissons sur la nudité, l'apparence, sinon d'obscénité, de licence, et en conséquence de provocation, est toujours trompeuse : elle dérobe en effet l'obscénité franche dont nous avons vu qu'elle a elle-même un sens glissant.¹¹⁹

This account of nudity is crucial as it is a metaphor Bataille often applies to his own thought and writing. The nudity of the text then would not be a static, brutal truth content. It is 'trompeuse'. It is constituted by a 'glissement' and is hence equivocal. In an essay written for the review *Lignes* in 2000, Jean-Luc Nancy considers the relationship between nudity and truth in Bataille's text on these terms. Considering Bataille's line 'je pense comme une fille enlève sa robe', Nancy argues that if it is about truth it also means that:

La nudité ne peut être qu'ouverte. Ou plutôt qu'elle est l'ouverture. Et cela veut dire, du même mouvement, que la nudité touche à l'autre. Il n'y a pas de nudité solitaire [...] La nuit ou la nudité, en donnant rien à voir, donnent ceci : que le sens ne se donne qu'en passant de l'un à l'autre.¹²⁰

Nudity is revealed in an image of undressing. However, the image implies that it could only have been accessed *through* a process of undressing. In other words, there is no a priori state

¹¹⁹ OC VIII, p.131.

¹²⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'La Pensée dérobée' *Lignes*, 1 (2000), p.98.

of nudity quo truth. Its truth-status is partially constituted by the passage from one state to another. This is why the complications of reception study are particularly pronounced in the case of Bataille. If we are to engage with the challenges of his text, then the first step would be sustain a sense of critical caution towards any simplistic separation of text and reception, and a resistance to stabilize his text by any safe ontological assertions or intellectual categorizations.

The idea of an ‘uncorrupted’ text prior to reception is thus deeply at odds with the challenges Bataille’s text sets the reader. This does not lead necessarily lead to a relativism in which all readings are equally valid. I propose, rather, to critically trace the partial distortions and partial truths in each scene of reception. While this thesis rejects the idea that Bataille’s text can be disentangled and separated from its reception through ‘theory’, it also contests the idea that all posthumous reception is completely determined by the initial dominant readings. Bataille text does not ‘belong’ to surrealism or inter-war Paris and neither does it ‘belong’ to ‘theory’ or what is often referred to as post-structuralism.¹²¹ We cannot simplistically ‘return’ to a time ‘before’ theory and even if we could, such a perspective would be potentially reactionary and of little critical interest. This thesis argues for a collaborative reading practice ‘with’ and ‘against’ the history of reception. ‘With’ because any progressive reading practice should be attentive to the contradictions of reception, and its complicity within that history of reception. ‘Against’ because any one reading practice is contingent, upon the historical, among numerous other factors. An attentiveness to the contingency of any one reading practice is a critical reminder that other readings were, and still remain, possible.

¹²¹ To clarify, when I say that Bataille’s text does not ‘belong’ to ‘theory’, in this context I am referring to what Patrick ffrench refers to as the ‘time of theory’. I dispute any causal deterministic attachment of Bataille’s text to the readings of *Tel Quel*, but I also reject the desire to disentangle Bataille’s work from theory. In my view theory, in a broad transhistorical sense, as a self-reflexive splitting open and connecting of discourses, remains an essential way of understanding Bataille’s text and of affirming new readings.

Chapter One - Between Libertarianism and Restraint: Counter-Cultural Readings

The primary focus of this chapter is to consider Bataille's place within a series of mostly popular, non-academic publications largely bound by a libertarian counter-cultural perspective. It begins by tracing some key early English language articles on Bataille, considering how he was initially framed for an English readership. It gives a literary-historical account of the publications of Bataille's earliest works by the Olympia Press. I consider the focus upon the erotic and the pornographic in reading his work and will thus give extensive consideration to Susan Sontag's major essay, 'The Pornographic Imagination' (1967). In looking at other less well known readings, a primary problem which recurs is the weight given to libertarianism in contrast to the persistence of restraint in much of Bataille's work. This is considered on the level of both theory and writing style. The emphasis on restraint and guilt in Bataille's theory of eroticism, for example, is somewhat diluted in readings which present eroticism in more simplistically liberating terms. The liberalizing of his theory in translation finds a parallel in the earliest translations of his prose. This chapter contributes the first analysis of translations of *Madame Edwarda* published by both the Olympia Press and Grove Press's *Evergreen Review*. The middle section of this chapter thus entails close readings of these translations and considers the problems raised by the use of a more liberal literary style in translation. The last section of the chapter then considers Bataille's previously unexamined prominence with the English journal *Curtains*. This journal provided translations of one of the most obscure positions of his oeuvre, his poetry. Through close-readings of some of the poems translated at *Curtains*, I argue that we can refine and further understand the problems of counter-cultural readings of Bataille explored throughout the chapter. Bataille's work has given rise to readings which appeal to a libertarian destruction of limits and more cautious readings which advocate the presence of restraint and

persistence of tension. I argue that the more libertarian aspects have a greater susceptibility to potentially reactionary readings. This is done by analysing two possible readings of death which emerge from Bataille's poetry, one which extends a libertarian and Dionysian vision of self-loss associated with many of the counter-cultural readings examined, and another which sustains a tension and antagonism which resists the 'intoxication' implied in the former reading. With reference to Jean-Luc Nancy's critique of sacrifice, and Philippe Sollers's critique of libertarian 'pseudo-transgression', I argue for a more cautious reading of Bataille which sustains the sense of tension and restraint in his work.

Early Reviews

One of the earliest substantial exposures of Bataille to an Anglo-American readership was the journal *Transition Forty-Eight*. This was a 1948 revival of the inter-war journal *Transition*. While the earlier journal was a renowned publication of modernist and surrealist works, French and English alike, the revival was more focused on the transmission of exclusively French work to the English-speaking world. As the editorial put it, 'The object of *Transition Forty-Eight* is to assemble for the English-speaking world the best of French art and thought, whatever the style and whatever the application.'¹ The journal was edited by Georges Duthuit, an art historian, friend of Bataille and contributor to *Le Collège de Sociologie* before the war.² Bataille was credited as an editorial adviser. 'The Ultimate Instant', a translation of an article Bataille originally wrote for *Critique* in 1946, featured in the first issue.³ But it is the 'note on contributors', the presentation of Bataille to an English readership that I wish to highlight first. Bataille is presented as a heretical figure. Firstly, it states that 'Georges Bataille is the founder and the editor of the monthly review, *Critique* (1946)'. It is noted that

¹ *Transition Forty-Eight*, 1 (1948), p.5.

² See 'Le Mythe de la monarchie anglaise par Georges Duthuit, Mardi 20 juin 1939', *Le Collège de sociologie*, ed. by Denis Hollier (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp.746-761.

³ This is a review article of Madeleine Deguy's *Les Condamnés* and Gabriel Marcel's *La Parole est aux saints*. It shares the broad concerns and themes of *La Somme athéologique*. 'Le dernier instant', *Critique*, 5 (1946), 448-457. See also *OC XI*, 116-125. It was translated into English by Thomas Walton. See 'The Ultimate Instant', *Transition Forty-Eight*, 1 (1948), 60-69.

he edited *Documents*, *Contre-attaque* and *Acéphale* as well as the fact that he joined Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris ‘in the organization of a group known as the Collège de Sociologie’. A reference to an earlier article which briefly mentioned Bataille⁴ and a quote from Sartre is then provided which emphasises Bataille’s heretical and controversial intellectual status in Paris:

Bataille has been described as ‘an aggressive atheist who frequently evokes his master Nietzsche with the arrogant and desolate cry of a man who is ‘God’s widower’’, but more often indifferent and apparently consoling himself very well for this “death of God” (...)’ (Claude Magny in *La France Libre*, London, 1944).⁵

Similarly, in a text that is the earliest known English article on Bataille, Nicolas Calas opens his 1944 article ‘Acephalic Mysticism’, with the dramatic statement ‘Now that the roar over Europe has ceased it is possible to hearken to voices that speak in hermetic language’.⁶ Calas continues by describing Bataille as ‘a genuine poet who has suffered that anxiety and ecstasy which the mystics of old have described’. The extremity and ‘determination to suffer the pains of open wounds to the healing effect of intergration[sic]’ lead Calas to associate him with a lineage ‘in the company of those tragic figures of the past among whom Pascal and Rimbaud occupy such a glorious position’.⁷ He was ‘profoundly influenced’ by the ‘first phase’ of surrealism but remained ‘hostile’ to the theories of the Second Manifesto. Calas continues, ‘As an atheist and existentialist at the same time, Bataille is faced with the task of explaining the reason why he values ecstasy’.⁸ While he references existentialism, Calas does not go into detail on the debate between Sartre and Bataille, yet it is likely that the above quote is drawing on Sartre’s critique, from ‘Un nouveau mystique’, that Bataille is caught in the contradiction of using discourse to attempt to communicate an apparently

⁴Claude Edmonde Magny, ‘La Littérature française depuis 1940’, *La France Libre*, London, 50 (15 December 1944), 102-108.

⁵ ‘Note on Contributors’, *Transition Forty-Eight*, 1 (1948), p.130.

⁶ Nicolas Calas, ‘Acephalic Mysticism’, *Hémisphères*, 6 (1944), p.3.

⁷ Calas, *Hémisphères*, 6, p.5.

⁸ Calas, *Hémisphères*, 6, p.6.

incommunicable experience beyond the confines of discourse.⁹ Calas ends on quite a critical tone towards Bataille, pairing him alongside Nietzsche and Strindberg, whose philosophies of self-loss are all compromised, he says by an ‘egocentrism’ and ‘individualism’.¹⁰ While this specific critique actually pre-empts more contemporary critiques of Bataille which we will return to later on, for the moment it is worth noting that this early important article largely depicts Bataille as a dissident figure in relationship to both surrealism and existentialism.

The second issue of *Transition Forty-Eight* features an article about Sartre’s polemics with the surrealists and references Bataille extensively throughout. The article gives a translation of a long passage from Bataille’s ‘Lettre à M. Merleau-Ponty’, a letter in which Bataille declined Merleau-Ponty’s invitation to contribute to *Les Temps modernes*.¹¹ In the letter Bataille expresses his discomfort with the criticisms of surrealism in a recent issue of *Les Temps modernes* and outlines what he sees as the contradictions of Sartrean existentialism and the concept of engaged literature. As one excerpt from the translated passage reads, ‘Sartre speaks of acting, but does this suffice? Can there be even anything worse?’.¹²

The extensive reference to his writing in an article focused on Sartre and existentialism suggests Bataille is an essential figure in Parisian intellectual life, with some degree of intellectual legitimacy or even authority. In reality, as noted in the introduction, Bataille does not even have a readership in France beyond a very limited circle in Paris, let alone the English speaking world. The dissonance between the perceived importance of Bataille as an intellectual figure in nineteen forties France and his actual limited reach will be

⁹ Similarly, the reference to Pascal could be following Sartre’s comparison, ‘Et je retrouve plus d’un trait de Pascal chez M. Bataille, en particulier ce mépris fiécrieux, et cette volonté de dire vite’, Sartre, *Situations I*, p.174.

¹⁰ Calas, *Hemisphères*, 6, p.8.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty had invited Bataille to respond, in *Les Temps modernes*, to various misconceptions of Nietzsche. Bataille had initially accepted but then changed his mind for the reasons outlined in the letter. The letter was originally published in *Combat*, 930 (1947), p.2. It can be found in *OC XI*, p. 250.

¹² V. Ffranchot-Bitourne. ‘Marx, Lautréamont, or Heidegger?’, *Transition Forty-Eight*, 2 (1948), p.122.

even more striking in posterity. In a nineteen sixty-four *Comparative Literature Studies* article on postwar French Criticism for example, Germaine Brée and Eugenia Zimmerman name Bataille as one of the most important postwar critics alongside Sartre, Blanchot and Bachelard.¹³ The perception that his work had a significant impact despite its very limited readership can also be attributed to the centralisation of French intellectual life within a small Parisian milieu. The same article notes that ‘the hub of the “communications machine” is Paris, with its concentrated and interpenetrating group of critics, professors’, to the extent, Brée and Zimmerman argue, that the tone of much national criticism is set by quite a small Parisian circle.¹⁴

The contradiction of Bataille’s limited reach in spite of the force of his work was broached in issue 4 of *Transition Forty-Eight* with an article by Maurice Nadeau devoted exclusively to the work of Bataille. Nadeau attributes the limited reception, not just in terms of broad readership, but even the limited critical response, primarily to its difficulty:

The fact that so few commentaries have been elicited thus far by the work of Georges Bataille (one by Sartre, one by Maurice Blanchot, another recently by Klossowski, which is about all),¹⁵ is sufficient indication of the difficulties that accompany the attempt to follow this type of thought. But although it is frameless, shifting and discontinuous; a tangle of reasonings, obsessions and mystical intuitions, reaching out towards ‘something’ which is neither knowledge nor wisdom – perhaps saintliness or madness – it is nevertheless disturbing and significant.¹⁶

While the defensive tone of reception has often had to firstly respond to accusations of irrationality or mysticism, Nadeau appears to frame the initial reception of Bataille in France on more serious intellectual terms, because of its difficulty, as much as any apparently

¹³ Germaine Brée and Eugenia Zimmerman, ‘Contemporary French Criticism’, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 3, ed. by Alfred Owen Aldridge and Melvin J. Friedman (University of Maryland, 1964), p.186.

¹⁴ Brée and Zimmerman, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 3 (1964), p.176. The writers go on to note ‘Although the problem of the unique center exists in America too, it is not nearly so acute’.

¹⁵ The three commentaries Nadeau is most likely referring to are Maurice Blanchot, ‘L’Expérience intérieure’, *Faux pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 51-6, Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Un nouveau mystique’, *Situations I*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 143-88, and Pierre Klossowski, ‘L’Expérience de la mort de Dieu chez Nietzsche et la nostalgie d’une expérience authentique chez Georges Bataille’, *Sade mon prochain* (Paris: Seuil, 1947), 155-84.

¹⁶ Maurice Nadeau, ‘Georges Bataille and the HATRED of POETRY’, *Transition Forty-Eight*, 4 (1948), p.109.

irrational mysticism. The simultaneous paradoxes are present, of a thinker concerned with both a 'tangle of reasonings' as well as 'mystical intuitions'. Nadeau thus gives a more complex portrait of a thinker, not simply a celebrant of the irrational or scatological.

Nadeau also situates Bataille within an intellectual lineage stemming from Sade. Bataille's work, says Nadeau, is not a confluence of ideas and systems as 'he disdains philosophic truths'.¹⁷ It is concerned rather with a confluence of 'those sensitive currents, desires, cravings and mythical reveries which Sade was the first to incarnate'. A lineage from Sade to surrealism is then established comprising Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Kafka, the common denominator stressed by Nadeau being the death of God. Bataille's name in a lineage of transgressive writers recurs throughout his Anglophone reception, however it is usually as writer of pornographic fiction, alongside Sade but also prose writers like Genet. As we will see, the popular associations of Bataille will be primarily fiction, his reception being largely consolidated around pornographic works such as *Madame Edwarda* and *Story of the Eye*. In the nineteen forties however, there had scarcely been any fiction published under his own name, save for *La Haine de la poésie* (1947), a largely theoretical work, and *L'Abbé C* (1950). What is somewhat unique about this lineage is that it is not one primarily centred on writers of transgressive fiction who would give a different indication of Bataille's intellectual space. In situating him here alongside Nietzsche and others, Bataille is presented as a thinker, an intellectual, rather than, as he might be understood in the counter-culture, a transgressive writer or novelist. In *Transition Forty-Eight* he was described as 'Author of: l'Anus Solaire (Paris, 1931), Le Coupable (Paris, 1944), Sur Nietzsche (Paris, 1945), Méthode de Méditation (Paris, 1947), La Haine de la Poésie (Paris,

¹⁷ Nadeau, *Transition Forty-Eight*, 4 (1948) p.109.

1947)¹⁸ Similarly as with Calas's association of Bataille with Nietzsche, the portrait we get is of a serious theorist concerned with the crisis of post-secularism.

In a 1951 *Yale French Studies* article Bataille is grouped for perhaps the first time in English alongside Artaud in the manner of dissident surrealists. The article is entitled 'The Surrealist Novel' but the central Bataille text referred to is *L'Expérience intérieure*. 'When he has chosen to write novels', notes Armand Hoog, 'he has attempted to establish in his narrative a kind of ascesis of downfall, ever more guilty and more voluntary'.¹⁹ Bataille is described as an 'ex-surrealist', and with Leiris and Artaud offer an alternative to Breton's optimism, characterised by 'black and desperate certainty of defeat'.²⁰ In contrast to Breton, 'the wonderful optimist' who had imagined 'salvation through 'l'amour fou', 'Writers such as Leiris, Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille have already allowed sacrifice and voluntary turning toward misfortune to appear in their works'.²¹ Their work is a philosophy of 'secular damnation' in contrast to Breton's 'salvation'.

In *L'Alittérature contemporaine* (1958), translated into English as *The New Literature* in 1959, Claude Mauriac similarly, though much less sympathetically, describes Bataille in terms of his antagonistic relationship to Surrealism and makes a more emphatic comparison with Artaud based particularly on the two writers' religious imagination and contempt for Christianity. Mauriac then quotes from *La Haine de la poésie* to reinforce his comparison : 'Je n'aime vivre qu'à la condition de brûler'. Following this citation, Mauriac says 'D'Artaud ? Non, de Bataille'.²² This pre-empts *Tel Quel*'s position of Artaud alongside Bataille but the unusual aspect of Mauriac's brief treatment of the two is that he portrays them as sharing similarities in writing style and thematic interests, whereas other readers have

¹⁸ 'Notes on Contributors', *Transition Forty-Eight*, 1 (1948), p.130.

¹⁹ Armand Hoog, 'The Surrealist Novel', *Yale French Studies*, 8 (1951), p.25. Hoog lists Bataille's novels as *L'Abbé C*, *Dirty*, and *La Haine de la poésie*.

²⁰ Hoog, *Yale French Studies*, 8, p.23.

²¹ Hoog, *Yale French Studies*, 8, p.23.

²² Claude Mauriac, *L'Alittérature contemporaine* (Paris : Editions Albin Michel, 1958), p.105.

more often stressed that they do not hold much in common but are rather principally united by a common enemy of orthodox surrealism.²³ In contrast to Artaud, it has often been noted that Bataille presents the reader with a more classical, conservative writing style so Mauriac's pairing here is somewhat unorthodox.²⁴

André Masson's 'Some Notes on the Unusual Georges Bataille', which appeared in *Art and Literature* in 1964, similarly contextualises Bataille as a dissident, 'an outsider' to the surrealists, though obviously in much more favourable terms towards his friend than the previous portraits. Masson gives an interesting account of the unusual intellectual status of Bataille during his life:

Bataille was admired while he was alive, but somehow secretly and silently: for example, that extraordinary book of his *Le Coupable* counted for a great deal both within and without the Surrealist movement. He always had friends and faithful disciples and a certain clandestine fame like the high-priest of some anathematized sect, but on the surface the world at large either ignored or belied his worth and his fate was very different from that of the Surrealists²⁵

Unlike the Surrealists he 'always remained apart'. According to Masson he thought surrealism was 'not dark enough'.²⁶ The article gives an introduction to some of Bataille's writing with quotations from *Le Coupable* which show, according to Masson, why 'poets took him for a philosopher and philosophers for a poet. In truth he was both'.²⁷ In the terms so far it seems Bataille's early reception was usually defined in negative terms by what he is not, in relation to surrealism and Christianity for example. Similarly, as Masson emphasised,

²³ See for example Sylvère Lotringer, 'Artaud, Bataille et le matérialisme dialectique', *Substance*, 2, (1972 - 1973), 207-225, and Philippe Sollers's more recent comments discussed in the following chapter, 'Le Grand Bataille : Entretien avec Philippe Sollers réalisé par Alexandre Mare', *Revue des deux mondes: Bataille cinquante ans après* (Paris, Mai 2012), p.79.

²⁴ Bataille himself noted that, 'Je fais du langage un usage classique', *OC V*, p.358. Also discussed below.

²⁵ André Masson. 'Some Notes on the Unusual Georges Bataille', trans. by Sonia Brownell. *Art and Literature*, 3 (1964), p.104.

²⁶ Masson, *Art and Literature*, 3, p.105.

²⁷ Masson, *Art and Literature*, 3, p.110. The article appears to be very loose rewriting of Masson's 'Le Soc de la charrue' in *Critique*, 195-6 (1963), 701-705. For example, similar to the opening lines of the above quotation, Masson writes in *Critique* 'Son Royaume fut et demeure souterrain. Celui de l'ambiguïté' (p.701), and similarly refers to Bataille's interchangeability between poet and philosopher, but the reference to *Le Coupable* here in *Art and Literature*, among other references, is completely new.

his writing rarely fits into any one aesthetic style or movement. The main body of this chapter is thus concerned with Bataille's tension and uncomfortable place within a number of key Anglo-American counter-cultural readings.

The Olympia Press

Bataille's first translated book in English did not appear under his name. *A Tale of Satisfied Desire*, a translation of *Histoire de l'œil*, was published by The Olympia Press under the pseudonym Pierre Angélique in 1953. This is the same pseudonym he had used for the publications of *Ma mère* and *Madame Edwarda* but he had in fact published *Histoire de l'œil* under the name Lord Auch. While Bataille's employment at the Bibliothèque Nationale and the strict censorship laws in France informed, to an extent, the initial and later use of pseudonyms, and while this section considers some of the social and historical factors informing the reception of Bataille's texts pseudonymously, this is not with a view to reducing readings to simply socio-historical or biographical considerations. Rather, the aim here is to provide an important supplementary background to his history of reception. Bataille's various pseudonyms also constituted a highly complex strategy for disrupting, and highlighting the instability of, any fixed authorial position. As there have already been a number of insightful commentaries exploring these issues, I am here concerned with the more modest aim of providing a literary-historical account of reception in order to trace which versions of 'Bataille' did and did not proliferate in Anglo-American popular culture.²⁸

The Olympia Press should be understood in relation to the strict censorship culture in the immediate post-war period. In 1949 a law was introduced in France forbidding the exposure of publications of a 'licentious or pornographic nature' to minors under 18 and upon De Gaulle's election in 1958, the scope was widened to the point of forbidding displaying

²⁸ For important discussions of the complexity of authorship and use of pseudonyms see for example Leslie Hill, *Bataille, Blanchot, Klossowski: Writing at the Limit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.28-34, Patrick French, *The Cut: Reading Bataille's Histoire de l'œil* (London: British Academy, 1999), pp.169-172, and Denis Hollier, 'Préface', in Georges Bataille, *Romans et récits* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), pp. ix – xliii.

such material ‘in any place whatever’.²⁹ In prioritizing morally subversive literature and confronting censorship restrictions, Olympia paved the way for the more far-reaching and influential Grove Press, even passing on many of the same authors, such as Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs and Vladimir Nabakov. Olympia was founded by Maurice Girodias in 1953. Girodias was a self-confessed pornographer with a somewhat unsophisticated editorial policy.³⁰ For example, he would only publish his friend Alex Trocchi’s novel *Young Adam* on condition that he insert some ‘dirty bits’.³¹ Girodias described his work and publications as being characterised by ‘le style porno intellectuel’, an apt description of how Bataille’s work would be initially widely perceived among a popular Anglo-American readership.³²

Post-war French political and cultural life very quickly returned to ‘business-as-usual’ after the liberation in Girodias’s view. The struggle for a new kind of freedom was a defining characteristic of the cultural climate amidst an increasingly authoritarian Gaullist France.³³ Long before he launched the Olympia Press, Girodias claims this cultural malaise was an influential factor in his editorial career. He contrasts what he perceives as the relatively uninspiring intellectual field of post-war France with the provocations and intellectual engagements of the inter-war years, citing such groups as the Collège de Sociologie. ‘De tout cela quoi restait-il?’, wrote Girodias in his autobiography.³⁴ He spoke to Prévost of his interest in launching a review and Prévost reconnected with Bataille through the intermediary of Blanchot. In 1946 Prévost then introduced Bataille to Girodias. Together they founded the journal *Critique*, which Girodias partially financed for twelve issues before stepping down.

²⁹ 1949: law forbidding the exposure of publications of a ‘licentious or pornographic nature’ to minors under 18. John Phillios, ‘Old Wine in New Bottles’, *International Exposure: Perspectives on European Pornography 1800-2000*, ed. by Lisa Sigel (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), p.129.

³⁰ Girodias describes himself in his autobiography as ‘un éditeur pornographique’. Maurice Girodias, *Une journée sur la terre II: les jardins d’éros* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence), p.258.

³¹ As recounted in James Campbell, *Exiled in Paris* (New York: Scribner), p.125.

³² Girodias, *Une journée sur la terre II*, p.257.

³³ James Campbell’s *Exiled in Paris*, a study of expatriate literary culture in 1950s Paris, makes a similar summary of the cultural climate as the struggle for a new kind of freedom after the liberation.

³⁴ Girodias, *Journée*, p.89.

Girodias claims to have parted with Bataille on amicable terms and when he launched the Olympia Press in 1953 Girodias writes that Bataille expressed his enthusiasm for the project:

J'avais revu Diane et Georges Bataille, tous deux très excités par cette nouvelle aventure. Diane rêvait d'écrire un roman pervers, basé sur ses souvenirs des pensionnats anglais. Georges me proposa son œuvre érotique 'sous le manteau' à la seule condition que je lui trouve – outre l'argent dont il avait follement besoin, pour ne pas changer – un bon traducteur. Je demandai à Austryn de commencer par L'Histoire de l'œil, qu'il traduisit en quelques nuits.³⁵

Jacques Audiart was the accredited translator, but this was in fact a pseudonym for Austryn Wainhouse, who would go on to translate numerous other Bataille works. Wainhouse has noted that the English title was chosen by Girodias to prevent the French authorities making any connection between the French original and the English text,³⁶ and Patrick J. Kearney has also cited correspondence from Wainhouse in which he notes Bataille's dissatisfaction with the English title.³⁷

The Olympia Press published one more major Bataille text in 1956, also translated by Wainhouse. *Madame Edwarda* was translated as *The Naked Beast at Heaven's Gate*, the abstract title again chosen to avoid the censors. There were 450 copies published, of which 50 were originally planned to be part of an illustrated limited edition. However, Girodias explains that he decided to only publish a cheaper edition because 'I felt that there was no market for it. Hans Bellmer's gravings were too sophisticated for the U.S. 6th Fleet'.³⁸ Girodias's remark gives an indication of the type of readership expected, as does the seasonal

³⁵ Girodias, *Journée*, pp.231-2. Bataille's correspondence and any reference he made to Girodias does not contradict Girodias's claim that Bataille viewed the project favourably.

³⁶ Correspondence cited in Patrick J. Kearney, *The Paris Olympia Press* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p.32.

³⁷ Wainhouse recounted Bataille's reaction: 'Thinking, no doubt, that his young translator had completely misunderstood the book he had just translated, he told me gently but quite firmly too that for him it had always been and was yet a tale rather of satisfied desire[sic]'. Wainhouse quoted in Patrick J. Kearney, *The Paris Olympia Press*, p.32. The final line from Wainhouse does not quite make sense and Kearney's inclusion of 'sic' perhaps indicates that he also suspects a mistake on Wainhouse's part. One could imagine that Wainhouse meant to say 'unsatisfied' desire in contrast to the 'satisfied' desire of the title. It is this issue, the idea of 'satisfied desire', which Bataille most likely found problematic.

³⁸ Girodias quoted in Kearney, *The Paris Olympia Press*, p.53.

economic life of the Olympia Press. Sales were much higher in the summer, leading to the natural conclusion for an English language publisher in Paris that the readership largely consisted of tourists or Americans passing through the city. The cheaper editions and clandestine nature of the books meant that no major reviews of these early Bataille books were published in America. The marketing of the series also led to some writers having major disputes with Girodias, stemming from having what they felt was high-brow review-worthy material published in cheap series containing low-brow pornography, the most notable case being J.P. Donleavy's outrage at the publication of his *The Ginger Man* in a series that contained crass titles such as *School for Sin* and *Tender was my Flesh*.

Bataille, however, seems to have been relatively enthusiastic about the Olympia Press. He also maintained an amicable relationship with Girodias for many years after his two Olympia Press titles were published, suggesting he did not take issue with the edition of his books for some of the reasons that troubled writers such as Donleavy. Girodias and Bataille came together again in 1957 to found a review centred on the theme of eroticism. The review, entitled *Genèse*, was planned to appear simultaneously in English and French and was a project Bataille was majorly invested in, taking up nearly a year of his time in preparation. However in that time the differences with Girodias became frayed and dissolved. Michel Surya notes that Girodias wanted the review to include 'images véhémentes' in order to seduce the 'clientèle des pervers'.³⁹ Unable to resolve his low-brow interests with Bataille's intellectual ambition, Girodias withdrew his support in December ending both the project and his relationship with Bataille who wrote to him in disappointment 'Votre décision m'a d'autant plus étonné que vous avez pu constater que jamais je n'ai compris certains de vos jugements'.⁴⁰

³⁹ Girodias quoted in Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille, la mort à l'œuvre* (Paris : Gallimard, 1987), p.558.

⁴⁰ In the same letter he writes, 'Je vous avoue que je comprends mal ce que vous dites finalement de votre effort "pour ne perdre aucune chance de réussite", puisque cet effort vous l'interrompez en plein développement! Je ne proteste pas. Vous décidez. Mais enfin la seule chose certaine est que du fait de votre brusque décision nous

Bataille's work was among the first prints of Olympia Press. The titles are revealing for the targeted readership and the type of identity Girodias wanted to cultivate. *A Tale of Satisfied Desire* was the sixth title preceded by two works of Apollinaire, two of Sade's, and Henry Miller's *Nexus*. Girodias launched The Olympia Press amidst the rediscovery of Sade in France, and the debates around censorship and morality which that gave rise to. Similarly, the publication of *The 120 Days of Sodom* included an introductory essay by Bataille.⁴¹ Girodias described himself as heavily influenced by Jean-Jacques Pauvert's publication of Sade, a writer who, for Girodias, was clearly at the root of the liberating struggle against censorship, a central priority of the Olympia Press.⁴² Girodias saw his initial programme as inspired by a quest to launch a cultural revolution against conventional ideas, religion and morality. He describes his initial programme, numbering Bataille, Sade, Apollinaire and Beckett as:

Une déclaration de guerre totale – à la morale ordinaire et aussi aux vieilles religions de L'Occident [...] Ma tâche d'éditeur consistait à trouver les champions capables d'entreprendre cette œuvre majeure, la mise à plat des vieilles morales, des vieux systèmes de pensée, laissant la place nette pour les futurs reconstructeurs.⁴³

Girodias's Olympia Press can be further contextualized with reference to the *Merlin* journal, a contemporaneous English review based in Paris. Many of the same personalities were involved with the two enterprises, most notably Alexander Trochhi and Austryn Wainhouse, who had already prepared significant translations of Sade for publication before he met Girodias. In *Exiled in Paris*, James Campbell describes the Olympia Press as arising from the

sommes trois à être sérieusement lésé à tous les égards. N'oublions pas non plus le règlement inévitable des articles demandés à divers collaborateurs', 'À Maurice Girodias, Orléans, le 12 Décembre 1958', Georges Bataille, *Choix de lettres : 1917-1962* (Paris : Gallimard, 1997), pp.509-510. Girodias partially blames the collapse of the project on Bataille's illness: 'Le seul facteur problématique, c'était Bataille lui-même, hélas, dont la santé était devenue plus fragile, et que ses derniers travaux avaient épuisé.' Girodias, *Journée*, p.370.

⁴¹ D.A.F Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom; or the Romance of the School for Libertinage*. (Paris: Olympia Press, 1957).

⁴² Girodias, *Journée*, p.219.

⁴³ Girodias, *Journée*, p.239.

clash of these personalities. Where Girodias often seemed like his vision was narrowly focused on pornography, the group at Merlin had higher ambitions:

The members of the Merlin group, on the other hand, were high-minded and discriminating; the risks they took were with form and content, aesthetics, everything in the literary arena. But they weren't above a little prostitution on the side, if it helped to pay the bills. Their medium was the written word, Girodias's the four-letter word. The confluence of these separate personalities would create the identity of the Olympia Press.⁴⁴

Campbell's portrait of the clash at the Olympia Press between high-minded aesthetic experimentation and low-culture pornography strongly resonates with the cultural tensions encountered in the reception of Bataille, and particularly Bataille's contextualization within the debates about pornography and art that took place in the nineteen sixties discussed below.

In between the two Olympia Press publications of Bataille, another publisher put out two book-length Bataille works in English. The style of the editions, the presentation and the content itself were vastly different from the works published at Olympia Press. *Lascaux: or, the Birth of Art: Prehistoric Painting* and *Manet* were published by editions Skira in New York, 1955. Wainhouse again translated both books.⁴⁵ The publications were lush presentations complete with illustrations, colour plates and the expensive retail price of \$20. The *New York Times* review of *Manet* referred to Skira as 'the most ambitious, impressive and consistently good of all art-book series'.⁴⁶ Reviews attest to the complete unfamiliarity of an Anglo-American audience with Bataille. For example, the *New York Times* review of *Manet* refers with unfamiliarity to 'the author', while another reviewer writes 'The author is a writer who suggested the project to Skira'.⁴⁷ The *New York Times* review considers several recent art publications so Bataille's *Manet* does not get extensive commentary save for some generally favourable comments. In contrast the *Times Literary Supplement* review of *Lascaux*

⁴⁴ Campbell, *Exiled in Paris*, p.80.

⁴⁵ with co-translator, James Emmons, for *Manet*.

⁴⁶ Aline B. Saarinen, 'A Common Excitement', *New York Times*, Dec 4, 1955, BR 4.

⁴⁷ M.H. Levine reviewed *Lascaux, or the Birth of Art*, 'American Anthropologist', *New Series*, 1 (1957), 143-145

was far less favourable, dismissing Bataille's approach as 'ecstatic or dewy-eyed', 'highly subjective' and given to 'great discursiveness'.⁴⁸

Bataille then has four books translated in the nineteen fifties, two of which are focused on art history and theory. After the 1956 Olympia edition of *Madame Edwarda* there would only be three new book-length translations of his work over the next two decades,⁴⁹ only one of which, *My Mother* (1972), was a pornographic text. Yet, as the *TLS* rightly pointed in 1972, 'Outside France, Bataille, where he is known at all is still probably thought of as a resourceful and prolific pornographer'.⁵⁰ As a 'prolific pornographer' Bataille did not quite reach the audience he might have given his central place at Olympia Press, and Grove Press's subsequent publications. Grove, along with City Lights Books, was the most important counter-culture press in the nineteen sixties. The Olympia Press essentially paved the way for Grove and a huge amount of their catalogue consisted of publications taken from Girodias' press. The same writers and genres Bataille was published alongside at Olympia were the cornerstones of Grove. As Loren Glas writes, 'The crowning achievement of this campaign to legitimize the pornographic underground was Grove's massive three-volume edition of the works of the Marquis de Sade, translated by Seaver and Wainhouse'.⁵¹ Grove then followed their publication of Sade with numerous reprints of Olympia titles and various underground pornographic 'classics' under imprints such as the Venus library.

⁴⁸ Michael Ayrton, 'Art of Prehistoric Man', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 12 August 1955, p 456. The *TLS*'s initially hostile reaction to Bataille might be considered symptomatic of what Paul Buck and Raymond Durnat both describe as the conservatism of English culture in comparison to the advances in America and continental Europe. See discussion of Durnat and Buck later in chapter.

⁴⁹ After the two Olympia Press publications in the 1950s, both books were reprinted in a now extremely difficult to locate rare edition, in 1968. Wainhouse's translation of *Madame Edwarda* appeared in the Evergreen Review in 1964, discussed below. *My Mother* was published in 1972 (London, Jonathan Cape). *L'Érotisme* appeared under the title *Eroticism* in England in 1962, and under the altered title of *Death and Sensuality* in America in the same year. There was new translation of *Story of the Eye* published in 1979 (Urizen books, reprinted by Marion Calders and Penguin), *Blue of Noon* in 1979 (Marion Boyars) and *L'Abbé C* in 1983 (Marion Boyars). In addition, numerous translations of shorter prose appeared in 1970s journals including Paul Buck ed. *Curtains* and Paul Auster and Lydia Davis eds. *The Living Hand*.

⁵⁰ 'Taboos and Transgressions: Oeuvres Complètes, vol IV: Oeuvres Littéraires Posthumes by Bataille, Georges (author)', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 3 March 1972, p. 233.

⁵¹ Loren Glas, 'Counter-Culture Colophon Part II: Grove Press in the 1960's', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, (published September 30 2011) <lareviewofbooks.org/essay/counter-culture-colophon-part-ii-grove-press-in-the-1960s> [Accessed online 30 November 2012] .

It is curious then that, amidst publication conditions which seem to be very hospitable towards his work, there no publication of his work by Grove (save for an *Evergreen Review* translation of *Madame Edwarda* discussed by below). His work is referenced sporadically in essays and articles related to pornography in the sixties, but does not have the prominence it might following the early translations by Olympia. While Bataille's work receives significant championing from certain counter-cultural quarters, its relevance is opaque and difficult to define. One of the principal reasons for his uncertain place within counter-cultural writing, I suggest, is the tension between restrained, often classical style of his prose, along with the more conservative and restrained aspects of his theory of eroticism as against the libertarianism of the counter-culture. These tensions will be considered throughout the translations examined.

Censorship and Pornographic Literature in America

By the early 1960s, the influence and success of the Olympia Press was waning. Scandal, provocation and literary confrontation of censorship were now being led by publishing houses such as Grove Press and City Light Books.⁵² The publishers John Calder and Barney Rossett met with Maurice Girodias in Paris at around the same time as Rossett was launching Grove Press. Girodias describes how their motivations were ultimately the same in provocation and defeat of censorship:

Il est évident que nous sommes tous les trois complémentaires, et que Barney et John sont presque aussi motivés que moi par la lutte contre la censure qui a inspiré la création d'Olympia.⁵³

He goes on to say that his initial programme, as followed by Grove, was consciously chosen with a war against contemporary moral values in mind:

⁵² City Lights Books occupied a highly significant role in the intersection between the American counter-culture and the French avant-garde. They did not publish Bataille until the 1987 edition of *Eroticism* from the original Mary Dalwood translation for Calwood and Boyars in 1962. However, their anthology of Artaud's writings in 1963 was a landmark publication in the intersection between French avant-garde and American counter-culture publishing.

⁵³Girodias, *Journée*, p.402.

Dans ce sens, mon programme initial, avec Sade, Bataille, Miller, Apollinaire et Beckett, apparaissait comme une déclaration de guerre totale – à la morale ordinaire et aussi aux vieilles religions de L'Occident.⁵⁴

Rossett fought obscenity trials against censorship for the famous Lady Chatterley case as well as the publication of Henry Miller. As the main publishers of French avant-garde literature in America, Grove Press led the way in prioritizing the publication of works which were provocative and frequently pornographic. Genet was published extensively and Grove Press was also the exclusive U.S. publisher of the unabridged works of Sade. John Calder led the British equivalent of Grove, and published *Eroticism* in 1962 and then *Literature and Evil* in 1973 with Marion Boyars.

While Bataille's work received little translation during the nineteen sixties his name sometimes came up in high-profile debates around censorship and pornographic writing, such as Richard Gilman's 1963 article, 'There's a Wave of Pornography, Obscenity, Sexual Expression'.⁵⁵ The perception of pornographic literature was also significantly advanced by Susan Sontag's major essay 'The Pornographic Imagination' in 1967.⁵⁶ With extensive treatment of *Histoire de l'œil*, it is clearly identifiable as one of the most important moments in the dissemination of Bataille's thought in America. The evocation of Bataille within this cultural milieu, however, meant that he was chiefly known among an Anglo-American readership as a pornographer, for a long time before the broader spectrum of his work was more widely referred to by academics and cultural journalists, beginning with the *Semiotext(e)* and *October* critics celebration of his work in the late nineteen seventies. The *TLS* in 1972 noted the disparity between his French reception as a radical theorist, influential

⁵⁴ Girodias, *Journée*, p.239.

⁵⁵ See for example Richard Gilman, 'There's a Wave of Pornography, Obscenity, Sexual Expression', *New York Times Magazine*, 8 September 1963, 36-37.

⁵⁶ It originally featured in *Partisan Review*, (Spring 1967).

upon Sollers and Foucault, and his Anglo-American reception as a ‘resourceful and prolific pornographer’.⁵⁷

Sontag’s ‘The Pornographic Imagination’ critiqued the entire Anglo-American perception of pornography. Sontag began by arguing that Europe, and particularly France, were significantly more sophisticated and advanced in their view of the relationship between eroticism and art. For her, both the libertarians and the censors in America were guilty of viewing pornography as either a symptom of social pathology or a social commodity. ‘But nowhere in the Anglo-American community of letters’, she says, ‘have I seen it argued that some pornographic books are interesting and important works of art’.⁵⁸ She uses five French books to argue her case, two of which are Bataille’s *Histoire de l’œil* and *Madame Edwarda*. A book such as *Histoire de l’œil* in particular could only have been written within the context of an agonizing reappraisal of the nature of literature itself, says Sontag, a reappraisal preoccupying literary Europe for over half a century. Lacking that context, books such as this must ‘prove almost inassimilable for an American and English audience-except as “mere pornography”’.⁵⁹

The essay goes beyond a simple argument for collapsing the dichotomy of pornography and literature as antithetical. Pornography, rather, should make us reconsider the very nature of literature and art itself. Sontag makes reference to a view of art as exploring the frontiers of consciousness. She develops the idea of art as a successor to religion; the nearest thing secular society has to a sacramental activity, an idea regularly expressed by Bataille and also particularly prominent in Sollers’s reading of Bataille.⁶⁰ Sontag’s essay

⁵⁷ ‘Taboos and transgressions’, *Times Literary Supplement* March 3 1972, p.233.

⁵⁸ Susan Sontag, ‘The Pornographic Imagination’, *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969), p.38.

⁵⁹ Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, p.44.

⁶⁰ Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, p.45. Bataille writes for example in *La Littérature et le mal*, ‘il me reste à rappeler de ces arts qui maintiennent en nous l’angoisse et le dépassement de l’angoisse, qu’ils sont les héritiers des religions’, *OC IX*, p.214. See also Sollers’s discussion of similar themes in ‘Le Toit’, *Tel Quel* 29 (1967), 24-45.

extends analysis she had already begun in her earlier ‘On Style’, where she had already argued that ‘approving or disapproving morally of what a work of art “says” is just as extraneous as becoming sexually excited by a work of art’.⁶¹ Giving primacy to content over form in literary criticism follows a similarly problematic logic of those who derive nothing but pornographic titillation from art or literature. Both approaches deny the autonomy and complexity of the artwork or text.

Even though her essay has been widely referenced throughout subsequent Bataille reception, her astute de-stabilization of the opposition between pornography and literature has sometimes been missed or, has been unwittingly reinforced by some Bataille readers. For many readers discussed in the following section, texts such as *Histoire de l’œil* are decidedly unpornographic and can only be considered as works of literature. I argue that this tendency to take a staunchly anti-pornographic position sanctifies Bataille’s text and attempts to rescue it from base associations, capitulating to a simplistic deference towards what constitutes ‘high’ art. My argument here is that Bataille’s text should primarily be understood from a formalist literary perspective, while at the same time acknowledging that it retains pornographic elements. Insisting on its pornographic aspects, I argue below, is not incompatible with reading the text on a primarily formal and structuralist level following Roland Barthes’ landmark essay.⁶²

The Literary and the Pornographic: Reading Bataille after Sontag

One of the most exemplary cases of the problematic attempts to disentangle literature and pornography in reading Bataille is the 1996 collection *Bataille’s Eye*, exclusively devoted to the famous récit. The collection opens with an interview with the editor, Deborah Cullen. Asked whether she thinks Bataille’s text is pornographic or not, Cullen replies, ‘I would have to say that clearly this book isn’t pornographic, since it is, in many ways, about the tensions

⁶¹ Susan Sontag, ‘On Style’, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1990), p.26.

⁶² Roland Barthes, ‘La Métaphore de l’œil’, *Critique*, 195-6, (1963), 770-777.

between languages: between the visual, the verbal, the spoken, the written. Pornography, after all, is a judgemental, legal definition; it is obscene writing, art and photography that has little or no artistic merit'.⁶³ Cullen rightly asserts that the textual operations at work are more important than the content. She deduces the problematic conclusion though, that it cannot be considered pornographic because of this textual primacy. My argument is not that Bataille's text can be classified as 'pornography' but that a primarily formalist or structuralist reading of the text does not preclude the fact that it has a pornographic aspect. Furthermore, the attempt to renounce that pornographic aspect betrays an attempt to sanctify the text in a moralistic or hierarchical conception of art as a space of purity. Where Sontag had undermined the dichotomy between literature and pornography, critics such as Cullen attempted to re-establish it by elevating the text to the exclusive status of art.

Furthermore, in order to deny its pornographic aspects, Cullen puts forward a quite limited and simplistic definition of pornography in solely legal and juridical terms. Even pornography defined purely in terms of the sexual titillation is a limited definition. In the recently published study *Beyond Explicit* (2013), Helen Hester's discussion of pornographic history shows that titillation was not always the sole intention. This tendency to view pornography solely in terms of the sexual has a parallel in the reduction of concepts such as 'transgression' solely to the sexual: Hester and other critics have instead emphasised the non-sexual forms of affect and visceral intensity often aimed at in different pornographic contexts. To argue that Bataille's text retains pornographic elements should not be conflated with the idea that the text is in any way concerned with sexual titillation.

The attempt to 'rescue' Bataille, confining him in the artistic at a remove from the pornographic is found in another text in the *Bataille's Eye* collection by Mary Ellen Wolf. The commingling of knowledge and sex 'invites misreadings' and censorship, she says. 'To

⁶³ 'Interview: Deborah Cullen, by Noah Chasin', *Bataille's Eye: ICI Field Notes* ed. by Deborah Cullen (Sant Monica: ICI Press, 1996), p.13.

exile *Story of the Eye* to some banal province of pornography is to forget its problematics' she says, and at this point she offers a footnote which says, 'For an example of this kind of reading, see Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Pornography, Transgression and the Avant-Garde."' ⁶⁴

It is disputable as to whether Suleiman does confine or 'exile' Bataille to pornography, as Wolf claims, though her reading will help us refine the interpretations I have been tracing. In this text, Suleiman takes two anti-thetical readings of Bataille and attempts to create a synthesis, in an apparently more balanced reading. Her oppositions rest on the binary between form and content, or text and representation. Exemplary of the former position, is the practice of *écriture* advanced by Kristeva and *Tel Quel* in the sixties, but also encompassing Derrida and Barthes among others. (From this perspective Suleiman is in danger of flattening diverse and contradictory perspectives into one loosely defined category of linguistic primacy). In contrast, feminist critics such as Dworkin focus on representation, confining *Story of the Eye* solely to pornography and moralistically condemning its apparent sexism. ⁶⁵

The more formalist readings in the tradition of *écriture* pursue metaphoric equivalences between textual violation and the violation of bodies, locating a space of transgression upon the text. According to Suleiman, this reading passes over 'precisely the view of the body and of the body's generally hidden organs, which were displayed and verbally designated on almost every page of Bataille's texts'. ⁶⁶ However, Suleiman is just as critical of the opposite tendency exemplified by Dworkin which 'flattens Bataille's narrative into a piece of pulp pornography'. Read along these terms, *Histoire de l'œil* becomes equivalent to novels with titles such as *Whip Chick*. As Suleiman puts it, 'If the textual critics

⁶⁴ Mary Ellen Wolf, 'Reading Bataille's Eye', *Bataille's Eye*, p.30.

⁶⁵ Dworkin's reductionist reading of Bataille's work has been well covered and does not require extensive critical examination here. See for example, Benjamin Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* (Pluto Press: London, 2000), pp.88-89.

⁶⁶ Susan Suleiman, 'Pornography, Transgression and Avant-Garde: Bataille's "Story of the Eye"', *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. by Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.123.

avert their gaze from representation, Dworkin cannot take her eyes off it'. Her conclusion is that a feminist reading of Bataille must seek to avoid both what she describes as the blindness of the textual reading which sees nothing but *écriture* and the blindness of ultrathematic reading which sees nothing but themes and characters.

This conclusion, with its appeal to a synthesised 'balance' between two oppositions, is not quite convincing though. Suleiman depicts the two reading approaches she describes as being too ideologically clouded by their own mode of reading to see the truth of Bataille's text, but I would argue that her own approach is beholden to a view of reading as a matter of unveiling the ideological surface of representation to reveal a 'truth' content. Such an appeal to authenticity, or authentic truth, is fundamentally incompatible with Bataille's texts, as is an appeal to 'balance' between two perspectives. She finishes by outlining her delineation of Bataille's work from mere pornography. In its self-conscious meditation on its own Oedipal sources, Bataille's pornographic fiction is 'a far cry from the pulp novels or trashy magazine photos that serve up their fantasies straight. The difference between them is, one could argue, the difference between blindness and sight'.⁶⁷ Suleiman's appeal to biographical Oedipal sources is symptomatic of a problematically simplistic reading practice in prioritising the biographical. While the confessional moments of Bataille's texts often coincide with actual biographical details, these moments are also often highly contestable and inconsistent, and it should be remembered that they come under not just one but a variety of different chosen pseudonyms. Moreover, any attempt to locate and fix a biographical origin to Bataille's text parallels the reductive attempt to locate an ontologically consistent base matter. As a performative continuously disruptive operation, base materialism works against such ideas of decoding and locating truth-content beneath the surface. Similarly, we can see a rebuttal to Suleiman's problematic attempt to locate Oedipal origins in Bataille's text with Patrick

⁶⁷ Suleiman, *The Poetics of Gender*, p.132

ffrench's insistence on the precariousness and instability of any reference to origins, arguing instead for the persistent decentring of the text. ffrench cautions against too easily settling upon a biographical reading of the final section of *Histoire de l'œil*: "Coincidences" does not, therefore, propose a hierarchy of origins, or levels of unconscious determination with the Oedipal structure as primary, but a structural play, in which the absent "centre" of this structure is successively displaced.'⁶⁸ What Suleiman does in her reading is take two oppositions (formalist and a more representationalist reading) and unravel them to show the 'true' reading underneath, which essentially consists of a balance. This is hardly compatible with base materialism which, in contrast, takes two oppositions and de-stabilizes them, not to show the stable truth underneath, but the instability of all such oppositions.

More immediately pertinent to our discussion though is the view of pornography. Where Deborah Cullen and the contributors to *Bataille's Eye* attempted to rescue Bataille from pornography, to sanitise the texts in the name of a purer art, Suleiman attempts to hold literature and pornography in equilibrium, and perhaps grants too much space to pornography. This is particularly evident in her description of *Story of the Eye* as 'literary pornography'. The adjectival 'literary' with the more substantive weightier noun attributed to pornography does betray a reduction of Bataille's text and for all her attempts at a more balanced reading, the emphasis on biography and experience suggests a somewhat reactive stance towards *écriture*. The description 'pornographic literature' would be a lot less problematic.⁶⁹ Furthermore however, I argue that Susan Sontag offered a pre-emptive corrective to the problematic readings of Cullen, Suleiman and others. The following passage from 'On Style' offers a guide for more precisely thinking the role of the pornographic in Bataille's text(s):

⁶⁸ Patrick ffrench, *The Cut: Reading Bataille's Histoire de l'œil*, p.172.

⁶⁹ But still not satisfactory, as the *Histoire de l'œil*'s textual transgressions attempt to subvert any simple designation as 'literature'.

Pornography has a 'content' and is designed to make us connect (with disgust, desire) with that content. It is a substitute for life. But art does not excite; or, if it does, the excitation is appeased, within the terms of the aesthetic experience. All great art induces contemplation, a dynamic contemplation. However much the reader or listener or spectator is aroused by a provisional identification of what is in the work of art with real life, his ultimate reaction – so far as he is reacting to the work as a work of art – must be detached, restful, contemplative, emotionally free, beyond indignation and approval.⁷⁰

Firstly, her description of pornography, though fleeting, entails the necessary recognition that it does not only entail titillation and desire, but often involves 'disgust'. Secondly, she describes a 'provisional' and then 'ultimate' reaction to the text, the latter given far more importance. The main and primary point of interest in a text like *Histoire de l'œil* is with the textual operations. She does not give equal balance to pornography, and says this text can only be understood in the context of an entire re-evaluation of what literature is. Lacking an engagement with that context, it risks being read as 'mere pornography'. However, she refrains from completely denying the pornographic impact of the text, the 'provisional' reaction that such shocking content might provoke, before the reader becomes conscious of the textual transgressions taking place which are de-stabilizing the relationship between content and form.

Sontag was critical, however, of large factions of the libertarian fight against censorship within which Bataille's work was initially contextualized, in that there was an attempt to commodify pornography, to use it as a shock tactic, rather than a re-evaluation of literature. Earlier, I noted Suleiman's criticism of Dworkin's treatment of Bataille, that in her terms, his work becomes indistinguishable from pulp pornography with titles such as *Whip Chick*. However, often Olympia Press's presentation of Bataille directly situated it within this kind of cultural space. In 1956, an Olympia Press anthology included an excerpt from their 1953 publication of *A Tale of Satisfied Desire*. The excerpt entitled 'Desire by the Castle'

⁷⁰ Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, pp.26-7.

was introduced in the volume, *The StripTeaser*, as ‘an extract from “A Tale of Satisfied Desire”, the extraordinary story of two young people caught in a whirlwind of passion, published by the Olympia Press’.⁷¹

Every page of text here, as with the other excerpts in the volume, is decorated by a side-line of nude models. The pulp-pornography style imagery, and presentation of the ‘story’ as a ‘whirlwind of passion’, discourages any reading which might consider the formal innovations of the text. Contra the original title *Story of the Eye*, with its implication that if this is a story it is one of an object, this one asserts the story of ‘two young people’: it is framed as a traditional story centred on characters. The imagery and the brief description explicitly appeal to the senses, provoking the reader: it depicts the text as if it is sensuous, with titillating imagery complementing the content. In unexamined translations of *Madame Edwarda* we can also see problematic primacy of content over form, though on far less crass terms than encountered with this Olympia Press collection.

Cultural Provocation and the Libertarian Context

As noted above, the far more influential and successful Grove Press did not publish any Bataille books during the sixties. However, they did publish an update of Olympia’s *The Naked Beast at Heaven’s Gate* in their journal, *The Evergreen Review*, which I examine in detail below. Grove’s position as a central counter-cultural voice in the fight against censorship is an important context for the reception of Bataille’s text, perhaps informing the more liberal stylistically expressive translation.

While Susan Sontag criticized large factions of the libertarian fight against censorship as being equally guilty of commodifying pornography, there is an implicit suggestion that the artist’s role is linked to the pornographer’s, and that the two roles can be unified, in the mutual motivation for provocation and scandal. Thus some of her comments do resonate with

⁷¹ *The StripTeaser*, ed. by Maurice Girodias (Paris: The Olympia Press, 1956) (pages unnumbered).

libertarian provocateurs such as the Olympia Press and Grove Press, though she develops a much more elaborate view of pornography and literature. The artist's job is inventing trophies of experience that fascinate, not entertain, she says. The artist's 'principal means of fascinating is to advance one step further in the dialectic of outrage that seems to make his work repulsive, obscure, inaccessible: in short, to give what is, or seems to be, not wanted'.⁷² This view of art and its relationship to pornography is linked to what motivated editors such as Girodias and Calder, and the expatriate writers based around the Merlin group in 1950s Paris: provocation. The cycle of taboo and transgression in Bataille's writings finds a broader social parallel in the relationship between censorship and pornography in the American reception of his work. The contention that the thrill of transgression affirms and depends on the re-imposition of taboo is echoed in the use of Bataille himself as a reference point for the championing of clandestine literature. This central facet of Bataille's thought, the desire and necessity for certain forms of prohibition, finds parallels in broader ideas of the liberating potential of constraints in creative practice. This is evident in Sontag's comments on the positive potential of censorship for literary creativity in an interview with *Tel Quel* in 1978. Asked if she agrees with the provocative statement that censorship is finally a good thing for a writer, Sontag replies

Yes, it's the importance of limits. We have to build our own limits [...] It's not that I believe that a writer has to have a tragic history, but you mustn't fall into this complacency which is always our temptation. Nor can you construct artificial barriers or imaginary limits, but you have to find true limits. For example, obscenity, which has mobilized much energy in the fight against taboos since Sade, Baudelaire, Bataille, etc.; you see now that it's a very fragile limit. The taboo has been broken. You have to find true limits, but you don't do that by creating a literature which 'shocks'. This society is basically 'unshockable'.⁷³

⁷² Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, p.45.

⁷³ Susan Sontag quoted, Guy Scarpetta, 'Susan Sontag: Dissidence as Seen from the USA'. *Conversations with Susan Sontag*, ed. by Leland Poague (Jackson: University press of Mississippi, 1995), pp.104-105. Originally published in *Tel Quel*, 76 (1978), 28-37.

Increasingly closer to Bataille's views on the necessity of taboo and restraint, and thus further from the libertarianism of the sixties counter-culture, here Sontag is conscious of the necessity of retaining taboos. Like Bataille, she recognizes that if one wants to preserve the potency of transgression, then some taboos have to be retained. While underlining the attraction of a libertarian struggle, Sontag nevertheless directly undermines a simplistic conception of 'shock'. The increasing commodification of 'freedom' of expression, and the banalization of transgression in postmodern culture may have informed Sontag's more conservative and reserved position on limits and censorship.⁷⁴ Her remark 'This society is basically "unshockable"' is a common starting point for a variety of critiques of transgression within postmodernism.⁷⁵

'The Orgiasts'

Among many conceptions of 'shock' literature prevalent in the sixties, the tendency to conflate liberty and sexual liberty is an important intellectual trend in the reception of Bataille. From this perspective, sex, and the literary depiction of sex, was often portrayed as inherently liberating. In the 2005 essay, 'Liberating Sade' James A. Steinbrager locates this trend in relation to the work of Sade within the sixties counter-culture.⁷⁶ More specifically, he locates a conflicted recurring portrait of Sade throughout the period. On the one hand, writers depicted Sade's work as a cautionary tale about the darker side of human nature, and thus could provide us with almost homeopathic healing qualities by more clearly identifying and purging that darkness and cruelty. On the other hand, Sade was depicted as an innocent visionary, repressed by society and cruelly imprisoned. This progressive image of Sade, offering cautionary tales to man, with homeopathic potential, while at the same time being

⁷⁴ See concluding section of this chapter as well as thesis conclusion for an elaboration of the point about transgression's diminishing efficacy in postmodern culture.

⁷⁵ See for example, Jean Baudrillard, *L'Échange impossible* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1999), Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1992), or for a more succinct and recent account, Steven Shavero, 'Accelerationist Aesthetics', *E-flux*, 46 (2013), accessed online via <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/>> [Accessed September 1, 2013].

⁷⁶ James A. Steinbrager, 'Liberating Sade', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2 (2005), 351-379.

used to castigate a repressive, intolerant society, is closely mirrored in writing on Bataille throughout the counter-culture. Both were often portrayed in contradictory terms as pedagogically showing ‘the fascism within us’ while at the same time their (apparent) message of sexual liberty was viewed as offering a potential release from fascist and repressive tendencies in society.

I argue that the Anglo-American counter-culture’s evocation and treatment of Bataille functions under a similarly progressive image of his work, particularly in relation to the politics of sexual liberation and libertarianism, guiding values of the counter-culture. Raymond Durnat’s series of articles on Bataille in the late sixties and early seventies exemplify some of these tendencies in the popular reception. Writing in *Books and Bookmen* in 1972, upon the publication of volume IV of the *Œuvres complètes* as well as a translation of *My Mother*,⁷⁷ Durnat’s review article initially makes similar comments on reception as the *TLS* article mentioned earlier: ‘Georges Bataille has remained almost unknown here. The reason may be that the ‘60s revival of libertarian thought occurred under an American impetus’.⁷⁸ Durnat thus implies that Bataille’s work found more receptive readers in America than England. Similarly, the reception of Bataille at the journal *Curtains*, discussed below notes with frustration England’s comparative cultural conservatism informing the delayed reception of much French thought.⁷⁹ Durnat goes on to repeatedly describe both Bataille’s thought and literary work as ‘libertarian’. He describes how in the nineteen thirties Bataille founded with Roger Caillois ‘the “Collège de Sociologie Sacrée”, which pursued his own left-wing, libertarian and anthropological interests’.⁸⁰ Then further down he writes:

Since the first volume of his *Somme athéologique* first introduced his thought to the non-libertarian majority in 1943, and particularly in the last decade, Bataille’s

⁷⁷ Georges Bataille, *My Mother*, trans. by Austryn Wainhouse (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972).

⁷⁸ Raymond Durnat, ‘Towards Eros 1: The Orgiasts’, *Books and Bookmen*, 17 (1972), p.28.

⁷⁹ Paul Buck writes in an editorial: ‘The trouble with England is that she has too long shut her retina and ear drums to the cultural advances made on the continent and in America’, *French Curtains* (Maidstone: Paul Buck, 1973) (unnumbered).

⁸⁰ Raymond Durnat, *Books and Bookmen*, 17, p.28.

thought has increasingly imposed itself as a complementary alternative to existentialism.⁸¹

Bataille's work is here seen to offer a libertarian alternative in France. His writing on base materialism and his political thought in the thirties, particularly the anti-parliamentarian advocacy of social effervescence around *Contre-attaque* could certainly be described as libertarian but there is also an anti-libertarian side to Bataille reflected politically in his enthusiasm for the Marshall Plan, his interest in planning more broadly, the political conservatism of his thought throughout the postwar period, and his explicit antipathy towards unbridled sexual libertarianism expressed in *L'Érotisme* and other texts, all of which cast major shadows over Durnat's characterisation.⁸²

Sections of this 1972 article were borrowed from an article Durnat had already written in 1967 for the counter-cultural journal *Circuits*. The former article, entitled 'The Orgiasts', is a grouping of four 'philosopher-novelists': Bataille, Blanchot, Klossowski and Pauline Réage. The group of writers are described as contemporaneous with the existentialist movement, but in contrast these writers lead an alternative trajectory of thought described as 'Reason's dark twin'. This quote is repeated in the 1972 article but in the latter case it is a direct quote from Bataille defining eroticism as 'Reason's dark twin'. The implication in both cases is that Bataille's work and eroticism itself provides a liberating alternative to the constraints of reason. Durnat recounts how it is eroticism which 'obstructs the reduction of man to a "thing"'.⁸³ The article extends a view of sex as socially and existentially liberating and amplifies Bataille's place within a cultural space on similar terms to both Olympia and Grove, specifically in the contextualization alongside other 'orgiasts':

⁸¹ Raymond Durnat, *Books and Bookmen*, 17, p.29.

⁸² For Bataille's interest in planning, see Allan Stoekl, 'Truman's Apotheosis: Bataille, "Planisme," and Headlessness', *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), 181-205.

⁸³ Raymond Durnat, 'The Orgiasts', *Circuit*, 4, ed. by David Bieda and David Robbins (1967), p.16.

Different temperaments need different mysticisms, and my suggestion is that ‘the orgiasts’ (who form a group in that they frequently refer to each other’s work) offer a vision of life as vital and authentic as those of D.H. Lawrence and Henry Miller.⁸⁴

While the four writers are presented as ‘dark’(er), the comparison to Miller and Lawrence is interesting. This presents the sexual in Bataille’s work, alongside quite different writers, within a broadly homogenous milieu of cultural libertarianism that will invite more comparative treatment of the conflicting depictions and views of sex in Bataille’s work, as well as its relationship to liberation.

The authenticity and vitality Durnat refers to is presumably derived from the vision of unrestrained sex and transgression as the therapeutic alternative to a repressive culture. ‘The Orgiasts’, according to Durnat, view society and life itself as depending ‘on the energies released by a kind of fertile and animal disorder, and by a convulsive and socially illegitimate dissolution of normal categories’.⁸⁵ This reading is accentuated by the context, the *Circuits* journal which, in this issue, contained beat poetry as well as an essay by R.D. Laing. Laing’s anti-psychiatry was a key part of the contestation of authority at the heart of the sixties counter-culture, alongside the Sexpol of Wilhelm Reich and the discourse of free-love and sexual subversion exemplified by the beats. The libidinal politics is reflected on the back page blurb, an editorial for the journal which says that the “‘Dialectics of liberation” begins with the fusion of body and spirit, the charge of love is the connection of new circuits.’⁸⁶ However in the 1962 translation of *Eroticism* which seems to have been an important reference point for Durnat, Bataille wrote in terms antagonistic to a social project of sexual liberation within which he was contextualized, ‘I must first make plain the futility

⁸⁴ Durnat, ‘The Orgiasts’, *Circuit*, 4, p.18.

⁸⁵ Durnat, ‘Towards Eros 1: The Orgiasts’, *Books and Bookmen*, 17 (1972), p.30.

⁸⁶ The ‘Dialectics of Liberation’ was also the title of a seminal anti-psychiatry conference held in London in 1967.

of the common contention that sexual taboos are nothing but prejudice and it is high time we were rid of them',⁸⁷ a point also elaborated in more detail in relation to *L'Impossible*:

Je ne suis pas de ceux qui voient dans l'oubli des interdits sexuels une issue. Je pense même que la possibilité humaine dépend de ces interdits: cette possibilité, nous ne pouvons l'imaginer sans ces interdits [...] Je ne crois d'ailleurs pas ce ce livre pourrait jouer dans le sens d'une liberté sexuelle invivable.⁸⁸

This direct antagonism of Bataille's theory with both libertarianism, and the broader sexual politics of the sixties, is absent from Durnat's reading. Even the preface to *The Naked Beast at Heaven's Gate* as published by Olympia contained Bataille's more explicit antipathy to such a libertarian view: 'I wish right away to make clear the total futility of those often-repeated statements to the effect that sexual prohibitions boil down to no more than prejudices which it is high time we get rid of.'⁸⁹ However this preface was excluded from the reprint of this translation of *Madame Edwarda* in the *Evergreen Review*.

Translations

The presentation of Bataille's ideas as libertarian with comparatively less of the tensions and contradictions that explicitly recur in his work also finds a parallel in how his work was translated: restrained, conservative prose was often rendered in English with a greater sense of liberty and embellishment. The August 1966 edition of the *Evergreen Review* featured an article by Austryn Wainhouse entitled 'On Translating Sade'. He describes his meeting of Girodias, whom he encountered through Bataille. Upon their meeting, Wainhouse recalls that Girodias put to him 'Georges Bataille has spoken to me about you. I understand you have some texts'. Wainhouse replied, 'I have made a translation of his preface to Justine'.⁹⁰ He does not elaborate on his acquaintance with Bataille's knowledge of Wainhouse but it is strongly suggested that Bataille was aware of Wainhouse's translations.

⁸⁷ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. by Mary Dalwood (London: Marion Boyars, 1962), p.266.

⁸⁸ *OC* III, pp.510-1.

⁸⁹ Pierre Angélique (pseudonym of Georges Bataille), *The Naked Beast at Heaven's Gate* trans. by Audiart (Austryn Wainhouse) (Paris: Olympia Press, 1956), p.13.

⁹⁰ Austryn Wainhouse, 'On Translating Sade', *Evergreen Review*, 42 (1966), p.54.

The *Evergreen Review* was a Grove Press publication which was launched in 1957 as a quarterly review and by the late 1960s was published monthly with a circulation of 75,000 per issue.⁹¹ The December 1964 issue featured an Austryn Wainhouse translation of *Madame Edwarda*. As one of the only major translations of Bataille in the nineteen sixties, aside from *Death and Sensuality*, this is an important overlooked moment in the dissemination of Bataille's writings. Wainhouse's translation of *Histoire de l'œil* for the Olympia Press retained a relative fidelity to the original French text, refraining from embellishing phrases, retaining the short syntax and minimalist style of the prose.⁹² His translation of *Madame Edwarda* for the *Evergreen Review* is noteworthy however for the distinctly greater change in style from the original text. The Wainhouse version does not render the minimalist, carefully punctuated style. Instead there are longer, more florid, less frequently punctuated phrases. For example, a phrase such as 'Enfin, je m'agenouillai, je titubai, et je posai mes lèvres sur la plaie vive',⁹³ is rendered by Wainhouse as: 'At last, *reeling*, I sank down on my knees and *feverishly* pressed my lips to that *running*, teeming wound'.⁹⁴

Adjectives are often added on, and phrases significantly embellished. In the original text, intensity often arises from the more minimalist style in which the obscene events are rendered. The translation is characterised by more dramatic language, however, and sometimes more idiomatic descriptions. For example, 'Je voulus bousculer la table, renverser

⁹¹ Loren Glass, 'Counter Culture Colophon Part II: Grove Press in the 1960's', *The Los Angeles Review of Books* <lareviewofbooks.org/essay/counter-culture-colophon-part-ii-grove-press-in-the-1960s> [Accessed online 30 November 2012].

⁹² For this reason, and because the translation has been already examined in detail in *Bataille's Eye* I've refrained from doing an in-depth comparative treatment here, focusing instead on *Madame Edwarda*, which is actually more relevant for the present discussion leading into its place in Grove Press in the sixties.

⁹³ *OC* III, p.21.

⁹⁴ 'Madame Edwarda by Georges Bataille', trans. by Austryn Wainhouse, *Evergreen Review*, 34 (1964), p.64. This phrase with choice of extra adjectives is exactly the same in both Olympia and Evergreen versions. My emphasis here to highlight the embellishments.

tout'⁹⁵ is rendered in the *Evergreen Review* as '*Struggling*, I wanted to kick the table and send the glasses flying, *to raise the bloody roof*.'⁹⁶

The translation for the *Evergreen Review* was based on a version Wainhouse had already done for the Olympia Press in 1956, published then as *The Naked Beast at Heaven's Gate*. The differences and alterations in these two translations are noticeable. However, they are not structural differences. Examining the two texts shows a close enough similarity to suggest that an entirely new translation was not undertaken. While the differences are relatively minute, there is a noticeably more dramatic tone. For example the phrase cited above, 'to raise the bloody roof off' had earlier been rendered more simply as 'to make a racket'.⁹⁷ Other examples include the change of short phrases from 'heavy meaning' to the more emphatic 'weightiest meaning',⁹⁸ and 'motionless' becomes the more blunt 'unmoving'.⁹⁹ The embellishments become particularly evident in the translation of the simple 'la nuit tombait sur moi' to 'the *freezing* night locked around me' to the more informal but equally gratuitous addition of adjectives in the *Evergreen Review* version: 'the *wintry* night *had* locked around me'.¹⁰⁰

The slightly more dramatic tone in the latter version was thus accompanied by a tendency towards slightly less formal wording. The Olympia version contained phrases such as 'If *one* has to lay oneself bare, it's deceiving to play with words, *to traffic in slow-marching sentences*',¹⁰¹ which were altered in the *Evergreen* version to a less formal direct pronoun: 'If *you* have to lay yourself bare then you cannot play with words'.¹⁰² Working from the original translation then, the *Evergreen Review* seem to have opted to publish a version

⁹⁵ OC III, p.20.

⁹⁶ *Evergreen Review*, 34, p.64. A discussion of the significance of 'renverser' in particular can be found in the concluding section of this chapter. Again, my italics.

⁹⁷ Pierre Angélique, *The Naked Beast at Heaven's Gate*, p.30.

⁹⁸ Angélique p.38 and Wainhouse trans, *Evergreen Review*, 34, p. 66.

⁹⁹ Angélique, p.40 and Wainhouse, 34, p.66.

¹⁰⁰ My italics.

¹⁰¹ My italics.

¹⁰² Angélique, p.39 and Wainhouse, 34, p.66.

which was edited towards being slightly more dramatic and somewhat less formal in language. Most importantly for our discussion though is the significant change in style from taut minimalist prose in the original, to more unrestrained, fluid and descriptively liberal prose. In this sense, the evolution of the translated text has gone in the opposite direction from which Bataille developed it. Across the three French versions of *Madame Edwarda* Bataille developed and rewrote, there is a stricter linguistic restraint, and a more classical, conservative style enforced, particularly evident in the 1955 rewrite which, as Gilles Phillippe has noted, emphasises and accentuates the use of a ‘désuète’ language.¹⁰³ The translation for Olympia, and its revision for the *Evergreen Review*, on the contrary, developed in the opposite direction, as I have shown. The looser, increasingly less formal style, and addition of adjectives, attempts to modernise and liberate the text rather than restrain it which was more characteristic of Bataille’s style. The formality of the final version of *Madame Edwarda*, for example, is most evident in the increasing abstraction. Phrases rendered with possessive or demonstrative adjectives are changed to the definitive article, and there is increased use of the imperfect subjunctive, as Phillippe shows. Phillippe’s examination of Bataille’s style notes that he always resisted ‘la tentation de la “belle langue”’, and never more so than with the *Divine Deus* cycle of which *Madame Edwarda* was apart.¹⁰⁴ The language recalls French of the 17th and 18th century. One of the syntactic arrangements which contribute to the style being particularly ‘désuète’ is the placement of circumstantial descriptions which normally go at the beginning or end of a phrase in the middle instead. For example, ‘Elle était, à mon gout, ravissante’. Or ‘Le plaisir, à la fin¹⁰⁵, nous chavira’. We can see by looking at the two published translations how this idiosyncratic syntax is altered which, despite its minute detail, gives a very different effect to the reading experience. In both the Olympia and *Evergreen*

¹⁰³ Gilles Phillippe, ‘Gauchissement syntaxique et grammaire classique : la langue de Bataille dans le cycle *Divinus Deus*’, *Sexe et texte : autour de Georges Bataille*, textes réunis par Jean-François Louette et Françoise Rouffiat (Lyon : Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2007), p.74.

¹⁰⁴ Phillippe, *Sexe et texte*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁵ My italics.

Review versions the latter phrase is translated as ‘Making that love liberated us at last’, placing ‘à la fin’ at the end of the phrase, giving it a more natural, fluid rhythm.¹⁰⁶

This raises the question of a more precise reason why such a ‘désuète’ style was employed by Bataille. One suggestion by Philippe is that such a classical use of language at a time (when the first version was written) contemporary with surrealism marks an almost polemical rupture with the formally experimental style associated with the surrealists and the avant-garde. But on a more generic level, there is the suggestion that there was a desire to de-historicize eroticism and, like Sade, separate the language of a pornographic récit from that of a common idiomatic. Philippe draws on Bataille’s comments on Sade to illustrate his point:

‘Le langage de Sade n’est pas le langage ordinaire. Il ne s’adresse pas à tout venant [...] C’est un langage qui désavoue la relation de celui qui parle avec ceux auxquels il s’adresse’, écrivait Bataille à la même époque. Et toute l’historiographie de l’érotisme qu’on trouve chez l’essayiste ne témoigne que d’une chose : la nostalgie d’un temps mythique où la sexualité n’était pas encore contaminée par le christianisme.¹⁰⁷

In referencing de-historicization in relation to eroticism there is need for some clarity here. Philippe rightly points to the practice, experience or representation of eroticism as aiming for a de-historicizing and defamiliarizing effect, where distinct senses of the temporal and spatial become blurred. But in the theory of eroticism Bataille frequently emphasized the necessity to think taboo, transgression and thus eroticism, in specifically historical terms.¹⁰⁸ A non-essentialist conception of the sacred, for example, dominates his work: things are never sacred in themselves, but acquire sacredness under certain historical and social conditions. The experience of eroticism though, is one in which coherent perception of time is shattered, and thus the employment of a writing style ‘out of joint’ and dissonant with dominant modern

¹⁰⁶ In the 1945 version of *Madame Edwarda* the above phrase was rendered ‘La jouissance à la fin nous libéra’. The change of vocabulary, particularly jouissance and plaisir is obviously important but beyond the scope of the present discussion. The syntax still retains the same form with ‘à la fin’ in the middle. The main difference is the absence of commas in the earlier version. This gives the latter version a more disjointed feel, obviously in accord the stylistic strategy. I have set the 1956 version of the *Madame Edwarda*, included in the *OC* III, against the 1945 original manuscript for any other discrepancies relevant to the present discussion.

¹⁰⁷ Philippe, *Sexe et texte*, p.84.

¹⁰⁸ This is a point repeated throughout Bataille’s work but see for example *L’Érotisme* in *OC* X, p.212.

aesthetics would make sense in that respect. On a conceptual level, the text operates from an initially heightened attention to the present. Access to an accentuation of time's non-coincidence with itself is initially provided through a heightened specificity of a historical moment, while the *textual style* simultaneously strives for an *instantly* de-historicised, de-familiarizing effect. A de-historicising textual style is developed in tandem with a highly historical theoretical consciousness. Philippe's depiction of Bataille's sexuality as being 'contaminée' by Christianity in Bataille's historiographical schema also needs clarifying. Bataille's conception of eroticism is not quite as separate from Christianity as his comment implies. His nostalgia is not necessarily for a sexuality disentangled from Christianity, but from Christianity's amputation of the left-sacred in modern experience, as distinct from merely sexuality entirely. His conception of sexuality and eroticism actually sometimes affirms a conception of guilt resonant with Christianity, one of the many factors creating a tension between his text and its reception amidst a culturally liberal milieu in the sixties.¹⁰⁹

The more conservative, often guilt-affirming sense of eroticism and sexuality is often glossed over in counter-cultural readings. Gilles Ernst for example, in a brief observation on the context of Bataille's reception remarked that his 'rayonnement' began after his death in 1962, during the period of the sexual revolution when there was 'le regain d'intérêt pour l'érotisme chez les intellectuels, avec les thèses de Reich (la sexualité déculpabilisée mise au service du combat révolutionnaire) ou celles de Marcuse [...] propose ni plus ni moins que d'annihiler la pulsion de mort en développant celle d'Eros'. Ernst thus closes this observation with a brief remark on Bataille's difference from 'les libérateurs de sexe' implicitly linked to a retention of 'la pulsion de mort'.¹¹⁰ The choice of vocabulary here is particularly interesting because in describing the theses of Reich which were so influential throughout the sixties, he

¹⁰⁹ For example, he writes that 'je crois qu'il n'y a pas d'érotisme sans sentiment de culpabilité', *OC X*, p.694. Expanded upon below.

¹¹⁰ Gilles Ernst, 'Bataille et le dualisme pulsionnel de Freud, ou la grande différence', *Sex et texte : autour de Georges bataille*, pp.38-9.

references 'la sexualité déculpabilisée'. This conception of sex liberated from guilt underlines the dissonance with Bataille's equivocations on the subject. Here is Bataille's description of the importance of guilt for eroticism:

Je crois qu'il n'y a pas d'érotisme sans sentiment de culpabilité, dépassé bien entendu, parce que, dans l'érotisme, la culpabilité n'est plus qu'une joie, elle n'est plus un obstacle, elle n'est qu'un obstacle franchi.¹¹¹

While it is 'dépassé', that guilt is still essential for the experience. The experience is always an anguished one and that anguish is affirmed in his writing, without illusions of the possibility of resolution or reprieve. However, the cultural translation of a text always entails major alterations. In looking at both the translations and commentary on Bataille in the sixties we can see that the emphasis on restraint on the level of both textual style and theory is diluted into something more liberal. Wainhouse's embellishment of the text and Durnat's description of Bataille as 'libertarian' deflates the textual and theoretical anguish. The parallels between liberating the prose and theory of Bataille's text is also evident in the 1973 translation of *Literature and Evil*. Where the original text describes Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, the loaded word used is 'transgressor' while the English version translates this as 'breaking' the law'.¹¹² Similarly, at one point where Bataille elaborates on the necessity of limits in thinking through the relationship between literature and sacrifice, he writes, 'C'est en transgressant ces limites nécessaires à le conserver qu'il affirme son essence'.¹¹³ This gets translated as 'It is by going beyond these limitations which are necessary for his preservation that he asserts the nature of his being'.¹¹⁴ The loaded meaning of transgression gets diluted in such translation. As Foucault explained in his crucial essay, transgression does not oppose an exterior space to an interior space, nor is it conceived as a limit point between black and white. Rather the limit-relation is that closer to 'en vaille dont

¹¹¹ OC X, p.694.

¹¹² *Literature and Evil*, trans. by Alastair Hamilton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973), p.20.

¹¹³ OC IX, p.214.

¹¹⁴ *Literature and Evil*, trans. by Alastair Hamilton, p.68.

aucune effraction simple ne peut venir à bout'.¹¹⁵ The complex, spiral-like nature of transgression, which is conceived as internal and immanent to the law, means that there is no space which is purely transgressive or a-transgressive. This intrinsic connection of law to transgression also means it does not entail a simply negative destruction of limits. The translation of transgression as 'go beyond' or 'breaking' the law are thus minor but significant examples of the dilution of internal tensions in Bataille's theory in tandem with liberalising the prose.

In the context of the emerging sixties counter-culture the tendency to 'liberate' his prose from its original constraints is particularly evident in our examination of *Madame Edwarda*. The parallels between the tendency towards a more liberal textual *style* and more liberal and libertarian theoretical appropriation of Bataille's text become clearer with a closer examination of Grove Press. This will allow us to extend our analysis of how a predominant counter-cultural depiction of sexual liberation as equivalent to total liberation informs and shapes various readings of Bataille.¹¹⁶

Grove's *Evergreen Review* was also characterised by a mix of French philosophy and literature and a more popular American counter-culture. This cultural mix was made clear from the earliest issues. Sartre and Beckett featured in the first issue alongside an interview with New Orleans jazz drummer Baby Dodds. The second issue was entitled 'The San Francisco Scene', containing a landmark first collection of work by the Beat writers, including Ferlinghetti, Kerouac and Ginsberg. As Loren Glass writes, 'With Paris as his primary resource, New York as his home base, and the booming American university population as his audience, Rosset's signal achievement with Grove Press and the *Evergreen Review* would be to take the avant-garde into the mainstream, helping to usher in a cultural

¹¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p.237.

¹¹⁶ See also below discussion of Steinbrager, 'Liberating Sade', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2 (2005), p.355.

revolution whose consequences are with us still.’¹¹⁷ Summing up the writers in the *Evergreen Review*, Barney Rossett claims that ‘their relentless assault on established values and official truths helped establish the counter-culture that took root in the sixties’.¹¹⁸

In 1965 Grove Press published de Sade’s *The Complete Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom and Other Writing*, also translated by Wainhouse with Richard Seaver.¹¹⁹ There was an anonymous publisher’s preface which gave a very specific outline of how they thought Sade’s vision should be contextualized:

To profit from that extraordinary vision, however, we do not have to subscribe to it. But if we ignore it, we do so at our own risk. For to ignore Sade is to choose not to know a part of ourselves, that inviolable part which lurks within each of us and which, eluding the light of reason, can, we have learned this century, establish evil as a rule of conduct and threaten to destroy the world.¹²⁰

From this perspective, Sade can teach us about the evil lurking within us. If we place too much faith in the redemptive capacities of reason, we miss the ‘inviolable’ part within ourselves. Repression of the irrational urges through the triumph of reason, it is implied, is partially to blame for the horrors of the twentieth century. If repression of desire is the cause of modern society’s maladies, then libidinal liberation is posited as the cure. Desire and the fight against all forms of repression are thus depicted as ethical imperatives and it is on very similar terms in which Bataille is received in the sixties. The depiction of Sade here as exposing the dark inviolable opposite to reason echoes Durnat’s description of Bataille and ‘the Orgiasts’ as ‘Reasons’ dark twin’. His work was often contextualized precisely against repression and furthermore depicted as a moral rejoinder to modern society’s subordination to reason. This is even evident in the choice of translations. In 1967 an essay appeared in *San*

¹¹⁷ Loren Glass, ‘Counter-Culture Colophon’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, (published September 7 2011), accessed via <<http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/counter-culture-colophon>> [accessed online 12 November 2012].

¹¹⁸ Barney Rossett, ‘Introduction to *Evergreen Review Reader 1967-1973*’ excerpt published online <www.evergreenreview.com/100/10_98.html> [Accessed online 1 June 2015].

¹¹⁹ Marquis de Sade, *The Complete Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1966).

¹²⁰ Anonymous publishers preface to *The Complete Justine*, p.xxii, quoted in Steinbrager, ‘Liberating Sade’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2, p.358.

San Francisco Earthquake, which also featured work by beat writers such as Laurence Ferlinghetti and William Burroughs. The choice of text is unusual here. Of all the many important essays, articles and récits of Bataille yet to be translated, the editors chose a relatively obscure text, 'Notes on the Present System of Repression'. Capitalized in the middle of this short article is a statement which rings closely with the counter-cultural values of repressive desublimation:

IT IS TIME TO PROTEST EVERYWHERE AND IN EVERY WAY THAT THE SYSTEM OF REPRESSION PRESENTLY IN FORCE IS INDEED MORE MONSTROUS AND DEGRADING TO MANKIND THAN ANY OTHER THAT HAS EVER BEFORE BEEN APPLIED.¹²¹

In this piece Bataille makes the ethical case for public sacrifice against private incarceration, that even the use of torture in certain societies entails a more human and less hypocritical attitude than the European prison system.

The text dates from 1933, was later published as part of the posthumous unpublished texts in the second volume of the *Œuvres complètes*, however *Le Quinzaine littéraire* published a version of it in July 1967, the same year as its appearance in *San Francisco Earthquake*. The unusual choice of text must have been based upon a coincidental discovery of it in *Le Quinzaine littéraire* then. Its inclusion however confirms an emerging, and inevitably partial, portrait of Bataille emphasising the more libertarian aspects of his work in context of ongoing cultural critiques of repression. Bataille often becomes assimilated to such a critique from an ethical perspective, rather than, for example hedonist or individualist. For Durgnat, for example, part of the power of eroticism was its power 'as a stimulus towards the "honest delirium" which for so long has been all but beyond the reach of modern man, too coldly civilized, too coldly violent, without the falsities of drugs, to know himself as much more than a nodding acquaintance'.¹²² Recognizing the potential for 'honest delirium' within

¹²¹ Georges Bataille, 'Notes on the Present System of Repression', trans. by J.L Hady, *San Francisco Earthquake*, 2 (1967), p.4.

¹²² Durgnat, 'Towards Eros 1: The Orgiasts', *Books and Bookmen*, 17 (June 1972), p. 30.

us, the liberation of sexual desire repressed by reason, is the moral message he finds in Bataille.

Bomb Culture: Libidinal Politics and Counter-Cultural Disappointments

For Jeff Nuttall, pivotal and influential figure in the British counter-culture of the sixties,¹²³ his interest in Bataille shared many of the focal points as Durnat in the prioritization of desublimation. In Nuttall's *Bomb Culture*, his description of the sixties counter-culture as he experienced it does not quite conform to a clear-cut political idealism as is commonly associated with the counter-culture. Nuttall's occasional dismissal of idealism and subservience to future goals, and passion for the intensity of the present, evokes closer comparison with Bataille's theory of sovereignty, and the 'ultimate instant', as antithetical to the submission of the present to the future. For example, Nuttall recounts his generation's concern for 'a way of life devoted to the sensation of the moment'.¹²⁴ It is worth noting here, however, the differentiation between the 'sensation of the moment' and the Bataillean 'instant'. The former implies a desire and belief in the possibility of full presence while the Bataillean 'instant' is lacerating, acknowledges the impossibility of such presence and partially derives its intensity from the anguish at such impossibility. The object of desire '*se dérobe au moment de la possession*'.¹²⁵ It is lacerated by a desire, '*par-delà la présence désirée ce point dont la douceur est donnée dans un désespoir*'.¹²⁶ Nuttall gives some extensive quotations from Bataille in his later book *Snipe's Spinster*, but it is clear, for a start from the differentiation between Nuttall's 'moment' and Bataille's 'instant' that the theoretical affinities are quite vague.¹²⁷

¹²³ Nuttall was involved in setting up the underground newspaper, *International Times*, took part in the first 'happenings' in the U.K. and his *Bomb Culture* has been a widely cited and influential text in cultural studies.

¹²⁴ Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (London: Paladin, 1970), p.106.

¹²⁵ *OC VI*, p.70.

¹²⁶ *OC VI*, p.70.

¹²⁷ With vague affinities to Bataille he expresses the motivations behind his first periodical with reference to scatology and nausea. He explains that *My Own Mag: A Super-Absorbant Periodical* 'used nausea and flagrant scatology as a violent means of presentation. I wanted to make the fundamental condition of living unavoidable by nausea'. Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, p.141.

However, to the extent that his vision of the possibility ‘that schizophrenia was a tortured means to a fuller existence’,¹²⁸ as well as the book’s conclusion on utopian exhortations to ‘build our own damn future’, *Bomb Culture* does reflect an intellectual zeitgeist of promethean idealism and politicized anti-psychiatry in this respect. These influences become even more apparent in *Snipe’s Spinster*. In this text however, Nuttall writes about the late sixties counter-culture from 1975 with a tone of embittered disappointment towards failed revolutionary dreams and desires.¹²⁹ Through a series of conversations, Nuttall’s (loosely fictionalized) protagonist ruminates on various aspects of his own immersion in the psychedelic and intellectual underworld of mid-sixties London, as well as broader ideas on revolutionary dreaming. Focusing on the Paris events of May 1968 as the crest of a wave, Nuttall’s dream of revolution is one derived from the poetry of the Surrealists and the libidinization of the social in Reichian terms. For him, the revolution, based on ‘the invention of the impossible by imagination and art and wild love’ failed primarily because of pacificism and ‘false concepts of history and freedom’. He goes on however to describe a sustained longing for a concept of revolution based on perpetual orgasm:

But my spinster within is always ready to shut up when one and all are prepared to acknowledge that we are all about the achievement of perpetual orgasm on earth and the sharing of the materials that the earth provides to that end.¹³⁰

The discussion of Bataille in this context suggests he held a more prominent place than has been previously thought, for some such as Nuttall, within the libidinal politics of the sixties. His thoughts on Bataille are here introduced during a scene in which he is in the middle of a drug-fuelled conversation, his memory flitting back and forth between the present and the sixties. Then, an excitable moment of ‘returning psychopathy’ brings with it, ‘wings, great dark wide wings’ which suddenly turns his attention to *Eroticism*, worth quoting at length:

¹²⁸ Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, p.109.

¹²⁹ An account of the cultural and social shifts that took place during this period and its effect on the reception of Bataille in Britain in particular is dealt with in chapter four.

¹³⁰ Jeff Nuttall, *Snipe’s Spinster* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1975), p.59.

Phrases of Bataille rattle through my memory like tickertape, phrases to read which, ten years ago, were to be immediately drunk: '(...) the sacred and the forbidden are one (...) the sacred can be reached through the violence of a broken taboo (...) an enormous possibility opened up towards profane liberty: the possibility of profanation' (...) and Bataille quoting Sade: 'The soul passes into a kind of apathy that is metamorphosed into pleasures a thousand times more wonderful than those that their weaknesses have procured them.' Bataille defining poetry: 'Poetry leads us to the same place as all forms of eroticism – the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea.' I am giddy with psychopathy because I am melting into history. Access to that 'kind of apathy' has suddenly flooded my self with poetry. I melt into the ocean, I float into the sun. I redefine myself with rocks of morality and caring. I change the subject. We make for the Sporrans club with its coy tartans and its awful bagpipe-blowing dolls.¹³¹

The alchemy and fusion 'of separate objects' suggests similar sources of fascination for Nuttall as for Durgnat. The possibility of fusion with the world, a loss of self in cosmic experience and return to primordial unity are recurring sources of attraction, in this instance where Nuttall imagines melting with the ocean and floating in the sea. He mentions that he first read Bataille ten years previously, which would have been 1965.

His initial encounter with Bataille is described as an intoxicating one where phrases 'were to be immediately drunk' rather than merely read. The emphasis on pleasure and cosmic bliss again suggests a reading of his work with brighter, more politically utopian resonances than it has normally been associated with. Following on from his comments on a Reichian view of revolution conceived as perpetual orgasm, and his utopian description of eroticism, Bataille's eroticism attracts Nuttall, like the other writers I have discussed, for its redemptive potential. Sex is ultimately depicted as a primary source of salvation. Eroticism gives access to sacred immanence 'melting into history', 'into the ocean', and permits a therapeutic transformation of self where, as Nuttall writes, 'I redefine myself with rocks and caring'.

Writing for the journal *Curtains* in 1976, Eric Mottram would draw similar conclusions to those we have seen with Nuttall and Durgnat: that the contemporary value of

¹³¹ Nuttall, *Snipe's Spinster*, p.14.

Bataille's work is excavated by reading it as pointing towards the socially redeeming and liberating potential of sex. Moreover, Mottram implies that this redemptive reading of Bataille is not readily apparent and must be discovered beneath the apparent nihilism or even cynicism. In 'No Centre to Hold: A Commentary on Derrida', Mottram, as the title suggests, offers a broad engagement with Derrida discussing the relationship between deconstruction, structuralism and process art, as well as engaging with several other thinkers, among whom Bataille features prominently. Engaging with broad philosophical issues related to 'centrelessness', the death of God and the absence of meaning in thinkers as varied as Camus and Derrida, he asks 'But how do you fend off suicide, or the suicidal psychosis which follows the knowledge and feeling of centrelessness – a crux for many twentieth century writers? Bataille's answer is to admit laughter [...] Bataille breaks what Camus called "the silence of the universe" with laughter at the very moment of ecstasy, sacrifice, the stake, the organs'.¹³²

Mottram initially posits Bataille's laughter in opposition to ethics, but other close readings of the place of laughter in Bataille's work have underlined its ethical foundations. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, for example, has shown how Bataille's conception of laughter presupposes identification with the other. 'Laughter is not divine and sovereign because it hovers over miserable human finitude, but rather because it allows itself to be carried away and falls along with that finitude into the impossible, into night.'¹³³ The loss involved in laughter is one which communicates with the other. While laughter is in a sense bound to nihilism, the meaninglessness of things in themselves and the nudity of being, the 'practice' of laughter also entails an identification with the other and a form of communication. Laughter occupies an ambivalent position between being symptomatic of the tangible

¹³² Eric Mottram, 'No Centre to Hold: A Commentary on Derrida', *Curtains le prochain step* (Maidstone: Paul Buck, 1972), p. 41.

¹³³ Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, 'The Laughter of Being', *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p.158.

nihilism of everything, and the ethical attempt to transvaluate that nihilism. Some of this ambivalence comes across in Mottram's treatment of Bataille, but at first Bataille's laughter is depicted from a more directly nihilist perspective and opposed to Wittgenstein's ethics:

Wittgenstein, on the other hand, believed that after silence [...] we had to attempt the *construction* of an ethics, since ethics is not part of 'the case' whose propositions we can ascertain by logical analysis [...] Where Wittgenstein approaches Bataille is at the point where he can say in the lecture on ethics [...] that 'in ethics people are forever trying to find a way of saying something which, in the nature, of things, is not and can never be expressed. We know a priori: anything which one might give by way of a definition of the Good – it can never be anything but a misunderstanding (...)'. That is, there is only ethical praxis; there are no ethical propositions.¹³⁴

Mottram goes on to rescue Bataille from a nihilist imbued conception of laughter, initially depicted in opposition to Wittgensteinian ethics. He refers back to André Masson's 'Some Notes on the Unusual Georges Bataille' for a passage relevant for underlining the similarities between Bataille and Allen Ginsberg. The two writers would find common ground, he claims, in Bataille's insistence that 'Sovereignty is revolt, it is not the exercise of power. Authentic sovereignty refuses' :

Ginsberg's extreme and dangerous testing of consciousness through drug experience tests limits – as Bataille observes in *La Haine de la poésie* : 'La liberté n'est rien si elle n'est celle de vivre au bord des limites où toute compréhension se décompose'. Where Ginsberg launched himself into experience and then wrote poetry, Bataille writes examples of interior experience already philosophized.¹³⁵

The Bataille quotation relative to liberty which he chooses here is one fundamentally linked to the account of eroticism, the blurring of distinct things, 'où toute compréhension se décompose'. Ginsberg and Bataille are united in a libidinal critique of logocentrism, and it is here that the progressivist reading of Bataille in this piece begins to emerge. Turning from an image of quasi-nihilist laughter in the face of absurdity, Bataille is linked to a progressive counter-culture politics of erotic liberation.

¹³⁴ Mottram, *Curtains le prochain step*, pp.41-2.

¹³⁵ Mottram, *Curtains le prochain step*, p. 43.

The progressive-emancipatory reading of his work is re-enforced by reference to William Burroughs's account of freedom at the end of the essay. Mottram quotes from Burroughs's *Wild Boys* which refers to the fragmentation of subjectivity in modern life. The historical shift we are witnessing, according to Burroughs as cited by Mottram, is giving rise to 'contemporary or Protean man as rebel': 'It is an effort to remain open, while in rebellion, to the extraordinary rich, confusing, liberating, and threatening array of contemporary historical possibilities and to retain, in the process, a continuing capacity for shape-shifting.'¹³⁶ This vision from Burroughs then gives Mottram the theoretical support for rescuing Bataille from merely base, nihilist, or purely hedonist readings, as he makes clear:

that if Bataille's transgressive principles are to be made valid, and not simply the basis of a regression to orgy or the sexual aristocratism of the sado-masochist positions loosely identified with Sade, they have to be placed in the context of historical social life and possibility of social change for the betterment of human life.¹³⁷

Mottram thus emphasises that his work has to be specifically 'placed' in context. He here takes up a position which resonates with Bataille's critique of Klossowski's reading of Sade, where sovereignty is put to work in service of the social. As Bataille argued:

Pierre Klossowski a donné de l'auteur de *Justine* une image un peu construite : ce n'est plus qu'un élément d'engrenages où une dialectique savante enchaîne Dieu, la société théocratique et la révolte du grand seigneur (qui veut garder ses privilèges et renier ses obligations). C'est en un sens très hégélien, mais sans la rigueur de Hegel.¹³⁸

This is particularly so because Klossowski draws a problematic conclusion from a passage where Sade speaks of a republican state being founded upon crime. Klossowski was seduced to deduce that 'la mise à mort du roi, substitue de la mise à mort de Dieu, une conception sociologique que fonde la théologie, qui guide la psychanalyse'.¹³⁹ The idea of making Bataille's transgressive principles 'valid' thus echoes Klossowski's attempt to put Sade's negativity to a transcendent use, recuperating its negativity into a social dialectic. Mottram's

¹³⁶ Burroughs quoted in Mottram in *Curtains le prochain step*, p.53.

¹³⁷ Mottram, *Curtains le prochain step*, p.53.

¹³⁸ OC IX, p.247.

¹³⁹ OC IX, p.248.

vocabulary suggests an effort to ‘elevate’ the baseness of Bataille’s text. There is a distinct socio-historical teleology, openly admitting what is implicit in any account of reception: that necessary distortions and assimilations take place in cultural translation, and this is particularly pronounced in the case of the more conservative aspects of Bataille’s theory when assimilated to the sexual politics of the counter-culture. Where Reich recognises ‘the potential for a new social ethos’, Bataille is content to ‘keep the analysis within the stricter limits of the erotic’. Mottram is attentive to the importance of limits in Bataille but his vocabulary still betrays a pronounced libertarianism. Concluding the above passage on Bataille, for example, he writes of a ‘form of a desire for being beyond the self in space and time, an essential breaking of the taboos of boundary, limit and law’. The idea of an essential ‘breaking’ of a taboo or limit gives the illusion that such a boundary is broken and discarded in Bataille’s account of transgression, where it actually entails the reassertion and strengthening of taboo and limit as discussed above in relation to Foucault. However, Mottram goes on to note that the conservative tenor of Bataille’s thought does pose a problem for contemporary sexual politics. He concludes that the residues of Bataille’s ‘puritan Catholic past’ are one hindrance of his place within a dialectics of sexual liberation.¹⁴⁰

Mottram’s essay then in many ways amplifies the tendency I have been charting through the counter-cultural readings (including Durgnat and Nuttall) to place Bataille within a libertarian social-progressive project of sexual liberation. But Mottram goes further in highlighting the difficulties and contradictions of placing Bataille in such a context. There is a recognition of the incompatibilities but a persistence to find a contemporary or subversive use for his thought nonetheless. The tensions between a left-leaning libertarianism of the counter-culture and the sometimes strongly conservative facets of Bataille’s text come to the

¹⁴⁰ Mottram, *Curtains le prochain step*, p.53.

fore in *Curtains*, where Mottram's essay was published, an instrumental and previously under-examined journal in Bataille's reception in the nineteen seventies.¹⁴¹

Curtains: A Shift in Counter-Cultural Readings

While there were relatively few translations of Bataille's work in the sixties and seventies, Buck's numerous translations of his work in the journal, as well as the first event dedicated to Bataille in the UK in 1984, were milestones in the dissemination of his work.¹⁴² The curious aspect of his translations is that the focus was on Bataille's poetry, still today one of the most marginal aspects of his work. *Curtains* was initially a journal almost exclusively concerned with poetry but after several issues the central concern became translating and introducing French writers who were relatively unknown in England. Bataille first appeared in the second issue, entitled *Curtains in the Meantime: a start* in 1972. The poem, 'Je mets mon vit ...' was translated by Paul Buck and Alexis Lykiard.¹⁴³ The next edition of the journal to feature work by Bataille makes the emphasis on quick dissemination very clear. Published in 1974, *Velvet Curtains* was a special issue dedicated to the work of Bataille, Blanchot and Bernard Noël. Some brief opening editorial comments do not explain why these three writers were brought together except that the material presented 'is not intended to interweave and form a tight raft, but was juxtaposed solely from the available translated material'.¹⁴⁴ Bataille's poetry is

¹⁴¹ To clarify, the 'conservative' aspects of Bataille's text I'm referring to are primarily 'conservative' on a formal level. The argument is not that Bataille's text is inherently conservative culturally or politically, though there are certainly aspects of cultural conservatism in comparison to the counter-culture libertarianism discussed.

¹⁴² Here are the major translations of Bataille found in *Curtains*: The poem 'I Stick My Cock ...', *Curtains in the meantime: a start* (Maidstone: Paul Buck, 1972), 'Pain', 'Maidemoiselle my Sweetheart', 'Piss' 'The Undifferentiated Being is Nothing', 'Invocation to Chance', 'Discord', 'Myself', 'The Roof of the Temple', 'I Throw myself among the Dead', 'To Be Orestes', *Velvet Curtains* (Maidstone: Paul Buck, 1974). Other texts related to Bataille in *Velvet Curtains* include Bernard Noël, 'Poetry and Experience', Bernard Noël, 'The Unfinished/Infinite of Bataille' (translated by Glenda George from *Le Quinzaine littéraire*), JAH, 'The Orestie', Paul Buck, 'On Wholeness: Reading Bataille, Blanchot, Noel'. *Curtains le prochain step*, and *Bal:le:ed Curtains* (1976) contained excerpts of translations of *Le Bleu du ciel* as 'The Blue of Sky', trans. by Paul Auster and Lydia Davis. See also *Violent Silence: Celebrating Georges Bataille*, ed. by Paul Buck (London: Georges Bataille Event, 1984). Buck first discovered Bataille, through the London bookshop Better Books, as did Jeff Nuttall.

¹⁴³ Originally published in *OC IV*, p.14.

¹⁴⁴ *Velvet Curtains*, ed. by Paul Buck (Maidstone: Paul Buck, 1974). Most of the *Curtains* journals were not numbered and poorly catalogued, giving only a title and year in some instances.

the focal point of his section of the issue and a Bernard Noël essay provides some context for the reader.¹⁴⁵ Noël's central argument is that the poetry arose out of a theoretical and practical necessity, rather than any aesthetic turn in his work. In order to transmit his experience, Bataille was 'compelled to write, and it was in devoting himself to that writing which definitively secularized the experience, that he met poetry'.¹⁴⁶ Bataille's turn to poetry, Noël implies was a necessarily communicative component of inner experience, though there is no explanation for the reader of *Curtains* of exactly what 'inner experience' might mean. While *Curtains* was a journal originally focused on poetry, this was no longer the case with *Velvet Curtains*. Prose excerpts and literary theory comprised the Blanchot and Noël translations. Of the vast body of (at this point) untranslated work by Bataille, why prioritize his poems, an especially obscure portion of his oeuvre?

Close Readings: Death, Mourning and Inner Experience¹⁴⁷

To begin with, the poems offer some of the most explicit collisions between eroticism and religious sacrificial experience, as well as the most sexually and violently explicit imagery found in Bataille's work. A close reading of some of the poems will allow us to identify and expand upon the tensions we have been exploring so far. This will necessitate a brief detour through 'inner experience', as an essential context for understanding the poetry. The following poem, *Douleur*, is the first poem in *Velvet Curtains* directly after Noël's essay which made elliptical reference to the intrinsic relationship between inner experience and poetry:

¹⁴⁵ Translated by Paul Buck and Glenda George.

¹⁴⁶ Bernard Noël, 'Poetry and Experience', trans. by Glenda George and Paul Buck, *Velvet Curtains*, p.3 (unnumbered).

¹⁴⁷ There are a number of important discussions of Bataille's poetry beyond the scope of this discussion. Patrick ffrench's article explores similar themes in relation to poetry and sacrifice. See Patrick ffrench, 'Donner à voir: Sacrifice and Poetry in the Work of Georges Bataille', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 42 (2006), 125-38. See also ffrench, *After Bataille* (London: Legenda, 2007). An important book-length study of Bataille's poetry is Sylvain Santi, *Georges Bataille, à l'extrémité fuyante de la poésie* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

Douleur¹⁴⁸

Douleur
 Douleur
 Douleur
 Ô douleur
 Ô douleur
 ô mes pleurs de poix
 ma queue de safran

ô me déculotter
 me pisser

Pain¹⁴⁹

Pain
 Pain
 Pain
 O pain
 O pain
 Oh my tears of pitch
 My tail of saffron

Oh to pull down my pants
 To piss myself

A different translation, by Mark Spitzer, renders lines six and seven, ‘oh my tears of sap/ my saffron dick’.¹⁵⁰ Whichever translation we opt for, line seven asserts a phallic image, ‘queue’, and the fusion of man with nature. The narrator becomes indistinguishable from a plant, ‘safran’. Similarly, in line six human tears are made up of resin-like ‘poix’ which comes from plants. The poet creates a sense of indiscernibility between his human self and a plant, imagery centred on verticality and erectness emphasising parodic and cyclical relationships of existence. In ‘La Vieille taupe’, Bataille compared man’s verticality to that of a plant, and the parallel gravitation towards the base, writing that ‘une plante dirige des racines d’aspect obscène à l’intérieur du sol afin d’assimiler la pourriture des matières organiques et un homme subit, en contradiction avec la morale formelle, des impulsions qui l’attirent vers ce qui est bas, le mettant en antagonisme ouvert avec tout élévation d’esprit’.¹⁵¹ Here in the poem the meditation on an image of pain or anguish, leads to an abandonment where the limits of both subjectivity and the human are destabilized.

The poem parallels the movement of ‘inner experience’ which partially entails an experience of self-loss through initial meditation upon an impossible, anguished object. However, it is not only self-loss which is aimed for, but the undoing of subject-object

¹⁴⁸ OC IV, p.11.

¹⁴⁹ Georges Bataille, ‘Pain’, trans. by Paul Buck, *Velvet Curtains*, p.6.

¹⁵⁰ Georges Bataille, *The Complete Poems of Georges Bataille*, trans. by Mark Spitzer (Chester Springs, DA: Dufour editions, 2008), p.1.

¹⁵¹ OC II, p.98.

boundaries. One of the clearest examples of the collapse of traditional subject-object relations in 'inner experience' is given in Bataille's description of his meditation upon a photograph of a young Chinese man undergoing the 'Torture of a Thousand Cuts'. This was a photograph of a brutal method of torture and execution in which the victim's body and limbs are slowly sliced from the living victim until he dies. In this photograph the victim was captured in a state where his anguish, for Bataille, suggested a conflicted state of ecstasy. The photograph was a gift from the psychoanalyst Adrien Borel. It had a special significance for Bataille who kept it on his desk and made reference to it in several works.¹⁵² In *Le Coupable*, Bataille writes that 'en même temps cet objet que j'avais choisi se défaisait dans une immensité, se perdait dans l'orage de la douleur'.¹⁵³ Meditating on this image of anguish thus takes him beyond himself but equally the object which he's chosen, the torture victim, is dissipated in what he calls the 'storm of pain', like the subject-object dissipation which emerges from the poem 'Pain'. In the instance of the ending of 'Pain', the subject-object abandonment is accentuated with the suggestive imagery of undressing, a metaphor that recurs in Bataille's work often evocative of the desire to strip away the confines of the self. 'Ce qui m'attire', he states in one digression on the subject, is 'le pouvoir qu'un homme aurait de se quitter lui-même ainsi qu'un vêtement, de se déculotter de lui-même'.¹⁵⁴ The vision of intoxication in 'Douleur' then, with its childish puerility and its vocabulary of 'se déculotter', entails the traditional Dionysian vision of abandoning the limits of one's self but also seems to imply a more extreme abandonment, or at least putting into question, of the limits of the human.

The movement of subject-object dissipation in both the poetry and in 'inner experience' has a degree of parallel with the Freudian account of mourning. For Bataille, mourning, or contemplation on objects of painful loss ('Douleur'), opens up access toward

¹⁵² For example, in his final book, *Les Larmes d'éros*, Bataille writes that he discerned in this image 'une valeur infinie de renversement. À partir de cette violence [...] je fus si renversé que j'accédai à l'extase'. OC X, p.627.

¹⁵³ OC V, p.283

¹⁵⁴ Bataille, *Romans et récits*, p.1145.

the sacred. The sacred is an 'impossible' experience partially because it is fuelled by a desire that can never be fully realized: pure immanence with the world as well as an experience fundamentally incompatible with the modern world of rationalized capitalism. Mourning is similarly 'impossible' as it cannot be resolved or fully worked through without betrayal: the lost one cannot be reached and its only end thus comes in a partial abandonment of the memory. For Freud the subject of mourning experiences an impoverishment of the world, while the subject of melancholia goes through an impoverishment of the ego. Melancholia is the more complex condition because we cannot clearly identify a cause, such as the death which triggers the state of mourning. Both states of inhibition pass into a state of emotional discharge which Freud labels mania. In such a state, the ego must overcome the loss of the object. Freud writes:

The total amount of counter-investment that the painful suffering of melancholia had drawn and bound to itself from the ego has become available. The manic person also unmistakably demonstrates his liberation from the object from which he had been suffering by pouncing on his new object-investments like a ravenous man.¹⁵⁵

In Bataille's experience of the sacred as mourning, we can see a similar passage from states of inhibition to mania which Freud describes. However, where Freud describes the manic person pouncing on a new object of libidinal investment, the Bataillean experience of ecstatic mania is concerned with liberating the subject from any investment in a specific object in instances of 'non-savoir'. These ecstatic instants of 'non-savoir' in Bataille's writings are often found in the eruption of laughter or tears. Bataille explains that only by cancelling, or suspending, all operations of knowledge do we gain access to the intensity of the instant. Breaking into laughter or tears 'brisent, interrompent ou rejettent à l'arrière-plan le déroulement continu de la pensée'.¹⁵⁶ Another poem, 'Rire', also published in *Velvet Curtains*, is worth considering in this context:

¹⁵⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Penguin Freud Reader* (London: Penguin, 2004), p.321.

¹⁵⁶ OC VIII, p.254.

Rire¹⁵⁷

Rire et rire
du soleil
des orties
des galets
des canards

de la pluie
du pipi du pape
de maman
d'un cercueil rempli de merde

Laughing¹⁵⁸

Laughing and laughing
at the sun
at the nettles
at the pebbles
at the ducks

at the rain
at the pope's piss
at mama
at a coffin full of crap.

The privilege of both laughter and tears as accessories to moments of 'non-savoir' in the practice of both mourning and poetry is brought out in *La Souveraineté* where Bataille writes, 'Le rire ou les larmes se déchainent dans le vide de la pensée, que leur objet fit dans l'esprit. Mais ces mouvements, comme les mouvements profondément rythmés de la poésie, de la musique, de l'amour, de la danse, ont le pouvoir de maintenir, de prendre et reprendre sans fin l'instant qui compte l'instant de la rupture, de la faille'.¹⁵⁹ In 'Rire' it is clear from the final couplet that this state of ecstasy, glimpsing the point at which thought might vanish, again emerges from a state of mourning. In this respect Nick Land's brief comments on the poem 'Rire' are worth considering as the problems of Bataille's conception of mourning or death as a possibly unbridled Dionysian state of intoxication become explicit:

It is because life is pure surplus that the child of 'Rire' – standing by the side of his quietly weeping mother and transfixed by the stinking ruins of his father – is gripped by convulsions of horror that explode into peals of mirth, as uncompromising as orgasm. 'Rire' is, in part, a contribution to the theory of mourning. Laughter is a communion with the dead, since death is not the object of laughter: it is death itself that finds a voice when we laugh. Laughter is that which is lost to discourse, the haemorrhaging of pragmatics into excitation and filth.¹⁶⁰

The particularly troubling aspect of Bataille's poetry which Land's reading brings out is in the idea of 'communion with' the dead. In reading Bataille's poetry as emblematic of an

¹⁵⁷ OC IV, p.13.

¹⁵⁸ Bataille, 'Laughing', trans. by Paul Buck, *Velvet Curtains* (unnumbered).

¹⁵⁹ OC VIII, p.254.

¹⁶⁰ Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.xvi.

experience of the sacred, of mourning, in which subject-object relations are dissipated in a transition to mania, a simplistic and de-politicised theory emerges in Land which problematically valorizes self-destruction. Communicating with a zero-level primordial intensity simplistically erases difference such that death and the abyss are fused with. In such a reading, worldly relations are renounced through hyperbolic destruction, and no sense of critical dissonance or antagonism remains. Self-destruction, and ‘communication with’ the abyss implies a simplistic surrender to the world as it is. These poems, written during a particularly transitional period of his work, suggest two different tendencies within Bataille’s thought which are also crucial for understanding the counter-cultural reception of his thought: ecstatic *communication with* death and a more cautious *exposure to* death that resists the unbridled intoxication of the former tendency and sustains an antagonistic dualism. These tendencies can often be found within the same text, but they also mark an historical shift in Bataille’s thought away from the more controversial aspects of sacrificial self-loss associated with his secret society Acéphale. Milo Sweedler has largely attributed this transition to the impact of Maurice Blanchot, whom Bataille only encountered in 1940. Sweedler writes that Bataille ‘rethinks communication and death, associated with Laure, in terms of the incommunicable and the impossibility of dying, associated with Blanchot’.¹⁶¹ This is why, as will be discussed in chapter three, Jean-Luc Nancy more often references texts from Bataille’s post-war work which contained implicit self-critiques of nostalgia for belonging in his earlier valorisation of sacrifice with Acéphale. When Nancy theorises community as death, he says that it is not the death ‘qui plonge dans un pur abîme: c’est la mort en tant que partage, et en tant qu’exposition’.¹⁶² It communicates because of our lack of communion, not in spite of it. Where that impossibility generates an antagonism, these poems similarly start from an emphasis upon absence and impossibility but end up resolving themselves somewhat

¹⁶¹ Milo Sweedler, *The Dismembered Community: Bataille, Blanchot, Leiris and the Remains of Laure*. (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2009), p.168.

¹⁶² Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1990), p.166.

neatly in terms of the fusion with death which Land's reading brings out. Bataille's ecstatic vision of mourning would seem to resist the return to 'normality' characteristic of the Freudian process. But mourning as an intoxicating loss of self resists that return to normality often through a simple inversion of normality: the complete annihilation of subject-object relations in a union with the abyss would erase any sense of antagonism and dissonance with the world.¹⁶³

I wish to take up two versions of Bataille which Sweedler points towards in order to draw some conclusions upon the counter-cultural reception of Bataille. Sweedler is right to point towards the historic shift in Bataille's thinking, but we should also be aware that the same incompatible tendencies, of impossible antagonism and sacrificial loss, are often simultaneously present in the same texts, and whichever one of these versions of 'Bataille' emerges depends upon our reading practice as well the restrictions of our historical reading moment. While the Landian version of Bataille, of fusing with the abyss, would appear to be virulently opposed to the counter-cultural readings in their more idealistic political leanings, the jettisoning of tension through libertarian self-loss is common to both counter-cultural idealism and Landian anti-humanism. Both reading trajectories sometimes short-circuit contradiction by romanticising a libertarian unshackling of constraint, both readings over-emphasising a destructive account of the Dionysian, particularly in Land's renouncing of antagonism to 'fuse with' death.¹⁶⁴ While we have described Bataille's text as 'conservative', that is not always conflatable with a political conservatism. A 'conservative' writing style on

¹⁶³ For further clarification we could refer to Maurice Blanchot's writing on death in similar terms as 'exposure to' an impossible experience rather than the reconciliation implied in 'communicating with' or fusing with death. Blanchot writes, 'Or, "la base de la communication" n'est pas nécessairement la parole, voire le silence qui en est le fond et la ponctuation, mais l'exposition à la mort, non plus de moi-même, mais d'autrui dont même la présence vivante et la plus proche est déjà l'éternelle et l'insupportable absence, celle qui ne diminue le travail d'aucun deuil. Et c'est dans la vie même que cette absence d'autrui doit être rencontrée ; c'est avec elle – sa présence insolite, toujours sous la menace préalable d'une disparition – que l'amitié se joue et à chaque instant se perd, rapport sans rapport ou sans rapport autre que l'incommensurable'. Maurice Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable* (Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 1983), p.45.

¹⁶⁴ I do not mean 'destructive' above in moral terms but theoretically: the stance is destructive towards limits, jettisoning entanglements and complex tensions.

the level of form does not necessarily equate to ‘conservative’ content or political implication. Inversely, a surface level-libertarianism or pretense to radicalism, as with Land’s reading of ‘Rire’, can actually be more susceptible to engender a political conservatism, a reconciliation ‘with’ the world through the removal of antagonist restraints for abyssal fusion. Similarly, a primacy of the Dionysian and particularly the libertarian removal of constraints in counter-cultural readings leaves itself particularly susceptible to problematic appropriations of sexual politics.

Further Problematizing the Relationship between Sexual Liberty and Liberty

We can extend our critique of the libertarian Bataille by looking at more readings which prioritize sexual liberty around the *Curtains* journal and the work of Paul Buck. In an article for *Poetry Information* (1976) which gives an introduction to Bataille, Buck begins with the epigraph, ‘Liberty is nothing if it does not mean living at the limit where understanding fails’.¹⁶⁵ In *Violent Silence*, the book dedicated to the first Bataille event in the UK in 1984, Buck includes a similar quote from Bataille to close off one of his translations, this time directly equating sex with liberty:

I do not distinguish between freedom and sexual freedom because depraved sexuality is the only kind produced independently of conscious ideological determinations, the only one that results from a free play of bodies and images, impossible to justify rationally [...] Because rational thought can conceive of neither disorder nor freedom, and only symbolic thought can, it is necessary to pass from a general concept that intellectual mechanisms empty of meaning to a single, irrational symbol.¹⁶⁶

This is a crucial quotation because Bataille, in the first line, explicitly links sexual liberty with liberty *tout court*. This shows a line of libertarian thought placing his work much closer to the values of the sixties counter-culture than I have been suggesting. Buck sourced this quote from the British writer Ken Hollings’s essay ‘In the Slaughterhouse of Love’,

¹⁶⁵ Paul Buck, ‘New French Writing’, *Poetry Information*, 15 (1976). p.51.

¹⁶⁶ *Violent Silence: Celebrating Georges Bataille*, ed. by Paul Buck (London: Georges Bataille Event, 1984), p.48.

published in *Screen* magazine in 1984 and later published as part of a Marion Boyars book collection of *My Mother*. Hollings had lifted the quote from the *Œuvres complètes* II, from an unpublished text in the dossier on heterology entitled ‘Je ne crois pas pouvoir’. In this text Bataille argues that sexual facts can exist outside ideological determination. In such instances, ‘les faits sexuels’ are put in opposition to what he diagnoses as the pervasive ideology of bourgeois rationality, and these moments or sexual facts can take on ‘la valeur symbolique d’une image angoissante de liberté’. Bataille equates liberty with sexual liberty in this text but the vision of liberty is not a simplistically unbridled one and can only be accessed through determinate restrictions. Firstly, he expresses his dissatisfaction with the very term ‘liberty’ with its naïve implications. He writes, ‘Peut-être même vaudrait-il mieux renoncer dès à un terme tel que liberté qui suppose un enthousiasme naïf ou rhétorique et parle plus ouvertement de *quelque chose qui fait peur*’.¹⁶⁷ In a second version of the same text he notes, ‘La peur, qui est à la base des régressions habituelles, peut aussi être employée comme un signe de libération et d’orgasme’.¹⁶⁸ Just as dread is theorised as an accessory to communal experience, fear and dread are similarly theorised as intensifiers of and accessories to sexual liberty.¹⁶⁹

In the Hollings essay which briefly referenced this piece, the writer also elaborates on eroticism with particular attention to temporality. According to Hollings, erotic experience ‘demands the total submission of the self to the immediate’:

By being forced into the present, physical sensation provokes a crisis of awareness in which consciousness inevitably exhausts and squanders itself. It is effectively displaced by the impossibility of grasping direct experience whilst being opened up to it [...] For an act to be decisive it must involve a certain amount of cruelty; that is, a complete disregard for the consequences. Guilt, remorse or pleasure – all that constitute the ‘sense’ of an experience – exist solely in the future. Since they can only confer meaning, the intensity of the moment renders them meaningless. The convulsions of the sexual act lay waste to everything but the deliberate commitment to

¹⁶⁷ ‘Je ne crois pas pouvoir ...’, *OC* II, p.128.

¹⁶⁸ ‘Je ne crois pas pouvoir ...’, *OC* II, P.131.

¹⁶⁹ On dread as an accessory to communal experience, see for example, ‘Le labyrinth’, *OC* I, pp. 433-41.

an experience which violates the self. Fear and assertion exist together in that one moment beyond which there is nothing: no expectation, no object and no safety.¹⁷⁰

Bataille's critique of contemporary society's submission to the future extended widely. For Bataille, the hedonist is as enslaved to the future by his subservience to the promises of pleasure in a parallel manner to the Christian's subservience to the promise of salvation. Reading Bataille through Hollings here, the danger is that his own unremitting rejection of submission towards future goals could result in enslavement to the present instant, or a persistent submission to existing worldly relations in a repetitive and cyclical libidinal economy of taboo and transgression. Sex is again intrinsic to liberty, and it is a Dionysian view of liberty Hollings asserts here, in which the 'the convulsions of the sexual act' give access to an experience of self-loss. Hollings goes on to define transgression in terms of an 'absolute freedom'. He writes that penetration, sacrifice and even murder provide some of the fullest realisations of thought. 'Severed from their consequences' he continues, 'denying all possibility of survival, decisive yet torn by conflict, they indicate a point at which deliberate transgression gives way to the condition of absolute freedom'.¹⁷¹

As 'Je ne crois pas pouvoir' suggests, the term 'liberty' was one Bataille was uncomfortable with, and this creates a tension with Hollings's vocabulary of freedom in relation to transgression and sex. Yet Hollings rightly shows that there is a moment in Bataille in which liberty and sexual liberty are more closely intertwined and in which his thought was libertarian to an extent in the early thirties. However, his later work presents quite a contrasting perspective. In fact, *L'Érotisme* directly contradicts such a simplistic vision of liberty. Bataille writes that 'La liberté de l'érotisme' is not possible since it is founded 'sur l'interdit, que s'il n'y avait pas en nous un interdit qui s'oppose profondément à liberté de notre activité érotique, nous n'aurions pas d'activité érotique [...] Je crois qu'il n'y

¹⁷⁰ Ken Hollings, 'The Slaughterhouse of Love', in Georges Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda and The Dead Man*, trans. by Austryn Wainhouse (London: Marion Boyars, 1995), pp. 206-7.

¹⁷¹ Hollings, p.208.

a pas d'érotisme sans sentiment de culpabilité'.¹⁷² While in relation to transgression, he says explicitly, 'Il ne s'agit pas de liberté'.¹⁷³

This brings us to a site of specific contradiction. By the time of *L'Érotisme* Bataille's thought has shifted in relation to sex, eroticism and liberty. While he still privileges the instant of eroticism for its sovereignty, he does not equate that instant necessarily with liberty, as he explicitly did in the earlier text referenced by Hollings. In the later work, it is clear that his thought become more conservative on a formal and structural level, more heavily emphasizing the necessity of taboos. And in his explicit criticisms of the emerging politics of sexual liberation which were available in the English translation of *Eroticism*, we can see the necessarily partial version of 'Bataille' that emerged when placed in a context concerned with counter-cultural libertarian sexual politics. However, I argue that reading Bataille's work as a critique of libertarian conceptions of freedom and liberty sustains the relevance of his work in a culture where excess and sexual liberty have become normative and heavily commodified 'values'. If Bataille's politics of excess find uncomfortable parallels in the excesses of postmodern capitalism, as Jean-Joseph Goux has argued, we should be cautious of similar recuperations in relation to libertarian sexual politics.¹⁷⁴ The struggle against censorship which largely characterised Bataille's initial counter-cultural reception greatly contrasts with the abundance of commoditized obscenity and injunctions towards excess and transgression in contemporary culture. As Helen Hester has written of the impasses of such sexual transgressions in postmodern culture:

¹⁷² OC X, p.694.

¹⁷³ OC X, p.68.

¹⁷⁴ See Jean-Joseph Goux, 'General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism', *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), 206-224. As well as Goux, the work of Arthur Kroker and several contributors to the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* also explored Bataille's consonance with postmodernism. See in particular *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyperaesthetics*, ed. by Arthur Kroker and David Cook (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988). I raise these issues again in the thesis conclusion with reference to Goux and Kroker.

in a world where one is more or less free to encounter any image one wants, from a work of child pornography to footage of dying animals, the forms of intensity made possible by pornographic transgression become inaccessible.¹⁷⁵

Bataille's 'ultimate instant' seeks to sustain a deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence implied in experiences of 'moments'. He insists on its 'lacerating' quality: it is always divisive and split. Less careful readings of Bataille today can easily find themselves creating uncomfortable parallels with debilitating libidinal economies of postmodern culture in which 'intensity' is sought out as a corrective to the simulacrum and abstractions of postmodernism. The technological, social and political changes of postmodernity have made it increasingly difficult to authoritatively delineate between reality and simulation, as analysed by theorists of the postmodern such as Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard. One of the symptoms of these changes, according to Fredric Jameson, has been a 'waning of affect'.¹⁷⁶ However, the cultural theorist Brian Massumi has argued on the contrary such conditions have given rise to a surfeit of affect.¹⁷⁷ In conditions where reality comes to feel increasingly spectral, postmodern consumers are compulsive affect-seekers, longing for moments of intensity where 'presence' or the real can be felt again. Excess becomes normalised as a compensatory search for 'presence' or 'intensity' by the affect-seeking subject or reader. This is why the Bataillean 'instant' should be carefully delineated from a 'moment' of 'experience' and more broadly it is one of the reasons why reading Bataille today necessitates a more tempered reading of his work than has sometimes been pursued. Land's description of Bataille's poetry as a 'communication with' death and the libertarian readings of Bataille raised here advocate, in different ways, forms of excess which imply a fusion *with* the real, even if for Land that comes in the form of an abyssal zero. The counter-cultural readings I have explored prioritize the *destruction* of limits. In Nick Land's reading

¹⁷⁵ Helen Hester, *Beyond Explicit* (New York: State University of New York, 2014), p.100.

¹⁷⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.10.

¹⁷⁷ See Brian Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect', *Cultural Critique*, 31 (1995), 83-109.

of Bataille's poems this destruction takes the form of total self-loss. One of the dualisms in Bataille's thought I have pointed towards is that between a libertarian view of destruction which short-circuits contradiction, and a that of more heightened consciousness of the impossible, similar to that of Sweedler's description of the tensions between sacrifice and the impossible.¹⁷⁸ The impossible sustains antagonism and a greater sensitivity to this aspect of Bataille could retain an ongoing political relevance.¹⁷⁹ Sacrificial destruction, on the other hand, renounces antagonism. The formal pretence to conservatism in Bataille's style and structural conservatism in the insistence on limits in his theory of transgression actually carries an implicit political progressivism.

We might conclude this chapter here with reference to the Philippe Sollers essay 'Le Toit'. Here Sollers raises the issue of postmodernist transgression, which he describes as a form of 'pseudo-transgression'. He describes 'pseudo-transgression' as a completely undesirable and disadvantageous position:

Comme si le fait de l'absence de résistance rendait impossible l'ancrage de la pensée, la livrait à une gratuité informelle, dérisoire, incapable de se comprendre elle-même dans son mouvement. Dans le premier cas, il n'y a pas d'expérience, ou alors celle-ci reste inconsciente. Dans le second, il y a fantasme d'expérience, l'interdit a disparu du champ conscient, et une telle 'libération' n'est que le masque d'une répression redoublée. Celui qui vit sans contestation sous le coup de la loi et celui pour qui la loi n'est rien sont donc en parfaite entente : il n'est pas difficile de vérifier chaque jour ce contrat liant la nullité répressive et l'idéologie libertaire.¹⁸⁰

I wish to follow Sollers here by creating a parallel between sexual libertarianism and political Dionysianism: those who protect and safely guard the limits of the ego, and those who hyperbolically breach unbridled self-loss and fusion with a cosmic abyss, are also in perfect

¹⁷⁸ By 'dualism' above, I am referring in particular to the two trajectories Nancy points to when he distinguishes between a communication 'with' death in contrast to a suspension of the impossible which seeks a more cautious 'exposure to' death. However, the latter trajectory is also characterised by its own internal dualism.

¹⁷⁹ Effective emancipatory politics retains no illusions, it is a politics without end : there is no utopic port of arrival at which the struggle ends. The struggle for emancipation and resistance towards power will always be necessary in any political or social formation. This is where the heightened consciousness of the impossible in Bataille holds potentially more relevance and political interest than the over-prioritization of sacrifice. The latter always risks falling prey to the illusion of simply 'resolving' antagonism.

¹⁸⁰ Sollers, 'Le Toit', *Logiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), p.168.

agreement, despite apparent opposition. A politicised antagonism and dissonance with and against the world is renounced through either simple conformism (the ‘ego’) or undialectical immersion (‘pure’ self-loss). The emphasis on a more fluid libertarianism in counter-cultural readings of Bataille, and the celebration of ‘destruction’ of limits, could here be compared to the embellishments of Wainhouse’s translation on a stylistic level discussed earlier. As mentioned Wainhouse translates ‘renverser tout’ from *Madame Edwarda* as ‘raise the bloody roof off’. However, ‘renverser’ is an important term in Bataille’s vocabulary. It offers a glimpse into the spectral nature of reality by upturning or overthrowing a set of oppositions, and by doing so entails a deconstruction of the illusions of presence contained therein. Bataille’s ‘dualist materialism’ acknowledges the parodic and unstable nature of all oppositions but does not imply that such oppositions can simply be discarded. A fraught tension comes with the ‘renversement’ of each opposition. Sollers, in his essay, describes *écriture* in the same terms that Bataille described ‘érotisme’, as a ‘renversement’.¹⁸¹ And for Sollers the dualist materialism at work in *écriture* and in Bataille’s thought more broadly cannot be resolved in any way, such that to ‘renverser’ a set of oppositions does not mean to destroy them. Sollers uses the two slopes of a roof as an image of two incompatible worlds that co-exist in Bataille, an affirmation of two sides which are irreducible to one another. Taking the parallel between eroticism and *écriture* again, he writes that while eroticism ‘consiste à jouer l’autre en sachant que l’on se perd dans l’envers de ce jeu, de même “l’homme” est dans le jeu de l’écriture cette figure du *rejeu* qui consiste à transformer le jeu tout en retraçant, comme des idéogrammes, les signes à l’intérieur de sa main’.¹⁸² The two hands working in opposing directions are represented by the image of the roof. The affirmation of intellectual violence in Bataille thus derives its potency from its anguished

¹⁸¹ Sollers, *Logiques*, p.191.

¹⁸² Sollers, *Logiques*, p.197.

restraint, its consciousness of the impossibility of completely unshackling from contradiction and embracing a form of pure excess, despite the desire to do so.

Chapter Two - *Informe*, Contamination, Purity: *October*'s Re-Reading of Modernism Through Bataille

Introduction

The preceding chapter traced a number of overlooked popular readings of Bataille and showed how they raise a number of conflicting interpretations of his work. This chapter turns to Bataille's reception through 'theory' by focusing on a number of key readings in the *October* journal, with particular attention to the critic Rosalind Krauss. Firstly, I extend the thesis introduction's pre-history of reception in France, further contextualizing the importance of Bataille for *Tel Quel*, and then comparing their readings with the closely linked *October* journal in America. I identify two broadly conflicting readings of Bataille, emerging from his influence upon the contested theory and practice of '*écriture*'. I describe Derrida's reading of Bataille as a textual 'contamination', relating it to a deconstruction between language and world. Conflicting with Derrida's insistence on the intrinsic relations of apparently opposing identities and upon the 'impurity' of all conceptual manoeuvres, I highlight a contradictory manifestation of Bataille, evident in later texts by Roland Barthes, in which there is a tendency towards textual 'purity'. This will be illustrated with reference to *Le Plaisir du texte* in particular. A logic of theoretical separation and a tendency towards purity is similarly evident in the readings of Bataille by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois. As I show, Bois in particular is keen to distance Bataille's writing from its relationship with any historical context, or with any potentially political (especially Marxist) readings.¹

However, I suggest, along with François Cusset, that while 'French Theory' undergoes processes of de-politicisation and de-contextualisation in transit it is similarly repoliticized and radicalised in different guises.² The process of translation is an additive as well

¹ My aim is not necessarily to argue for a renewed Marxist reading of Bataille but to examine *why* and *how* critics such as Bois were so emphatic about imposing distances between Bataille and other intellectual lineages.

² The American reception of Jean Baudrillard, for example, was initially also often characterised by the sort of depoliticising readings of French theory to which Cusset alludes. Where Bataille was often read as a 'postmodernist' the conflation of Baudrillard with 'postmodernism' was even more pronounced. On this point,

subtractive process. In this sense, I will show how Bataille's work played a crucial role in a formally progressive and innovative re-reading of modernism by Rosalind Krauss. I argue that the attempt to disentangle the Bataillean *informe* from the more prevalent art-world theory of the abject was important in proposing an anti-essentialist and formally innovative re-reading of modernism along Bataille's contested terms.

However, Bois and Krauss's reading of the *informe*, a process aimed at resisting systemization, ends up becoming, to an extent, a counter-system of itself as will be discussed in relation to another *October* critic, Hal Foster. I suggest that the reason for this primarily entail the deflation of a fraught tension and inner conflict, which I have argued is a particular potent aspect of Bataille's work. This tension, or sustained sense of conflict, sometimes gets deflated in Krauss and Bois's account into a neatly resolved abstraction. The tendency towards counter-system has close resemblances to the tendency towards purity I identify in certain readings of Bataille by Barthes. As I show, Krauss and Bois often try to exaggerate a distance between Bataille and dialectical thinking, Marxism, surrealism and considerations of historical context among other factors. Bataille, the theorist, is often set apart in an absolutist manner that is at odds with a logic of contamination I refer to in both *informe* and Derrida's reading of Bataille. While Krauss and Bois's perspective is compared to Georges Didi-Huberman's opposing emphasis on a dialectical perspective, I show that there are conflicting readings of the *informe* within Krauss and Bois's own readings. They oscillate between contradictory conceptions of the *informe* across different texts, and this chapter aims to identify those contradictions. It argues that the readings of Bataille at *October* which are most progressive and most interesting emerge when there is a heightened sensitivity to the internal conflict of Bataille's text in accompaniment with a primarily formal and theoretical perspective. This attentiveness to internal conflict and theoretical contradiction, it is argued,

see for example Gary Genosko, in particular the introduction to *Baudrillard and Signs : Signification Ablaze* (New York : Routledge, 1994).

is not a debilitating equivocation: rather, the anguish and equivocations of Bataille's theory are precisely what generate interesting new readings. After identifying conflicting readings within *October*, I then consider how the different versions of Bataille which emerge relate to Krauss's broader re-reading of modernism.

A 'Generalized Contamination' – Derrida's Bataille

The appeal of Bataille's work to entirely conflicting intellectual perspectives is again evident in the fact that his work was a primary reference for both the linguistic theoretical turn of the nineteen sixties and the anti-linguistic turn of the nineties. Exemplary texts of the anti-linguistic reaction against post-structuralism in the nineties, which were not simply historicist, were Nick Land's *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (1991) and Steven Shaviro's *Passion and Excess: Bataille, Blanchot and Literary Theory* (1990). Shaviro suspects that what he sees as the linguistic entrapments of post-structuralist theory confirm Nietzsche's suspicion, 'I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar'. 'Contemporary theory', says Shaviro, 'continues to endow language with a metaphysical aura'.³ Nick Land writes from a similar position of dissatisfaction towards the linguistic turn in theory, but in more provocative and confrontational terms. Land is scathing of Derrida's deconstruction which he describes as 'massively weakened by an influx of neo-humanist themes' that exacerbate what he describes as a 'quasi-theological compromise'.⁴ While coming from different positions, both Land and Shaviro converge on the view that post-structuralist theory has attempted to undermine metaphysical philosophy but has only done so at the expense of re-inscribing metaphysics upon language: theological investment has been displaced onto the text.

³ Steven Shaviro, *Passion and Excess: Bataille, Blanchot and Literary Theory* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 1990), p.173.

⁴ Nick Land, 'Making it with Death', *Fanged Noumena*, ed. by Robin McKay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2011), p.263.

Derrida, deconstruction and the development of *écriture* are often the primary targets for such critiques of grammatical theology.⁵ However Derrida's elaboration of *écriture* was precisely targeted at metaphysical conceptions of language. In this sense, Derrida is not necessarily a fundamentally linguistic thinker and *écriture* is not always reducible to a textual or linguistic puritanism. Such tendencies towards theological conceptions of language are actually the objects of his critique. As he writes in *De la grammatologie*, 'Le logos comme sublimation de la trace est *théologique*'.⁶ And it is theological conceptions of language and experience disentangled from one another, and self-present to each, which are fundamental targets of deconstruction. Similarly, the concept and practice of *écriture* both comprises and exceeds language. In deconstructing the metaphysics of presence in the historical privileging of speech, Derrida's work also deconstructed the relationship between language and the world. Far from imprisoning us, and everything in language, Derrida questions the separation of language and world. In doing so, he does not necessarily bring the world into language, as Geoffrey Bennington explains, but he:

de-linguistifies language and takes the world into it. In other words, Derrida's concern is to think about the separation of language in a way that neither reinforces it nor simply denies it, but that places that separation into a situation of *différance* such that 'language' and 'world' at most name poles of attraction in a more general structure which is neither language nor world (nor their synthesis or amalgam).⁷

While the introduction pointed to some of the differences between Bataille's base materialism and Derrida's deconstruction, here I wish to highlight the proximity of these intellectual orientations by using a term from David Cunningham's description of Derrida's work as a

⁵ Many Derrida scholars, such as John Caputo, have advanced the argument that Derrida is a religious thinker. See for example John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007). However, in a strong critique of the idea that there was ever a 'religious turn' in deconstruction, Martin Hägglund argues on the contrary that Derrida's work always retained a resistance to theology and a 'radical atheism'. See Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*. (Paris: Les Éditions De Minuit, 1967), p.100.

⁷ Geoffrey Bennington, *Not Half, No End: Militantly Melancholic Essay in Memory of Jacques Derrida*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p.87.

‘generalized contamination’.⁸ I use the idea of a generalized theoretical contamination for both Bataille and Derrida. This means a resistance to the idea that any conceptual position can occupy a space of purity: all theoretical edifices are compromised, in some way or another, by an interdependent complex relationality. That which ‘is’ is always, implicitly or otherwise, defined by that which it is not.⁹ This emphasis on the relational aspect of being is one of the aspects of Bataille’s thought I attempted to underline in the introduction, from the parodic account of ‘being’ in ‘L’Anus solaire’ to later definitions of the relational account of communication in terms of being ‘en rapport’.¹⁰

It is not the purpose of this chapter to give an extensive comparative treatment of Bataille and Derrida. However, a reading of Bataille informed by a Derridean conception of ‘contamination’ will inform my critique of manifestations of theoretical puritanism in reception. The heterogeneous and complex history of *écriture* at *Tel Quel* has a major impact in how Bataille and theory more broadly are read in the Anglo-American academy. I wish to point towards two contrasting conceptions of *écriture*, between a Derridean conception of contamination and a somewhat opposing tendency towards purity evident in the late Barthes.

In his essay on Bataille, originally published in France in 1967,¹¹ and translated for *Semiotext(e)* in 1976,¹² Derrida identifies two kinds of writing, a minor and a major form. The major form of writing sought by Bataille, according to Derrida, ‘*excède le logos* (du sens, de la maîtrise, de la présence, etc.). Dans cette écriture [...] les *mêmes* concepts, apparemment inchangés en eux-mêmes, subiront une mutation de sens, ou plutôt seront affectés, quoiqu’apparemment impassibles, par la perte de sens vers laquelle ils glissent et

⁸David Cunningham, ‘Intersciences, Philosophy and Writing’ (Paper Presented at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy workshop ‘Transdisciplinarity and the Humanities: Problems, Methods, Histories, Concepts’, London, 17 May 2012).

⁹ For example, the letter ‘a’ does not have full self-presence, an inherent definable a-ness. It is rather understood within a linguistic chain of 26 letters and is to a certain extent defined by the letters it is not.

¹⁰ See *OC* VII, p.37.

¹¹Jacques Derrida, ‘De l’économie restreinte à l’économie générale : un hégélianisme sans réserve’, *L’Arc*, 32 (1967), 24-48, and *L’Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), pp. 369-407.

¹²Jacques Derrida ‘From a Restricted to a General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve’, *Semiotext(e)*, 2 (1976), 25-55.

s'abiment démesurément'.¹³ We can expand upon Derrida's remarks on writing here with reference to Philippe Sollers. The 'perte de sens' which Derrida describes is in conflict with practices of reading which, to a large extent, tend towards the location of meaning. Writing has a conflicted relationship with reading. 'L'écriture textuelle' says Sollers clarifying a similar point in the approximately contemporaneous *Logiques* (1967), 'n'est pas un langage mais, à chaque fois, destruction d'un langage [...] Cette destruction, cette négation, sont expliquées par la théorie qui est donc le langage de cette destruction du langage'.¹⁴

Reading was viewed as totalizing, while writing worked to rupture that totality. The slippage of meanings across a single signifier which Derrida referred to, the destructive capacity of writing which Sollers refers to, give *écriture* a broadly transgressive role. If reading attempts to formally arrange, *écriture*, somewhat like Bataille's *informe*, seeks to undo form, to self-reflexively elude stable meaning. When Derrida argues in his essay that Bataille's writing, in its major form, does not tolerate the distinction of form and content, he reinforces the point that *écriture*, in its various manifestations, was not simply about reasserting the primacy of form, or the linguistic, but often entailed a deconstruction of the relationship between form and content, as well as language and world.

Equivocations on the 'Political' – *Tel Quel* and the 'Logic of Succession'

Tel Quel's consistent reference to a canon of literary transgressors and institutional outsiders was essential in cultivating a marginal, transgressive, and anti-institutional status, while at the same time lending legitimacy to their political positions, as discussed in the introduction.¹⁵ In this sense, the use of Bataille could be described, in Nikolas Kauppi's terms, as a 'logic of

¹³ Derrida, *L'Arc*, 32, p.36.

¹⁴ Philippe Sollers, *Logiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), p.13.

¹⁵ *Tel Quel* was of course one of the most important journals of its time so any reference to its 'marginal' status is obviously questionable. The point is that as insiders, central to the Parisian publishing world, they nevertheless attempted to harvest an 'outsider' status. This was supported by the fact that the group's main contributors and editors were mostly neither normaliens or agrégés, in contrast to the centralised academic links characteristic of much literary publishing of the time. See Niilo Kauppi, *The Making of an Avant-Garde: Tel Quel* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), pp.37-9.

succession', a transgressive lineage.¹⁶ This should be used with caution as Kauppi's description risks an implication that Bataille's place within *Tel Quel* was merely an example of appropriation and assertion of 'cultural capital', reducing a highly complex intellectual engagement to a narrative of cultural and political posturing. However, bearing in mind the wider complexities of their reading of Bataille, it is still evident that their use of Bataille was partially motivated by harvesting a space of marginality. In a recent interview with *Revue des deux mondes* in 2012, Sollers agrees with the interviewer's suggestion that 'Positionner Artaud et Bataille sur un même plan, c'était en quelque sorte faire front contre Breton', before Sollers adds, 'Et contre Sartre'.¹⁷ Referring to the surrealist polemic Sollers says that 'On a tout dit sur l'affrontement, ou le prétendu affrontement, entre Breton et Bataille'.¹⁸ The reference to the 'prétendu affrontement' and the admission that transgressive predecessors like Artaud and Bataille were used in order for *Tel Quel* to position themselves against dominant intellectual currents attest to the appropriation of Bataille I've been describing, via Kauppi's description of intellectual succession, in which radical rhetoric and traditions often substantiated conflicted, equivocal and sometimes conservative political positions.

It is difficult to describe any one scene of Bataille reception as being either 'political' or 'anti-political' as 'Bataille' cannot be neatly categorized according to one or the other. To take only the example of *La Part maudite*, he critiques sterile anticommunism without calling for blind support of Stalinism, and makes the highly political assertion that 'de toutes part et de toutes façons qu'un monde en mouvement veut être changé'.¹⁹ Other moments, particularly in volume II, *Histoire de l'érotisme*, are resolutely anti-political, where he writes for example that 'Des hommes engagés dans la lutte politique ne pourront jamais se plier à la vérité de

¹⁶ On the importance of reference to works by Artaud, Bataille and Sade, Kauppi writes 'Emphasising their works allowed Seuil's review to apply a logic of intellectual succession via one of intellectual transgression, or to accumulate profits by participating in and surpassing previous radicality.' Kauppi, p.74.

¹⁷ 'Le Grand Bataille : Entretien avec Philippe Sollers réalisé par Alexandre Mare', *Revue des deux mondes: Bataille cinquante ans après* (Mai 2012), p.79.

¹⁸ Sollers, *Revue des deux mondes*, p.79

¹⁹ OC VII, p.158.

l'erotisme'.²⁰ However, it is not a tautology nor a facile relativism to say that Bataille's anti-political positions often carry potential politicisations. His antipathy to the political often agitates for broader conception of collective experience which Bataille might hesitate to call political but this should not necessarily prevent us from doing so. As suggested in the thesis introduction, the rejection of politics and embrace of religion which characterised both the journal and secrecy society *Acéphale* was partially informed by a perception that broader existential and religious frameworks were necessary to understand the 'political' events of the epoch. Where Bataille contrasts eroticism with politics in the above quote from *La Part maudite* he follows a similar framework established in 'L'Apprenti sorcier' where he wrote 'Le monde des amants n'est pas moins *vrai* que celui de la politique. Il absorbe meme la totalité de l'existence, ce que la politique ne peut pas faire'.²¹ What 'la politique ne peut pas faire' however, clearly shows that a rejection of politics is not borne out of an apolitical retreat from contemporary problems but is motivated by the limitations of politics. This relates to the different rejections of 'art' and 'philosophy' at other points in Bataille's work. Discourses or experiences which entail any closure or isolation from one another are rejected in favour of contact with the 'totalité de l'existence'.²²

The rejection of the political in Bataille thus often comes from an agitation towards a broader conception of what might be described as the political, or a transgression of the political. I follow this broadly progressive reading of the paradoxically political implications to Bataille's sometimes anti-political trajectory, a perspective best exemplified and elaborated upon by Jean-Michel Besnier in *La Politique de l'impossible* (1988).²³ At the same time,

²⁰ OC VIII, p.164.

²¹ OC I, p.532.

²² Similarly, this is why Bataille's occasional antipathy to the political is always accompanied by a consciousness that the political cannot simply be ignored. As he notes in a conference on eroticism, 'je n'ai pas à parler aujourd'hui de l'impossibilité de construire une philosophie indépendante de l'expérience politique : c'est, à la rigueur, un principe qui caractérise une orientation moderne de la philosophie' OC X, quoted in Jean-Michel Besnier, *La Politique de l'impossible : l'intellectuel entre révolte et engagement* (Paris : Éditions La Découverte, 1988), p.150.

²³ See also, Francis Marmande, *Georges Bataille politique* (Lyon : Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1985).

while the anti-political often carries a potentially transgressive and progressive politicisation in Bataille, it is worth noting that his postwar trajectory sometimes betrays relatively conservative outcomes.²⁴ In the aforementioned interview with Sollers, for example, he refers to the tension in Bataille in the postwar period, between a sophisticated consciousnesses of the historico-political moment while at the same time expressing conservative, sometimes cynical reflections. Sollers says, ‘Je pense aussi à cette réflexion de Bataille au moment de l’anti-gaullisme frénétique de Breton et de Blanchot : “Pour un général catholique, je trouve qu’il n’est pas si mal”’, to which Sollers adds, ‘Stupéfiant dans le contexte politique de l’époque’.²⁵ Such bifurcations and complexities of Bataille’s political trajectory suggest that when looking at his place with *Tel Quel* and beyond, we should hesitate to simplistically describe Bataille’s place in theory as depoliticised. Rather, reading ‘Bataille’ through the ‘time of theory’ should be understood historically within a post-68 moment of what Peter Starr has referred to as ‘Logics of Failed Revolt’,²⁶ and a sensitivity to this intellectual-historical context sheds some clarity upon the later prevalence of less explicitly politicized versions of Bataille.²⁷

²⁴ Besnier rightly says of Bataille, ‘La fin de l’Histoire éveille en lui un sentiment d’horreur qui le porte à célébrer, par réaction, les vertus de l’inachèvement de toutes choses’. Besnier develops out of this a progressive reading of Bataille’s politics of the impossible. This has close parallels to the progressive import I argue for in the ‘internal conflict’ and ‘angoisse’ of Bataille’s text where moments of ‘reconciliation’ are consistently resisted. In this regard, see in particular the final section of the preceding chapter. However, a celebration of a posthistorical ‘inachèvement de toutes’ can easily vacillate towards less progressive ends with a stifling disengagement from any revolutionary orientation. Bataille’s attitude towards communism, for example, often suggested he believed it to be a necessary global balance to unbridled Americanized capitalism. For a succinct and candid account of his position on this see. ‘Lettre à Kostos Axelos, 11 Nov 1956’, Georges Bataille, *Choix de lettres*, p.463. Yet his commitment to the ‘inachèvement’ of all things left him in a position of decreased alignment with any revolutionary political orientation, sometimes from scepticism of the homogeneous order that would restore itself ‘après’ and sometimes a fear of the violence of revolutionary upheaval is evident. Noteworthy in this respect is the unpublished fragment where he notes, ‘jamais je n’ai réussi à haïr davantage notre civilisation bourgeoise et jamais je n’ai pu me débarrasser d’un scepticisme qui me disait : l’idée d’une révolution porte à la tête, mais après ? Le monde se refera, se refermera, ce qui pèse aujourd’hui se retrouvera demain sous quelque autre forme. Marx l’attendait du socialisme, mais on ne supprimera jamais le jeu de la chance et de la malchance’. ‘A Combat, “Sur le Communisme”’, *OC XI*, p.557.

²⁵ ‘Le Grand Bataille : Entretien avec Philippe Sollers réalisé par Alexandre Mare’, *Revue des deux mondes: Bataille cinquante ans après*. (mai 2012), p.79.

²⁶ Peter Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After May 68* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

²⁷ Moreover, it should be noted that an ‘anti-political’ starting point in Bataille has the potential for both a progressive broader repoliticisation and on the contrary a reactionary and nihilist rejection of any semblance of political engagement.

Subtle Subversion

To illustrate this point, a seldom-cited passage from Roland Barthes's 1979 text *Sollers écrivain* is useful. Here Barthes writes about a renaissance of language as a strategic response against nostalgia for the historic transcendental signifiers of human meaning such as God, and Reason. A materialist conception of language entails a risk stemming from the fact that language, Barthes explains at length with important reference to Bataille:

est la Loi même: toute loi se rassemble fatalement dans le langage, et partant toute transgression et toute négation de la transgression. Le langage est finalement le seul lieu où il soit possible d'accomplir la formule de Bataille (défendu dans *Logiques*) : *lever l'interdit sans le supprimer*. C'est ce qui fait Sollers : il lève l'interdit sans supprimer le langage ('Le récit avait commencé brusquement quand j'avais décidé de *changer de langue dans la même langue*'). C'est cette *extériorité intérieure* (lever la barre de la Phrase en gardant les yeux ouverts sur elle) qui déplaît à la fois aux gardiens de la Loi et à ses négateurs.²⁸

Here Barthes refers to Bataille's conception of planned transgression, the suspension of a taboo without abolishing it, in terms of an 'internal externality.' This tells us something fundamental about Bataille's importance within theory, an importance which is characterised by thought's necessary complicity with the object of rebellion, subversion or transgression, and the intensification of a sense of complicity in a post-68 context. Barthes's description of Bataillean linguistic transgression as an 'internal externality' and the implications of complicity recall Bataille's description of his relation to surrealism, 'L'Ennemi du dedans', taken up by Jean-Louis Houdebine. The fact that the 'inner exteriority' 'déplaît à la fois aux gardiens de la Loi et à ses négateurs' underlines the efficacy of Bataille's thought as not simply oppositional, nor from a position of a 'négateur', but a subtle subversion which recognises one's compromised and complicit position in struggles against systems and power. This similarly recalls Derrida's insistence that Bataille cannot be described as either 'Heglian' or 'anti-Heglian' or Kristeva's account of Bataille as traversing systems, rather

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *Sollers écrivain* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), pp.82-3.

than negating them.²⁹ ‘Subtle subversion’ could be considered a renewed articulation of Bataille’s rupture or displacement of the dialectic between negativity and affirmation. Where in Bataille’s work, laughter, tears and other forms of non-productive expenditure exceed that dialectic, *écriture* gets developed as a subversive third term which disrupts dialectical relations.

Internal Externality

The tensions between rebellion and complicity animate Peter Starr’s *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After May 68*, in which it is argued that by understanding the adventure of French theory contextually and historically we can avoid the vilifications and deifications to which it has often been subjected. Starr invokes Barthes’s ‘internal externality’ to argue that through a heightened sensitivity to, and repeated insistence on, the inescapable power relations inscribed in language, the diverse advocates of *écriture*:

typically reinforced the assumption that effective oppositional practice presupposes a ‘fatal complicity’ – the expression is Derrida’s – with the systems and structures to be dismantled. On the other hand, and indeed often in the same texts, writing served as the vehicle for a compensatory utopianism, for the dream of voyages ailleurs (elsewhere), to utopian (or, as Barthes would say ‘atopian’) spaces.³⁰

This passage raises a split in how we interpret *écriture* as ‘oppositional practice’. On the one hand the pursuit of subversion through *écriture* was motivated by a response borne out of politicised *necessity*, a consciousness that any effective opposition had to consider its own position of ‘fatal complicity’, but on the other hand the idea of a ‘compensatory utopianism’ suggests that some pursuits were motivated more specifically by retreat and by a wilfully apolitical turn away from the world.

The reference to atopian space is significant as *écriture* was often schematized as an alternative to old dichotomies in aesthetic, intellectual and political allegiances.³¹ In his

²⁹ See Julia Kristeva, ‘Bataille, l’expérience et la pratique’, in *Bataille*, ed. by Philippe Sollers (Paris: U.G.E., 1973), pp. 267-301.

³⁰ Peter Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After May 68*, p.114.

³¹ Neither Sartrean engagement, nor art for art’s sake apoliticism, but writing as political in itself.

history of *Tel Quel*, Philippe Forest writes that the group initially aimed at avoiding explicit political allegiances through ‘third way’ positions, situating themselves neither left nor right but in the ‘ailleurs’ of *écriture*.³² For an avant-garde to escape the sterility of old political allegiances and recuperable nature of opposition under late capitalism, the dissent of French theory frequently operated under a loose model of what Peter Starr has described as ‘Neither/Nor/But...’. In this sense he describes French theory as working through:

an impasse (the contemporary neither/nor) as the pretext to a displacement, translation, or reinscription – the ‘migration’ (in Barthes’s words) towards an ‘ex-centric’ third term. It was not uncommon moreover, for the third term to name both a plural solution and a touristic destination. The journey or exile that disoriented ethnocentric meaning commonly entailed a heightened attention not so much to difference (an inexpurgable narcissism served to limit this), but to a programmatic multiplicity – of languages, styles, meanings, desires, political positions, erotic sites, and so on.³³

Again there is a tension, or even ambivalence between identifying whether the use of a third term operates as a ‘plural solution’ out of a politically charged exigency, or merely a ‘touristic destination’. The ‘ex-centric third term’ here is a reference to Barthes, particularly *Le Plaisir du texte* which is full of references to compromised rebellion and ‘duplicity’. Bataille’s primary influence for this line of thinking in Barthes is elaborated most explicitly in terms of ‘subtle subversion’. Art, says Barthes, has always seemed historically and socially compromised, hence the artist’s effort to destroy it. The writer can choose to ‘dismiss’ writing and become an intellectual theorist speaking only from, what Barthes describes as, a moral site cleansed of linguistic sensuality. Abandoning art, the theorist is thus confined to irrelevance, while remaining within it, he is exposed to recuperation.³⁴ As an alternative to such dichotomies of either conformism or artistic destruction, Barthes proposes a practice of ‘subtle subversion’:

³² Philippe Forest, *Histoire de Tel Quel : 1960-82* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), p.57.

³³ Starr, *Logics*, p.24.

³⁴ ‘L’avant-garde, c’est ce langage rétif qui va être récupéré’, he writes commenting on the inherent recuperability of the avant-garde. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p.87.

J'entends à l'inverse par subversion subtile celle qui ne s'intéresse pas directement à la destruction, esquive le paradigme et cherche un autre terme : un troisième terme, qui ne soit pas, cependant, un terme de synthèse, mais un terme excentrique, inouï. Un exemple? Bataille, peut-être, qui déjoue le terme idéaliste par un matérialisme inattendu, où prennent place le vice, la dévotion, le jeu, l'érotisme impossible, etc. ainsi, Bataille n'oppose pas à la pudeur la liberté sexuelle, mais (...) le rire.³⁵

Writing, for Barthes, is the site of 'atopia' where subtle subversion can be enacted and which is exemplified for him by Bataille. Writing for Barthes here comprises a quasi-utopian 'ailleurs' in terms similar to those referred to by Forest and Starr. As he elaborates, 'La langue se reconstruit ailleurs par le flux pressé de tous les plaisirs de langage. Où, ailleurs ? au paradis des mots. C'est là véritablement un texte paradisiaque, utopique (sans lieu), une hétérologique par plénitude : tous les signifiants sont là et chacun fait mouche'.³⁶ Barthes is explicitly flirting with an apolitical utopianism of the text here accentuated by his vision for a 'Société des amis du texte', with reference to Fourier's 'sorte de phalanstère'.³⁷ The space of the text is conceived as *atopian*, a space where conflict would be dismissed as irrelevant, for its incapacity to generate pleasure.³⁸

However, the various conceptions of *écriture* beyond Barthes's version here do not necessarily, or inherently, lead to an apolitical position. I would argue that Derrida's elaboration of *écriture*, for example, is potentially more politicizing as it deconstructs the relationship between language and world and thus entails a persistent consciousness that there is no interior space that is not in some sense contaminated by its outside. If we take an example from beyond the explicit considerations of *écriture*, Derrida writes about the relationship to the other, in an early essay on Levinas, on similar terms which stress the formal contamination of worldly relations. He writes, 'L'autre ne peut être ce qu'il est,

³⁵ Barthes, *Plaisir*, p.87.

³⁶ Barthes, *Plaisir*, p.17.

³⁷ Barthes, *Plaisir*, p.27.

³⁸ It should be noted that elsewhere Barthes makes further clear distinctions between 'l'*atopie*' and 'l'*utopie*'. In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* he describes 'l'*atopie*' as a 'doctrine intérieure' which he praises for its potential to break with an assigned caste or class, without giving into the 'réactive' 'littéraire' orientation of 'l'*utopie*'. See Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris : Seuil, 1975), p.53.

infiniment autre, que dans la finitude et la mortalité (la mienne *et* la sienne)'.³⁹ A position of exteriority, the apparent infinity of the relationship to the other, is compromised by a dependence upon the finite relations which make that relationship possible. In Martin Hägglund's reading of Derrida he associates the refusal to think through such issues of contamination, 'immunity' and purity, as marked features of religious thought. The common feature of religions is that they advocate absolute immunity as supremely desirable. Religions are founded on the unscathed and the pure. Derrida's argument on the contrary, says Hägglund, is that 'nothing can be unscathed. His notion of autoimmunity spells out that everything is threatened from within itself, since the possibility of living is inseparable from the peril of dying'.⁴⁰ An attentiveness to 'autoimmunity', to the contamination of worldly relations, informs the Derridean reading of Bataille I wish to contrast with that seen in certain moments of Barthes here. Barthes's comparison of the text to Fourier's phalanstère is suggestive of a problematic textual escapism, a tendency towards purity, evident throughout *Le Plaisir du texte*. Rather than deconstructing the relationship between language and world, there is at times here a retreat from the world to the text. The 'paradis des mots' situated in an 'ailleurs', 'atopique' space which evades conflict is aesthetically seductive but offers an unmistakably depoliticizing manifestation of Bataillean thought which deflates the anguish and tension between language and world encountered elsewhere.⁴¹ We have here two conflicted readings of Bataille around *Tel Quel* and écriture, one veering towards a textual puritanism (Barthes), the other towards contamination and impurity (Derrida).

French Theory in America

Before exploring the tensions between what I identify as a pull towards conceptual purity and contamination in key readings of Bataille at the *October* journal, it is necessary to look

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Violence et Métaphysique', *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p.169.

⁴⁰ Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, p.129.

⁴¹ On the evasion of conflict in Barthes, see for example : 'Dans la guerre des langages, il peut y avoir des moments tranquilles, et ces moments sont des textes'. Barthes, *Plaisir*, p.49.

briefly at the emergence of Bataille through ‘French Theory’ in America. The first journal issue dedicated to Bataille in English was released in 1976 by one of the primary vehicles for the transmission of French theory, the journal *Semiotext(e)*. Denis Hollier’s short ‘Presentation?’ which opened the volume ponders the enigma of where to situate Bataille, or where to begin. Hollier considers the ‘French novelist’, or the ‘X-rated theologian’? For Hollier though, any ‘presentation’ is both insufficient and deceptive. He notes, ‘Faire apparaître donc, ici, le caractère fétichiste de la présentation, comme en général de tout présent ou bijou : on sait de quelle absence ils sont le voile’.⁴² Hollier’s question is crucial to the study of reception. What are the inevitable absences concealed, often inadvertently, with each presentation? Which set of texts and readings are prioritized? These questions guide my investigation into the reception of Bataille through theory by examining the *October* journal below.

Two key moments in the dissemination of French theory in America are the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference, entitled ‘The Language of Criticism and the Science of Man’,⁴³ attended by Derrida, Barthes, Lacan, Hyppolite and René Girard, and the 1975 ‘Schizo-Culture’ conference organised by *Semiotext(e)*, attended by Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard, Foucault, amongst others. However, Katia Schneller has noted that ‘an American assimilation of continental theory took place before the more media-covered influx of structuralism and post-structuralism at the end of the 1960s’, including for example texts by Barthes and Bataille in *Art and Literature* no.3, 1964.⁴⁴ Founder-editor of *October* Annette Michelson was at that time based in Paris where she replaced New York poet John Ashberry as the Paris correspondent for *Arts Magazine* and *Art International* in 1963. She took an early interest in theory, quoting Derrida in her art criticism, and seeking to translate texts such as Foucault’s

⁴² Denis Hollier, ‘Presentation?’, *Semiotext(e)*, 2 (1976). p.3.

⁴³ See *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ See Katia Schneller, ‘Structure and Structuralism in New York’s Artistic Field in the Mid 60s’, *French Theory and American Art*, ed. by Lejeune et al. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), p.108

‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’, which *Artforum* rejected, but which eventually appeared in *October*.⁴⁵ Where *Semiotext(e)* originated from the margins of an academic milieu, *October*’s origins date back to the import of theory through the art world. The editorial perspective of both journals was informed by a disdain for the constraints of over-specialization and academic departmentalization. If for Lotringer and *Semiotext(e)* the allure of theory was principally fuelled by the libidinal politics of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, while *October* were initially more concerned with the structural semiotics of Roland Barthes, both were nevertheless united by a shared desire for ‘connecting’. ‘We want to connect all the domains of an institution’ said Lotringer opening the 1975 *Schizo-culture* conference, ‘Not because they are each of themselves separate and exchangeable, as the French structuralists would have it [...] but already caught within the continuous web of micro-controls that simultaneously produce and enslave, differentiate and normalize individuals’.⁴⁶

The Beginning of *October*

The editors at *October*, though much more receptive to the French structuralists than Lotringer, were similarly frustrated at institutional balkanization. In the editorial of the first issue they express their antipathy not only to the academic colonization of cultural criticism, but also the over-specialization, philistinism and conservatism of intellectual journals.⁴⁷

François Cusset’s study of ‘French Theory’ often emphasises its depoliticising orientation in America. Cusset notes that while *Tel Quel* were turning towards Maoism, their American counterparts who were explicitly influenced by the journal ‘exploreront de Derrida à Deleuze les pistes d’une pensée qu’elles conçoivent souvent comme ‘postpolitiques’, alternative intellectuelle à l’héritage marxiste plutôt que sa continuation intensive’.⁴⁸ However the journals in which Bataille’s work first received significant attention, *Semiotext(e)* and

⁴⁵ See Schneller, *French Theory and American Art*, p.103.

⁴⁶ Sylvère Lotringer, ‘Introduction’, *Schizo-Culture: The Event*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer and David Morris (Los Angeles: M.I.T Press, 2013), p.44.

⁴⁷ See ‘About October’, *October* 1 (Spring 1976), 3-5.

⁴⁸ François Cusset, *French Theory* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013), p.70.

October, do not fit any neat narrative of a depoliticised or postpolitical orientation.⁴⁹ *Semiotext(e)*'s advocacy of anti-psychiatry, the politicised readings of Deleuze and Guattari, and engagements with the American counter-culture left no ambivalence regarding their commitment to radical politics. *October*, meanwhile, was unique, according to Cusset, in that it was 'la seule revue à explorer sérieusement les enjeux de la théorie française pour l'art et les pratiques artistiques'.⁵⁰ Yet its title, with its reference to Eisenstein's film, and its editorial outlook from the beginning were highly politicised, even if their focus was mostly limited to art. Co-founders Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss left *Artforum* in 1976 out of frustration with the political and editorial direction of the magazine, and founded *October*. The opening editorial expressed a number of conflicting but politicised intentions, including reclaiming the 'unfinished analytic project of Russian constructivism', along with 'the unfinished project of the 1960s (the legacy of the neo-avant-garde) for a consideration of contemporary practices'. The contemporary cultural context was described as an epoch of 'late capitalism, a time of continued struggles to radicalize cultural practices, and of the marginalization of those attempts through the revival of traditional artistic and discursive tendencies'.⁵¹

October held close connections with *Tel Quel* and with Barthes in particular. Later contributor Yve-Alain Bois completed his PhD under the supervision of Barthes before taking up a number of academic positions in America, beginning with Johns Hopkins in 1983, and joined the editorial board of *October* in 1990. Denis Hollier, a regular contributor, also joined the editorial board in 1990. In an early issue in 1978, *October* published a translation of *Tel Quel*'s 'The U.S. Now: A Conversation'. In the same issue a tone of unease is evident in Annette Michelson's comments on the increasing conservatism of *Tel Quel*'s politics, where she writes in her article 'The Agony of the French Left' that the group are

⁴⁹ Although I do argue below that certain specific readings of Bataille were depoliticising.

⁵⁰ Cusset, *French Theory*, p.74.

⁵¹ 'About October', *October* 1 (1976), 3-5.

‘fearful of Left domination of the superstructure’ and that they prefer ‘the cultural permissiveness of a regime whose policy of economic austerity will, in any case, continue to be paid for by the working class. To such a view, socialism may indeed appear, as to Sollers, “unsuccessful capitalism”’.⁵²

Barthes was also published in an early issue of *October* in 1979 with a translation of his ‘Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France’.⁵³ In the lecture, Barthes outlines the inherently servile nature of speech and the tactile subversion afforded by literature which, for him, undoes any opposition between science and letters. The text offers an example of a logic of the ‘Après Mai’ theory elaborated in relation to Peter Starr earlier. The logic of the intellectual history charted by Starr is a sense that ‘the strategies, dilemmas, and anxieties attending the intellectual’s effort to guarantee a subversive margin from within specific pedagogical and ideological institutions will have been played out and worked over largely in relation to language’.⁵⁴ Barthes’s inaugural lecture is exemplary because it attempts to underline his status as an outsider, ‘a fellow of uncertain nature’, prone to interrogate his pleasure where others pursue more rigorous scholarship with ‘disciplined invention’.⁵⁵ Beyond the servility of speech, literature is referred to as a space ‘outside the bounds of power’.⁵⁶ While post-structuralist theory often stressed that there is no outside to the constraints of language, literature was sometimes suggested in Barthes’s schema as utopian exteriority.

Barthes’s work, and his reading of Bataille, has a discernible influence on Rosalind Krauss. Krauss offers some of the most extensive treatment of Bataille at *October*. The key

⁵² Annette Michelson, ‘The Agony of the French Left’, *October* 8, (1978), p.19.

⁵³ Roland Barthes, ‘Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège de France, January 7, 1977’, trans. by Richard Howard, *October* 8, (1979), 3-16.

⁵⁴ Starr, *Logics*, p.129.

⁵⁵ Barthes, *October*, 8, p.3.

⁵⁶ ‘This salutary trickery, this evasion, this grand imposture which allows us to understand speech outside the bounds of power, in the splendour of a permanent revolution of language, I call for one literature’. Barthes, *October*, 8, pp.5-6.

dates and texts for Bataille's reception at the journal are as follows: the 1985 Rosalind Krauss article 'Corpus Delecti' offers the first extensive discussion of Bataille in the journal, here in the context of surrealist photography. In 1985, Krauss also published *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, with the same publisher as *October*, M.I.T. Press. In this book 'No More Play' featured extensive discussion of Bataille in relationship to modernist sculpture. The exhibitions *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* held at the Hayward Gallery in London and *Explosante-fixe: photographie & surrealisme* at the Pompidou Centre in 1985 also feature the essay 'Corpus Delecti'.⁵⁷ In 1986, *October* published a special issue entitled *Georges Bataille: Writings on Laughter, Nietzsche, Unknowing*, featuring a wide variety of Bataille texts translated by Annette Michelson, with articles by Michelson, Allen S. Weiss and Krauss. Krauss's engagement with Bataille is largely in relation to the *informe* as discussed in detail below. In 1993, *October* published a round-table discussion on the topic and in 1996 Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois collaborated on an exhibition at the Pompidou Centre, the catalogue of which was a co-authored book in its own right, *Formless: A User's Guide*.⁵⁸ There are other key moments related to Bataille at *October*, such as articles by Denis Hollier, particularly his 1984 article 'Mimesis and Castration', which would lead us into an inquiry into an alternate route of reception through Hollier's work on the College of Sociology. To encompass all the routes of reception would be beyond the scope of a chapter however and as the most ubiquitous and exemplary Bataille reference at *October*, Krauss's development of the *informe* is the focal point of analysis here.

Rosalind Krauss and the First Readings of Bataille at *October*

Krauss's two earliest articles on Bataille exhibit a structuralist reading of his work, directly influenced by Barthes who she references in both articles, and to an extent follow *Tel Quel's*

⁵⁷ This essay and her 1993 book *The Optical Unconscious* are dedicated to Denis Hollier.

⁵⁸ Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

use of Bataille's marginality by reactivating the polemic with Breon.⁵⁹ In the article 'No More Play' in her 1985 book, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, she uses Barthes's reading of *Histoire de l'œil* in order to apply it to Giacometti's sculpture, *Suspended Ball*. The crossing of two metaphorical series in *Histoire de l'œil* establishes what Krauss, following Barthes, describes as a combinatory system of infinite possibilities of signification, whereby any term is tied to its neighbouring term in a surface-deep metonymic chain. This 'combinatoire' of crossed signifiers is a 'machine for the production of images; it is essential to note that because of the logical constraints regulating the chains, there is nothing surrealist in the "encounters"; they are not meetings by chance'.⁶⁰ The introduction of Bataille is thus established via a distinction from and opposition to Breton's surrealist chance. As Krauss would later clarify in *Formless* (1997), Breton considered chance 'open', an expanding field of possibility, occasionally brought into focus by desire whereas Bataille was more interested in a 'lugubrious game' 'in which a structure rules absolutely over any apparent play of happenstance [...] nothing is left to chance'.⁶¹ In her 1985 article on Bataille written for *October*, Breton is depicted as 'passive', waiting for the chance encounter in contrast to the 'active aggressive tenor' of Bataille's thought, exhibited for her by the conception of a dictionary as productive of tasks rather than meaning.⁶² Where *Tel Quel* had consistently evoked this opposition, it was often to justify ideological and political positions, as we saw with the reaction to 68. With Krauss and *October* however, Bataille is used in specifically aesthetic terms, more pointedly as a means to reinterpret the history of modernism. Across

⁵⁹ In 'Corpus Delecti', Krauss develops her reading following Barthes: 'The idea that one could construct a machine to make something happen, a machine that would leave nothing to chance but the working out of detail, operates in Bataille's novel *Histoire de l'œil*. There, as Roland Barthes has demonstrated, Bataille devises a combinatory mechanism for associating two strings of images – one generated by associations with the shape of the eye (eye/egg/testicles), the other by associations with its status as a container of fluid (tears/yolk/semen) – to write its perversely spectacular story'. Rosalind Krauss, 'Corpus Delecti', *October*, 33 (1985), p.40. See also for other references to Barthes her other article of the same year, Rosalind Krauss, 'No More Play', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1985), p.62.

⁶⁰ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, pp.62-3.

⁶¹ Krauss, 'Cadaver' in Krauss and Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide*, (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p.64.

⁶² Krauss, 'Corpus Delecti', *October*, 33, (1985), p.40.

different readings, from Krauss's *Modernist Myths*, even encompassing other *October* critics such as Hal Foster's 1993 book *Compulsive Beauty*, Bataille is depicted as a desublimatory antidote to the repressions of 'official' modernism, with Bataille's relationship to surrealism as the fulcrum point.⁶³

The *October* critics' 'desublimatory' approach to modern art was centred on the concept of *informe*. This was a short entry taken from the 'Critical Dictionary' part of *Documents* and reads as follows:

Un dictionnaire commencerait à partir du moment où il ne donnerait plus le sens mais les besognes des mots. Ainsi informe n'est pas seulement un adjectif ayant tel sens mais un terme servant à déclasser, exigeant généralement que chaque chose ait sa forme. Ce qu'il désigne n'a ses droits dans aucun sens et se fait écraser partout comme une araignée ou un ver de terre. Il faudrait en effet, pour que les hommes académiques soient contents, que l'univers prenne forme. La philosophie entière n'a pas d'autre but : il s'agit de donner une redingote à ce qui est, une redingote mathématique. Par contre affirmer que l'univers ne ressemble à rien et n'est qu'informe revient à dire que l'univers est quelque chose comme une araignée ou un crachat.⁶⁴

From the first line, it is obvious that the *informe* occupies a place within Bataille's broader theoretical account of base materialism. A call to examine words as primarily productive and generative, rather than containing a signified content, is a provocative confrontation of the absence of meaning which Bataille detects within linguistic communication. Moreover, it enacts violence, persistently working to 'déclasser' things against formal systemisation. As Krauss and Bois note, it is notoriously difficult to 'define' *informe* since its goal is precisely to resist definition and any systemic ordering. The *informe* is thus nothing in and of itself and has 'only an operational existence'.⁶⁵

Here they were careful to distance themselves from the more popular Bataillean concept of the abject. As I elaborate further in chapter four, the abject originated from a little-

⁶³ See Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1993). However, Foster's perspective differs in many respects from Krauss, as discussed below in relation to their disagreement over *informe*.

⁶⁴ *OC I*, p.217.

⁶⁵ Krauss and Bois, *Formless*, p.18.

known Bataille text ‘Abjection et les formes misérables’, but which gained more notoriety from Julia Kristeva’s *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*. Kristeva’s use of the term described potentially traumatic and taboo elements, ejected from the social order but with no distinction as either subjects or objects. Abject states were conceived as transitory although Kristeva has been criticised for her essentializing of the abject.⁶⁶ In Bataille’s work, the abject was principally defined by the *process* of exclusion and the *use* made of that exclusion. Kristeva follows this schema delineating between *to abject* and *to be abjected*. However, her elaboration of the abject has been associated with specific waste objects or on wounded bodies, as Bois and Krauss explain. They write that ‘The wound on which much of “abject art” is founded is thus produced in advance as semantic, as it thematises the marginalized, the traumatized, the wounded, as an essence that is feminine by nature and deliquescent by substance.’⁶⁷ This essentializing and substantializing of the ‘abject’ is thus completely in conflict with the concept of *informe* for Bois and Krauss. In prioritizing the analytically *formal* category of the ‘informe’ over the content-based, shock tactics associated with the ‘abject’, the *October* critics were attempting to pursue a more radical re-reading of Bataille through contemporary theory.⁶⁸

We can see this formal application of *informe*, and its radical import for Krauss, most succinctly in her analysis of the crossing of semiotic chains at work in *Suspended Ball* as previously mentioned. Giacometti’s sculpture entails a suspended ball over a reclining wedge. There is a clearly sexual suggestion as the forms have a genital appearance. Krauss emphasises the deep ambiguity however, as gender identification becomes a matter of inherent uncertainty. As she says, ‘Vulvalike, the wedge is also coded male, like the phallic

⁶⁶ This critique is explored in the final chapter. See Sylvère Lotringer and Julia Kristeva, ‘Fetishizing the Abject’, *More & Less*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer and Chris Kraus (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Semiotext(e), 1999), pp. 15-35.

⁶⁷ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless*, p.245.

⁶⁸ As we will see however, *informe* entails a deconstruction of any simple divisions between ‘form’ and ‘content’.

knife that slices across the heroine's eyes in *Un Chien*'. 'Masculine in its active role', she continues, 'the ball's cleft also pronounces it as feminine. And the continual crisscross of this play of identification, itself imitating the metronomic swing of the structure's pendulum, results in just that act of declassifying that Bataille had termed the job of formlessness.'⁶⁹ Borrowing Barthes's description of crossing of gender identifications in *Histoire de l'œil*, she says *Suspended Ball* evokes a 'round phallicism'. Krauss clarifies that the 'the important lesson the *Suspended Ball* delivers is that the formless is not simply mess or slime', again carefully delineating it from the abject, which the latter substances are associated with. Rather the formless is 'structural' since it involves an operational 'voiding of categories'. In contrast to the abject then, which is susceptible to being essentialized and thought of in terms of content, the formless prioritizes formal radicalisation over any thinking of prioritizing of content. It is a *process* of alteration, rather a thing or a state. It is initiated on a primarily formal level but the operation accentuates the inherent instability in delineations between form and content.⁷⁰

As a materialist operation, it has sometimes been thought that formless entails the play of matter against form. However, as Georges Didi-Huberman has emphasized, Bataille's account of the formless entails occupying unstable forms, accentuating their instability, and acknowledging the instability and indistinctness of all such categories and ontological oppositions. In this respect, Didi-Huberman and the *October* critics rightly emphasize that the *informe* is characterised by its process and movement. This is not in conflict with Bataille's materialism but is constitutive of his critique of weaker accounts of materialism. His critique of other forms of materialism is not only that they make matter into an ideal substance, but they are ontological accounts of matter, thus posing matter as containing an essence, rather than being an anti-essentialist movement which puts form and matter in play. In his article

⁶⁹ Krauss, 'Poststructuralism and Deconstruction', *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. ed. by Buchloch et al (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 255.

⁷⁰ A similar point is made by Derrida throughout the aforementioned essay.

‘Le Bas matérialisme et la gnose’, for example, he critiques materialist thought which makes of matter not only an ‘ideal’ form but a certain, stable form, granting the kind of transcendental guarantee afforded by belief in God. For Bataille there is no safe ontological ground to stand on, hence all matter and all formal arrangements are fundamentally unstable.

Dissemblance and the Dispute with Didi-Huberman

Didi-Huberman and the *October* critics are all in agreement that *informe* is not simply anti-form, or direct opposition to form. A critical dispute emerged from their deductions from this however. The principal difference in their readings is that for Didi-Huberman *informe* constitutes a kind of dialectical thinking while the *October* critics argue that it is strongly anti-dialectical. Rosalind Krauss, for example, sets up an opposition between a dialectical and an anti-dialectical perspective in *Modernist Myths*:

Informe denotes what alteration produces, the reduction of meaning or value, not by contradiction – which would be dialectical – but by putrefaction: the puncturing of limits around the term, the reduction to sameness of the cadaver – which is transgressive.⁷¹

The key difference between the *October* critics’ anti-dialectical deduction and the more dialectical claim of Didi-Huberman is the manner in which the final lines of the short *Documents* entry are interpreted. Formlessness famously ‘resembles nothing’ and it is this differential singularity which is most emphasised by the *October* critics. Yve-Alain Bois, like Krauss, repeatedly assert that the formless ‘resembles nothing, especially not what it should be, refusing to let itself be assimilated to any concept whatever, to any abstraction whatever’.⁷² The refusal of ‘any concept whatever’, the claim to an absolute exteriority to system, is compromised by Bataille’s concluding lines where he writes that if the universe is formless and resembles nothing then this would mean that the universe resembles ‘quelque chose comme une araignée ou un crachat’. We’re presented with a paradox then: the formless resembles nothing but this entails positing a resemblance in the first place undermining its

⁷¹ Krauss, *Modernist Myths*, p.64

⁷² Bois, ‘Base Materialism’, *Formless: A User’s Guide*, p.53.

claim to pure difference/dissemblance. The affirmation of pure alterity is compromised by the positing of a simile, ‘quelque chose comme’. In positing a resemblance through an iteration of non-resemblance Bataille is generating not a contradictory but a dialectical mode of thought according to Didi-Huberman.⁷³ He claims that Bataille always prefers to posit ‘*ressemblances transgressives*’ rather than posit ‘absolute’ dissemblance.⁷⁴ Further to Didi-Huberman’s observations about Bataille’s ‘preferences’, the debates over the *informe* also highlight the inherent conceptual difficulties of thinking alterity in aesthetic theory: ‘absolute’ or ‘pure’ dissemblance is rarely a possible conceptual choice, as dissemblance must depart from a semblance. Difference depends on identity: as Fredric Jameson often remarks ‘difference relates’,⁷⁵ or from the perspective of the philosopher Ray Brassier, ‘The registration of change presupposes the recognition of an unchanging substrate’.⁷⁶ I will argue that Krauss and Bois’s readings of Bataille are compromised by their failure to adequately address the kinds of dialectical contradictions pointed towards in these examples.

Krauss and Bois exaggerate a closure associated with dialectics. They see dialectical thinking as being synonymous with ‘homology’ and ‘reconciliation’.⁷⁷ On these terms, Bataille’s writing would clearly have nothing to do with dialectical thinking. For them, dialectical thinking restricts the possibility of alterity and difference. However, the idea that dialectical thinking entails a simple resolution and sublation of difference is a somewhat

⁷³ See Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe : ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris : Macula, 1995), p.20.

⁷⁴ Didi-Huberman, p.21.

⁷⁵ Asked how he perceives difference, Jameson explains in a 1989 interview, ‘I tried to put this in the slogan “difference relates.” The very perception of breaks and difference becomes a meaning in itself; yet not a meaning that has content but one that seems to be a meaningful, yet new, form of unity. This kind of view does not pose the problem “How do we relate those things, how do we turn those things back into continuities or similarities?” It simply says “When you register difference, something positive is happening in your mind.” It’s a way of getting rid of content.’ Anders Stephanson and Fredric Jameson, ‘Regarding Postmodernism – A Conversation with Fredric Jameson’, *Social Text*, 21 (1989), p.6 (3-30).

⁷⁶ Ray Brassier, ‘That Which is Not: Philosophy as Entwinement of Truth and Negativity’, *Stasis, 1: The Politics of Negativity* (October 2013). <www.stasisjournal.net/all-issues/12-1-politics-of-negativity-october-2013/13-that-which-is-not-philosophy-as-entwinement-of-truth-and-negativity> [Accessed online 10 January 2014].

⁷⁷ See Bois, ‘Dialectic’, *Formless*, p.67.

outdated one that has been undermined by a variety of theorists, including Didi-Huberman himself whose criticism of this position here is worth quoting at length:

Rappelons aussi que la fameuse ‘réconciliation’ hégélienne ne va pas, pour le ‘mouvement du concept’, sans une ‘différenciation infinie’, l’acte de libérer constamment son Autre. Rappelons surtout que Hegel ne voyait pas dans la dialectique une façon de résoudre seulement les particularisations antagonistes – c’est-à-dire de les fixer dans une abstraite ‘identité des contraires’ -, mais la façon même de ne pas cesser concrètement de les produire : ‘Je nomme dialectique le principe moteur du Concept en tant que non seulement il résout les particularisations de l’universel, mais le produit’.⁷⁸

Dialectical thinking thus entails the *production* of difference, not simply resolution. Similarly Slavoj Žižek has written about the problematic view in which ‘Hegelian dialectics “sublates” all the inert objective leftover, including it in the circle of the dialectical mediation: the very movement of dialectics implies, on the contrary, there is always a certain remnant, a certain leftover escaping the circle of subjectivation’.⁷⁹ Krauss and Bois’s caricatures of dialectical thought as entailing a ‘synthesis’, a totalizing closure which always reduces alterity, betrays a problematic conceptual outlook: the desire for difference without thinking through its intrinsic dependence on identity. Krauss’s aversion to conflating either Bataille’s thought or the movement of the *informe* with a dialectical schema is partially based on her view that Hegelian ‘synthesis’ entails ‘neutralization’: ‘A difference, or opposition, is “neutralized” by a third term that “sublates” that difference.’⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe*, p.229.

⁷⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2008), p.209. Another more canonic example of dialectical thinking which excludes synthesis is Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*. A particularly useful account of dialectics as the production, rather than the resolution, of difference is also given by Fredric Jameson. He writes that the deconcealment of the antinomies at the root of practical or theoretical dilemmas ‘can serve as a powerful instrument of ideological analysis (as in deconstruction), but it should not be confused with that more dynamic and productive act of setting the antinomy itself in motion, that is to say, revealing it to have in reality been the form of a contradiction: for it is the unmasking of antinomy as contradiction which constitutes truly dialectical thinking as such’ Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2010), p.43.

⁸⁰ Krauss, *Formless*, p.111. On different terms than I argue here, Paul Hegarty also disagrees with Krauss and Bois’s attempts to disassociate Bataille from dialectical thought. See Paul Hegarty, ‘As Above, So Below; Informe/Sublime/Abject’, *The Beast at Heaven’s Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, ed. by Andrew Hussey (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 73 – 80. In the same volume, see also Richard Williams, ‘Informe and ‘Anti Form’. However, as will become clear from my arguments in the remainder of the chapter, I see some aspects of Krauss and Bois’s formal abstraction as a critical strength, and do not share Williams’s argument that Krauss and Bois ‘did not want to get their hands dirty’. See Williams, ‘Informe and Anti Form’, *The Beast at*

My argument is that while Krauss is careful to avoid simply positing *informe* as anti-form, her attachment to a strongly anti-dialectical outlook suggests a desire for difference simplistically and incoherently liberated from its necessary theoretical basis in identity, thus leading to inconsistent theoretical territory.⁸¹ In other words, there is an act of separation at work in Krauss's schema, which is in conflict with the *informe* as an operation that contaminates and makes neat separations unstable. In this sense, the dichotomy between a Derridean conception of 'generalized contamination', which I referred to in characterising deconstruction and base materialism, in contrast to the tendency towards purity in Barthes is useful in relation to Krauss, Bois and *October*. Moreover, a commitment to an 'anti-dialectical' perspective risks making the mistake Derrida warned against in identifying Bataille as 'anti-hegelian'. The traversal and internal displacement of systemic thinking similarly finds a parallel in the movement of the 'informe': in wishing to posit it as absolutely apart from system, it represses the relational dependence of heterogeneity upon homogeneity.

Logics of Separation

The pull towards an aesthetic purity, as opposed to a logic of conceptual contamination, is most evident in Krauss's earlier more explicitly structuralist work. The structuralist prioritization of the horizontal spatial axis over the vertical temporal one is evident in her engagement with 'Grids', the title of a 1979 *October* essay, later adapted for *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*. The perspective of 'Grids', in which sequential aspects of myth and narrative are rearranged in spatial form, also informs one of Krauss's earlier discussions of *informe* in the 1985 article 'Corpus Delecti'. Her description of Bataille is in structuralist terms when she says that his *bassesse* was a 'mechanism' for the achievement of the *informe*,

Heaven's Gate, p.148. Other readings of *informe* can be found in Patrick Crowley and Paul Hegarty eds. *Formless: Ways in and out of Form* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), and Jeremy Biles, *Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form* (New York: Forduman University Press, 2007).

⁸¹ It may seem counter-intuitive to use the term 'difference' in comparative terms with the *informe*, an operation that is conceived as the annulation of difference. But the *informe*'s annulation of difference is also the resistance to any system as an identity. Hence if 'form' is the stable foundation of architecture, then it can be thought of as an identity against which the *informe* unravels and resists systemization, blurring once distinct boundaries.

‘through an axial rotation from vertical to horizontal, through that is, the mechanics of fall’.⁸² The mechanistic vocabulary is not as pronounced in later writings by Krauss which often exhibit more self-reflexive and fluid methodological approaches. In her entry for *Art Since 1900* for example, Krauss writes that ‘Poststructuralism grew out of a refusal to grant structuralism its premise that each system is autonomous, with rules and operations that begin and end within the boundaries of that system’,⁸³ which could be an implicit self-critique of her own trajectory, increasingly influenced by both the poststructuralist critique of structuralism’s a-historicism as well as Fredric Jameson’s engagement with the depoliticizing tendencies of structuralist analysis.⁸⁴

In this article again she differentiates the formless from the abject, reminding that ‘It’s not simply mess or slime’. The insistence on an initially formal shift thus entailing a structural shift in how we understand the instability of ontological categories is one of the most compelling aspects of her reading of Bataille. The insistence that *informe* is ‘structural’ lends a degree of performativity and formal adventurousness. However, her tendency to enact theoretical separations and purities comes with both potentially exciting but theoretically limiting implications. This desire for separation, which becomes more pronounced in the co-authored work with Bois, and insistence on the anti-dialectical nature of the *informe* carries with it a certain de-historicising and de-politicizing tendency. This is particularly evident in Krauss and Bois’s comments on Bataille’s relationship to Marxism. In *Formless* (1997) Bois discusses Bataille’s reading of the history and meaning of the institution of the museum. He quotes a passage from *Documents* which attacks aesthetic contemplation as a form of

⁸² Krauss, ‘Corpus Delecti’, *October*, 33 (1985), p.37.

⁸³ Krauss, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, p.40.

⁸⁴ On the question of history, see for example *Post-Structuralism and the question of history*, ed. by Attridge et al., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and discussed in the following chapter. See also Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-house of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), and *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2002), to which Krauss alluded to in the title of her 1993 book *The Optical Unconscious*.

narcissistic self-celebration.⁸⁵ Bois then tells us that we should resist the temptation to create links between these remarks and the famous observation of Walter Benjamin several years later that ‘There is no document of culture that is not at the same time a record of barbarism’. The reason for Bois’ warning against such links is that ‘this would be to push Bataille’s thought toward Marxism, with which he was engaged only very briefly (just after the end of the *Documents* adventure, roughly from 1932 to 1939), always maintaining his distance’.⁸⁶ This is quite an unusual comment, especially the quantification of his engagement with Marxism as only being very brief: Bois and Krauss’s engagement with Bataille is largely confined to texts from a two year period covering the duration of the *Documents* journal as opposed to the supposedly ‘brief’ seven years when he was engaged with dissident Marxist and left-wing political theory and projects.⁸⁷ Bois then offers further justification for his wish to reinforce a distance:

Bataille was less interested in class struggle than in de-classing, and barbarism was something to which Bataille appealed with all his might. No Marxist could have penned the following sentences: ‘Without a profound complicity with natural forces such as violent death, gushing blood, sudden catastrophes and the horrible cries of pain that accompany them, terrifying ruptures of what had seemed to be immutable, the fall into stinking filth of what had been elevated – without a sadistic understanding of an incontestably and torrential nature, there could be no revolutionaries, there could only be a revolting utopian sentimentality.’⁸⁸

Leaving aside the dubious claim in which de-classifying renders one incompatible with Marxist class struggle, the subsequent lines are even weaker as a testament to an aversion to Marxism. The basis of Marx’s materialist analyses in *Capital* came out of an antipathy to the

⁸⁵ Bois refers to the ‘Museum’ entry in which Bataille relates the origins of the museum to the development of the guillotine. He then quotes the following passage: ‘The museum is the colossal mirror in which man finally contemplates himself from all sides, finds himself literally admirable, and abandons himself to the ecstasy expressed in all the art journals’, Bataille quoted in *Formless*, p.47.

⁸⁶ Yve-Alain Bois, ‘Abbatoir’, *Formless*, p.48.

⁸⁷ The *October*, 36, issue on Bataille did publish a wide range of translations and Krauss and Bois quote from other periods of Bataille’s work, but this is often with a sense of disappointment in regards to his post-war writing, as discussed below in relation to Krauss’s disappointment with *Manet*. Their engagement with Bataille is then largely focused on texts from *Documents* and writings on base materialism in the late twenties and early thirties.

⁸⁸ Bois, *Formless*, p.49

kind of utopianism Bataille refers to in the closing lines of the quote. Both Marx and Bataille were emphatically opposed to idealism, Marx against utopian idealism, and Bataille against idealist materialisms, such as that of the Surrealists. Bataille's development of base materialism came out of an explicit engagement with Marxian thought in essays such as 'La "Vieille taupe" et le préfixe sur dans les mots surhomme et surréaliste' or 'La Notion de dépense' published in Boris Souvarine's dissident communist review *La Critique Sociale*. In the former essay for example, as noted in the thesis introduction, Bataille's starting point for his version of materialism was explicitly aligned with Marx, drawing on the image of the mole from the *Communist Manifesto* emphasizing his antipathy to Icarian thought. While hardly a Marxist in any conventional sense, a certain debt to Marxist thought as well as a protracted and explicit engagement with Marxism is undeniable.

To quickly and eagerly dismiss Bataille's relationship to Marxism for relatively weak reasons is thus symptomatic of a broader political distancing at work in Bois and Krauss's treatment of the *informe*.⁸⁹ Bois and Krauss are eager to separate Bataille's theory from dialectical thought, Marxism, as well as surrealism.⁹⁰ Just as Krauss had introduced Bataille in *Modernist Myths* in strict opposition to Breton, similarly in *Formless* Bois asserts that 'there is no connection whatever between Bataille's sense of the sacred and Breton's contemporaneous reappropriation of the marvellous'.⁹¹ *Tel Quel*'s positing of the Bataille-Breton opposition still involved examining the former's complicated, complicit, and less than simply anti-thetical relationship to Surrealism.⁹² While following the same narrative as *Tel*

⁸⁹ My point here is not to pursue an extended analysis of Bataille's relationship to Marxism, merely to highlight Bois's eagerness to enforce and exaggerate a distance between Bataille and Marxism.

⁹⁰ In this sense, Bois and Krauss have more in common with Breton than they think. Breton was also keen to label Bataille an anti-dialectical thinker in the Second Surrealist Manifesto. Similarly, Didi-Huberman notes that 'les lecteurs de Bataille ont souvent interprété sa violence conceptuelle comme un refus caractérisé de toute méthode dialectique', Didi-Huberman, *Le Gai savoir* p.203.

⁹¹ Bois, *Formless*, p.53.

⁹² Since the nineties there have been several books which have argued for Bataille's much closer theoretical proximity to the Surrealists. Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. by Michael Richardson (Verso: New York, 1994). See also Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (Routledge: New York, 1994), and Andrew Hussey, *The Inner Scar: The Mysticism of Georges Bataille* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000).

Quel, Bois and Krauss posit an even greater, more rigidly imposed, distance between Bataille and the Surrealists. And the same distance applies for politics and Marxism too. Where Jean-Louis Houdebine and *Tel Quel* had used Bataille's 'marxiste, profondément marxiste' critique of the surrealists to distinguish and differentiate their own contemporary Marxism, Krauss and Bois do not delineate a Bataillean Marxism like *Tel Quel*, but separate him from Marxism altogether.

While offering sophisticated readings of the conceptually productive, anti-essentialist nature of *informe*, Bois and Krauss's emphasis upon apartness and separation in their elaboration of *informe* frequently runs the risk of positing a pure exteriority, as suggested by their rigid separation between Bretonian surrealism, Marxism, the political and the dialectical, and the removal of any referent, temporality or historical conditions facilitating *informe*'s emergence. Bois, for example, often reinforces simple binary choice in treating the *informe*: either dry historicist contextualising or the libidinal charge of liberated theory. 'We could treat the *informe* as a pure object of historical research, tracing its origins in *Documents* [...] But such an approach would run the risk of transforming the formless into a figure, of stabilizing it', he writes. Faced with this binary, Bois quite naturally opts to put the formless to work 'far from its place of origin'.⁹³ Why should such a simplistic binary be sustained though, as between 'History' and 'Theory'? Bois's vocabulary is symptomatic again in the reference to a 'pure' object of historical research. Bois and Krauss's separations, particularly in opposition to surrealism, suggest an attempt to distance themselves from conventional accounts of modernism as a means of developing new readings. However, a negation of all aspects of the historical is not a prerequisite for an affirmation of the new. While disentangling the *informe* from any historicism is necessary for new readings, a jettisoning of historical consciousness should not follow. This binary betrays a broader tendency in Krauss

⁹³ Bois, *Formless*, p.40.

and Bois's account of *informe*, enforcing a false choice between either deferential historicist treatment or an uncritical affirmation of abstract formal experimentation.⁹⁴

The hostility to systems of all kinds by Bois and Krauss is, ironically, what lends their account of *informe* most susceptibility to lapse into a counter-system. At pains to distance the Bataillean *informe* from surrealism, Marxism, historical determination and dialectics, their enhancement of such distances often results in positing an impossible exteriority which, as I have shown, can be theoretically inconsistent: difference posited without thinking its intrinsic dependence upon identity more easily becomes recuperated into another homogenous identity. *October* critic Hal Foster was attentive to this danger of simply positing another system under the guise of an anti-system. In a conversation among the *October* critics published in 1994, Foster takes issue with Bois and Krauss (as well as Benjamin Buchloch):

I hate to say it, but the three of you have collaborated on a story that feels almost as claustrophobic, as hermetic, as the old narrative. Only now, rather than a heroic history of form-givers, we have a heroic history of form-undoers, great debasers of form [...] the materiality, the bodiliness, the historicity of the *informe*, the base of the *base*, all but drops out.⁹⁵

'You're saying that we're cleaning it up, making it a clean machine', replies Krauss, to which Foster agrees: 'Resublimating, but in the guise of desublimating'. That resublimation is, as I have suggested, largely influenced by a will towards pure exteriority (conceptually opposed to the apparent identity of the dialectic, materially in the autonomy of the artwork against/outside its historical conditions). Their account, which too quickly dismisses 'materiality' and historicity, as Foster highlights, deflates the tension constitutive of the *informe*. It tends to 'resolve' the antagonism between resemblance/dissemblance by embracing pure abstraction. In this sense it also parallels the tendency to embrace purity in certain moments of Barthes discussed above. Where in Barthes's phalanstery of the text

⁹⁴ The tensions between theory and history are elaborated upon in chapter 3.

⁹⁵ Foster et al., 'The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the "Informe" and the Object', *October*, 67 (1994), p.12.

conflict would be dismissed due to its incompatibility with pleasure, the internal conflict and contradictions of the *informe* tend to be also rejected in Bois and Krauss's embrace of abstraction.⁹⁶ This tendency towards 'exteriority' and theoretical 'separation' is, I argue, a manifestly depoliticising aspect of reading Bataille's *informe*.

While Bois and Krauss's version of Bataille is largely representative of a theoretical puritanism I have been critiquing, there is an ambivalence between the two critics' perspective, even within co-authored texts, further problematizing any vision of a consistent account of *informe* on their part. From *Modernist Myths* to *The Optical Unconscious*, Krauss moves from a discernibly structuralist framework to a more self-reflexive position influenced by post-structuralism. The tendency towards exteriority and theoretical purity is less pronounced in *The Optical Unconscious*. She still reads modernism through the spatial logics of graphs and grids but is now much more attentive to the problems and exclusions entailed in such a perspective. Krauss writes:

The advantage of the graph as a picture of modernism and its visual logic is that it is perfect. Both a perfect descriptor and a perfect patsy. Its frame which is a frame of exclusions is oh so easy to read as an antiideological closure. Nothing enters from the outside, there where the political, the economic, the social foregather. But neither does anything rise up into the graph from below. The problem of this book will be to show that the depths are there, to show that the graph's transparency is only seems: that it masks what is beneath it, or to use a stronger term, represses it.⁹⁷

The increased consciousness that the perceived 'exclusions' of such analysis are never purely excluded, that the transparency is only 'seeming', is a progressive development of the work she began in *Modernist Myths*. Her idea of an 'optical unconscious' aims at disrupting the separation between the temporal and the spatial upon which modernist visual logic was built.

⁹⁶ 'Une telle société n'aurait pas de lieu, ne pourrait se mouvoir qu'en pleine atopie; ce serait pourtant une sorte de phalanstère, car les contradictions y seraient reconnues (et donc restreints les risques d'imposture idéologique), la différence y serait observée et le conflit frappé d'insignifiance (étant improducteur de plaisir).' Barthes, *Plaisir*, p.27.

⁹⁷ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, pp.26-7.

As she explains, again progressively countering the tendency towards purity encountered elsewhere in her own work, the notion of:

outsideness, of the temporal as necessarily outside the visual, this idea of the separation of the sense on which modernism's logic is built, it is just this that the beat exploited by the artists of the 'optical unconscious' contests. The pulse they employ is not understood to be structurally distinct from vision but to be at work from deep inside it. And from that place, to be a force that is transgressive of those very notions of 'distinctness' upon which a modernist optical logic depends.⁹⁸

However, there is a further theoretical inconsistency in how the *informe* is elaborated. By the time of 1997's *Formless* co-authored by Krauss and Bois, there is a renewed tendency towards theoretical separation, reinforcing those 'distinct' boundaries which Krauss, in *The Optical Unconscious*, had gestured towards unravelling. Here the points of difference between Krauss and Bois become difficult to identify, but it is Bois' texts which most often exhibit a problematic theoretical puritanism. As well as the previously discussed dismissive comments on Marxism and politics, Bois's commentary throughout his entry on 'Dialectic' is also exemplary. After discussing 'The Deviations of Nature' and 'The Big Toe', he writes that 'For Bataille, there is no third term, but rather an "alterating rhythm" of homology and heterology, of appropriation and excretion.'⁹⁹ The resistance to permitting the idea of a third term is again informed by a resistance to any trace of dialectics in Bois' account of a 'nondialectical materialism'. The unusual aspect of this account is that Barthes, so often the major influence in Krauss and Bois's engagement with Bataille, elucidated *informe* precisely as a third term in his essay 'Les sorties du texte'.

In 'Les Sorties du texte' Barthes gives a lucid and succinct account of Bataille's base materialism as entailing three poles of value, the noble in opposition to the ignoble, and the base as a disruptive third term. Barthes refers to one reading of Bataille's priority of laughter as an example. He explains that 'pudeur' is not simply negated by its contrary 'nudité' or

⁹⁸ Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, p.217.

⁹⁹ Bois, *Formless*, p.71.

‘exhibitionisme’. Rather, ‘Rire’ is the third term which intrudes in order to ‘d  jouer’ the opposition between ‘nudit  ’ and ‘exhibitionisme’, the noble and the ignoble.¹⁰⁰ Neither high nor low, but base, lower than low, not as a positive term but a self-reflexive operation at the limit of all value systems. Barthes uses that logic in his conception of the text as an ‘atopia’ as mentioned earlier, and that logic is often evident in Bois and Krauss’s conception of the *informe* in somewhat puritan operations of aesthetic separation, as I have highlighted. In *The Optical Unconscious* Krauss describes the *informe*, the most tangible example of base materialism, as a ‘third term’, following the same schema as Barthes. *Suspended Ball*, she writes, ‘asks us to recognize an eccentric third term, one that refuses the assumption that ground can be generalized as an abstract plenum – neither figure, nor ground, but their structural precondition’.¹⁰¹ In *Formless* however, her co-author Bois writes, as noted above, that ‘there is no third-term’, only an ‘alterating rhythm’. Similarly, where Krauss had referred to *Suspended Ball* in *The Optical Unconscious* as emblematic of a disruptive third term, the discussion of the same artwork in *Formless*, in the co-authored entry ‘Part Object’, makes no reference to the third term Krauss had previously insisted on, but instead leans on imagery more associated with Bois’s perspective, of alternating between homology and heterology. In *Formless* a tertiary schematic movement has become a binary movement.

Contested Modernisms

For Bois, the presence of a third term reduces the violence and ‘scission’ of the operation, but his own account reduces the violence of the *informe* through an unwitting ‘resolution’ in abstraction. However, I do not wish to argue against the tendency to think and elaborate the *informe* on primarily conceptual and abstract grounds, only to argue for a suspension of, and consciousness of, the contradictions and tensions entailed in embracing that abstraction. In this sense, while the purity and aesthetic separation in these readings has de-politicizing and

¹⁰⁰ Barthes, ‘Les Sorties du texte’, *Bataille*, ed. by Sollers, pp.58-9.

¹⁰¹ Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, p.192.

de-historicizing tendencies, I wish to argue that the readings carry simultaneous political and ground-breaking import in other respects. Krauss in particular does not simply 'update' Bataille but uses his theory as a means of re-reading the history and narratives around modernist aesthetics, and more broadly how we understand the relationship between such major and disrupted terms as 'modernism' and 'postmodernism'. Furthermore, the ground-breaking aspects of Krauss's readings may be partially conditioned upon the separations and disentanglements I have been critiquing, making any simple critical denunciation problematic.

Krauss's critique of historicism, for example, is on the grounds that newness is domesticated, made familiar, and seen as merely a natural evolution of forms from the past: 'Historicism works on the new and different to diminish newness and mitigate difference.'¹⁰² Her reading of modernism entails the refusal of the optical logic of canonical modernisms which read aesthetic development in teleological terms. To think modernism topographically rather than historically permitted Krauss a new conception of twentieth century aesthetics.¹⁰³ Considering history, for Krauss, too often runs the risk of seeing the world as a simple chronological development, from one aesthetic movement to the next.¹⁰⁴ Again, this approach would seem to fall into the trap mentioned above in relation to Bois, with 'Theory' as an incompatible opposition to 'History'. However, this resistance to thinking historically should be understood in the context of a rupture in post-war art criticism. For the dominant school of critical modernism exemplified by Clement Greenberg, modernism was understood primarily historically and, for Greenberg and many others, this meant a simplistic teleological model. Krauss says Greenberg has mistakenly been described as 'formalist' whereas in fact he is

¹⁰² Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, p.277.

¹⁰³ See Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, p.13.

¹⁰⁴ 'History, as we normally use, implies the connection of events through time, a sense of inevitable change as we move from one event to the next [...] so that we tend to view history as developmental'. Krauss, 'Grids', *October*, 9 (1979), p.64.

‘profoundly historicist’.¹⁰⁵ Krauss wants to disentangle the former from the latter and inaugurate a radical break with the dominant version of critical modernism originating from Greenberg. Historicism entails familiarity, a stable conception of time and development. A truly modernist aesthetics is based on *de*-familiarization. From this perspective, Krauss’s antipathy towards historicist progressivism is essential for she highlights how it gives no sense of the uncertainty, the variable potentials and the risks at stake in radically new aesthetic choices and movements.¹⁰⁶ Instead it leads to the idea that art simply progresses from one stylistic period to the next in a natural evolution.

Bataille’s work was essential to Krauss’s rereading modernism against these familiarizing and simplistically historicizing tendencies.¹⁰⁷ Reciprocally, we can begin to see why there was a tendency towards imposing sometimes exaggerated distinctions and separations in reading Bataille. Such separations were perhaps viewed as a necessary means of facilitating radical critical breaks. Bois practically states this explicitly in a curious passage of *Formless*: after engaging in a lengthy critique of Didi-Huberman’s reading of *informe*, he then makes the strange admission that Didi-Huberman’s interpretation is ‘paradoxically more or less Bataille’s own, once he sets himself to “applying” the idea of the *informe* to the art of his day’.¹⁰⁸ There is an implication that in order to both produce the radically new in critical perspectives, and foster the emergence of the new in contemporary art, then the *informe* should be, to an extent, disconnected from its original historical emergence and articulation.

¹⁰⁵ Krauss, *Modernist Myths*, p.1.

¹⁰⁶ For a similar critique of simplistically historicist views of aesthetics see Gabriel Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2010), p.102.

¹⁰⁷ See the introduction to *The Originality of the Avant-Garde* for Krauss’s criticism of these tendencies. Later in the book, she succinctly critiques the problem of historicist perspectives: ‘the new is made comfortable by being made familiar, since it is seen as having gradually evolved from the forms of the past. Historicism works on the new and different to diminish newness and mitigate difference’, Krauss, p.277.

¹⁰⁸ Bois, *Formless*, p.80.

Bataille's Modernism: 'Neither Form nor Content but...'

In the 1986 article 'Antivision', there is a striking contrast between conflicting trajectories of Bataillean thought which might inform Krauss's rereading of modernism. Krauss explicitly states her preference for the *Documents*-era writings in contrast to his post-war work. Krauss begins the article by writing, 'One turns the pages of Georges Bataille's book on Manet with a mounting sense of disappointment.' She continues:

Is it really Bataille who is telling us – once again- that Manet's achievement was the destruction of subject matter so that in its place, from among its ruins should arise pure painting – 'painting', as he writes, 'for its own sake, a song for the eyes of interwoven forms and colors?' Having turned subject matter into a mere pretext for this experience of optical autonomy, Bataille concludes, 'I would stress the fact that what counts in Manet's canvases is not the subject, but the vibration of light.'¹⁰⁹

This passage is so disappointing for Krauss because of its privileging of vision in Manet, perceived as strange particularly because Bataille had 'begun his career precisely buying out of all this', in other words by rejecting the 'modernist fetishization of sight'.¹¹⁰ For Krauss *Manet* often subscribes to a disappointingly 'conventional paradigm', an Enlightenment view of art. What it appears to do is to assert the primacy of form over content in a familiar modernist narrative whereas the work of the *formless* is initiated on the level of form, but only in order to deconstruct the very distinctions between form and content.

There is one moment in *Manet* however which attracts Krauss's attention as pointing towards the radicalism of the *informe*. Krauss discusses the dualism at work in Bataille's theory of art, the co-presence of conflicting theories: the automutilative act of staring at the sun is also an act of mimesis in which one tries to identify with an ideal Sun or God, imitating it. Mimesis and alteration coincide. She writes, following Bataille, that representation is born at the limit: 'where light turns to darkness [...] where sight is extinguished in a revelatory moment which is the same as blindness'.¹¹¹ This subversive non-productive view of representation appears, for Krauss, in the brief reference to Goya but also in Bataille's strange

¹⁰⁹ Krauss, 'Antivision', *October*, 36, (1986), p.147.

¹¹⁰ Krauss, *October*, 36, p.147.

¹¹¹ Krauss, *October*, 36, p.152.

location of two separate beginnings for modernism. Goya, with his art of excess that recalls the violence of the sacred, was ‘the first of the moderns’ before adding of Manet (whom Krauss characterizes as ‘dominant modernism’s art of absence’) that he ‘alone explicitly inaugurated modern painting’.¹¹² This passage centres on an ambivalence in the founding moment of modernism as a struggle between ‘the values of opticality and those of an intensity that is “blinding”, “sight-destroying” and in which representation dare to be neither appropriative nor productive’.¹¹³ The latter tendency, the ‘optical unconscious’ as she would come to call it, is clearly of more interest to Krauss. While much of *Manet* subscribes to a conventional modernist paradigm, Krauss closes this essay with the suggestion that a reconsideration of the history of modernism under the terms Bataille introduced at *Documents* could be a ground-breaking project.

In the introduction to *Formless*, Krauss takes up Bataille’s *Manet* again, this time co-authored with Bois. Here the break with dominant modernist art criticism through the use of Bataille is explicitly laid out. Clement Greenberg, they write, sees nothing in Manet but the frankness of the flat surface on which it is painted. And above all they write, ‘it ponders the identity of the motif itself (luxury courtesan or two-bit streetwalker?) and its sources (from Titian and Goya to pornographic photography).’¹¹⁴ In other words, the critical opposition between form and content is safely in place and left unchallenged. In this critical opposition, and with regard to reading Manet, Bataille has been put on the side of form. In one sense, this is unsurprising, as Krauss and Bois note, since Bataille repeats the phrase ‘the crisis of subject matter’ echoing the modernist surpassing of representation and subject matter for the liberation of form. But this move, from content to form, stops too short for both Bataille, and Krauss and Bois. It is this limitation of conventional modernism to the formal level for which Bataille provides an alternative. Where formal modernism is seen as based on absence (of

¹¹² Bataille quoted in Krauss, *October*, 36, p.152.

¹¹³ Krauss, *October*, 36, p.153.

¹¹⁴ Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, p.13.

representation, for example), Bataille's modernism constitutes a violence. The tone of indifference of Manet evident in *Olympia*, for example, is not a simple retreat into the 'ivory tower of "purely formal experiment": it is an attack'.¹¹⁵

The refusal of formal and ideological codes regulating the depiction of the nude is the focal point of Manet's greatness for Bataille. His subject is thus not located '*anywhere*' and it is this disappointment of expectation which is the real goal of his art. Bataille's differentiation with conventional modernism is highlighted in his mentioning of Malraux, who, according to Bataille, discerned the decisive steps taken by Manet but failed to define *Olympia*'s value as an operation. It is this operational aspect of Bataille which Bois and Krauss emphasise in their re-reading of modernism, the violent and aggressive attack on traditional categories. So while their modernism, via Bataille, entails the decline of representation and the primacy of form, it goes further: 'So it is neither the "form" nor the "content" that interests Bataille, but the operation that displaces both of these terms.'¹¹⁶

The fact that Krauss and Bois's analysis situate their attack upon form on an initially formal level lends their reading valuable critical purchase. This perspective entails a commitment to the formal innovations of late modernism as well as the deconstruction between high and low culture characteristic of postmodernism. At the same time, their reading of *informe* at its best voids any distinct categorization between high and low while resisting those postmodernist critical gestures which over-compensate for the 'low' in a simplistic reaction against 'high' modernism.¹¹⁷

October critic Hal Foster has highlighted dialectic characteristic of postmodernism. On the one hand postmodern culture is characterised by pure abstraction, exemplified by the predominance of simulacra and ahistorical pastiche but an opposing tendency in culture is the desire for primitive ontological intensity, exemplified by certain iterations of the abject.

¹¹⁵ Bois, *Formless*, p.14.

¹¹⁶ Bois, *Formless*. P.15.

¹¹⁷ This critical gesture is explored in some detail in the final chapter.

Foster follows Fredric Jameson's account of postmodernism as resembling 'a schizophrenic breakdown in language and time that provoked a compensatory investment in image and space'. Foster continues:

And in the 1980s many artists did indulge in simulacral intensities and ahistorical pastiches. In recent intimations of postmodernism, however, the second, 'melancholic' structure of feeling has dominated, and sometimes, as in Kristeva, it too is associated with a symbolic order in crisis. Here artists are drawn not to the highs of the simulacral image but to the lows of the depressive thing. If some high modernists sought to transcend the referential object and some early postmodernists to delight in the sheer image, some later postmodernists want to possess the real thing.¹¹⁸

Rather, there is a trajectory of modernism, to be rethought through a critical-postmodernist perspective, which is 'lower than low', enacting its violence initially on a formal level, and which displaces and transgresses critical categoriawation.¹¹⁹ The self-reflexive limit-work of *informe* blurs and makes pre-conceived categories and identities indistinct. It shows that the ground upon which aesthetic work begins can never be sure of itself. Krauss's critical departure from Greenberg was partially based on her predecessor's reinforcement of an unquestioning aesthetic self-confidence, as if modernist art was sure of itself, did not question its own methodology or its own historiographical assumptions. Rejecting the ahistorical pastiche which characterises uncritical postmodernisms, as described by Foster, and rejecting the reliance on teleology and lack of historiographical self-questioning in dominant modernisms, the strength of Krauss's perspective is as a 'critical postmodernism' which, when she is particularly attentive to the tensions and contradictions of formal abstraction, bears more in common with a literary late modernism than that of the dominant modernism of post-war art criticism.

¹¹⁸ Hal Foster, 'Obscene, Abject, Traumatic', *October*, 78 (1996), p.121.

¹¹⁹ For reference to a 'critical postmodernism', see for example the discussion of a 'postmodernism of resistance' in Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto, 1987), p. xi.

Modernism as Crisis of Self-Expression

The progressive import of Krauss's readings can thus be supplemented here within a broader contextualisation of theoretical modernism. The famous opening line of Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is particularly resonant here: 'It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore.'¹²⁰ While Adorno recognises this as particularly pertinent at his time of writing, this inherent uncertainty of aesthetic expression is a characteristic feature throughout modernism. Bound up with a Hegelian 'disenchantment with the world' in a secular age where there is no longer any transcendental authority underpinning society, such as God or King, modernism is characterised by an anxiety over the absence of a foundation not only of social authority but of the inadequacy of art itself as an aesthetic authority: the 'end of art' is a recurring preoccupation and this anxiety is amplified in late modernism.¹²¹ Modernism is, in a certain sense, founded upon the end of art, as a variety of critics have shown.¹²²

Bataille's work represents an extreme in this regard, as his wide-ranging critique of art at *Documents* makes clear. Moreover, his work is consistently characterised by a self-conscious self-referential meditation upon the impossible, and persistence through expression, despite or partially because of the impossible constraints encountered therein. Didi-Huberman's highlighting of the contradictory desire for dissemblance fractured through a necessary positing of semblance in the *informe* is a precise condensation of the desire for the impossible and the anguish characteristic of modernist expression. T.J. Clark summarises the paradoxical dilemma and tension of modernism in the following terms: 'ever since Hegel put the basic proposition of modernism into words in the 1820s – that "art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past" – art's being able to continue has

¹²⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.1.

¹²¹ The fiction of Beckett and Blanchot is particularly exemplary in this regard.

¹²² As well as Adorno and Josipovici, see also T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2001).

depended on its success in making that dictum specific and punctual'.¹²³ Following Beckett's famous lines, the 'can't go on, will go on' syndrome described by Clark, we could say that modernist aesthetics are characterised by a fraught tension as well as a permanent crisis of expression. To what extent is this sense of tension present, or deflated, in Krauss and Bois's reading of Bataille? A clarification of their account of the autonomization of art is first required to answer this.

The story of art's autonomization is a familiar one to both late modernist and postmodernist cultural history. For modernism, the referent's relationship to the sign is bracketed, its arbitrary relationship underlined, while for postmodernism we could say that the link is often severed, releasing the sign from any relation with referent.¹²⁴ The history of art and literature however, is not a simple, straight-forward and 'natural' evolution into a greater and greater abstraction. For Krauss, and many others, this is one of the problems of Greenberg's account of modernism: abstract modernism comes to signify the teleological endpoint of modernism, abstraction depicted as a 'natural', autonomous and puritan state, missing the sense of contingency and conflict within artistic modernism. Krauss shares Greenberg's appreciation of the autonomy of the artwork, for abstraction.¹²⁵ She attempts to disentangle this from a historicist narrative however.¹²⁶ Her neglect of historical concerns in artistic analysis, the priority of the horizontal over the vertical axis in her structuralist perspective, exemplifies to some extent Fredric Jameson's descriptions of postmodernism as characterised by a 'spatial turn' in contrast to modernism 'whose experience of temporality –

¹²³ T.J. Clarke, 'In Defence of Abstract Expressionism', *October: The Second Decade*, ed. by Rosalind Krauss and others (London: M.I.T Press, 1997), p.51.

¹²⁴ Here I am drawing on some of the dominant accounts of postmodernism including Fredric Jameson as well as Hal Foster who writes, similarly, 'the referent is abstracted in high modernism, as in the characteristic non-objectivity of its art and architecture, then the signified is released in postmodernism, as in our media world of simulacral images (Baudrillard) and schizophrenic signifiers (Jameson)'. Foster, *The Return of the Real* (London: M.I. T. Press, 1996), p.76.

¹²⁵ And this is reflected not only in the style of criticism but the subjects examined: sculpture, photography and abstract art. Figurative art is rarely of interest.

¹²⁶ Similarly, Krauss's formal and methodological priorities are posited in direct contradistinction to Greenberg's concern with the 'value' of the artwork. See Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, p.2.

existential time, along with deep memory – it is henceforth conventional to see as a dominant of the high modern'.¹²⁷

The 'pastiche' which Jameon identifies as characteristic of postmodern culture and the abstraction which characterises Greenbergian modernism share a common deficit of historicity. The liberation of the sign from the referent in postmodern culture, as described by Jameson, goes hand in hand with a waning of historicity. The experience of culture within postmodernism is characterised by an evasion of historical weight.¹²⁸ However, the weight of history, and the contingency of the present, is also elided in simple historicism. In this sense we might highlight a useful distinction between teleological historicism and historical materialism.¹²⁹ In the former, history is reduced to a race-track with a determinate end point, in its art-history version as a simple evolution towards abstraction. The latter emphasises the uncertainty of any one historical moment and the various potentialities that could result from it. As Peter Osborne writes in *The Politics of Time*, to historicize, in a general sense, entails rendering a moment historical, i.e. contingent, whereas as historicism is more generally conceived a 'reduction to the *relativity* of a *chronologically defined* historical moment'.¹³⁰

Krauss's acute critique of Greenberg's historicism would nevertheless be complemented by a more pronounced sense of contingent historicity in her co-authored work

¹²⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.154. This refers to a broad cultural shift and my claim here is not that cultural and political change can simply be mapped onto theoretical and artistic production, or that the latter is a simple reflection of the former, but that the latter is always, in some sense, *marked* and strongly influenced by the former.

¹²⁸ We might compare this to more recent criticism which has argued that Jameson's arguments are even more relevant today, especially in relation to popular music. For the critics Simon Reynolds and Mark Fisher, who are discussed in the final chapter, contemporary music culture has lost its sense of 'future shock' and its historical specificity, as the uses of retro and nostalgia in dance and pop music have surpassed the self-referentiality, or bracketing, implied in postmodern pastiche. For Fisher, in particular, postmodern pastiche might have some awareness of its sources, but contemporary music recycles previous styles but with less and less awareness, from both producer and listener, of any of the historical specificity from which they emerged. See Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life : Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester : Zero, 2014) and Simon Reynolds, *Retromania : Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (London : Faber and Faber, 2012).

¹²⁹ Walter Benjamin's essay 'Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian' is useful on this point. Benjamin explains that a historical materialism, in its historicization, seeks to blast an epoch out of the 'reified continuity' to which historicism confines it. See Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 3, 1935-1938 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), p.262 (260-302).

¹³⁰ Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time* (London: Verso, 1995), p.126. The emphasis is mine. Chronologically conceived, this version of historicism does not question its own historiographical assumptions.

with Bois. The emphasis upon contingency is evident in Krauss's transition from *Modernist Myths* to the *Optical Unconscious*. Her critique of historicism is not just that it domesticates the new. She is attentive to its inadequacy as a claim to be historical. As she notes in *Modernist Myths* 'art history proceeds as if there were nothing at all going on in the domain of historiography, no questions being raised, no serious examinations of the role of cause'.¹³¹ With *Formless* however, as noted above, historiography and the precariousness of any one claim to 'outsideness' are of less interest, particularly in Bois's account which embraces the *informe* 'far from its origin'.

This tendency towards theoretical separation I have described also has a tendency to deflate the tension constitutive of radical modernism and the fraught tensions, the 'angoisse' of Bataille's text described by Maurice Blanchot in the introduction and pointed towards, in different terms, by Didi-Huberman's dialectical account of *informe*. Here, Gabriel Josipovici's work can illuminate how the 'angoisse' of Bataille's text relates to a broader field of modernism characterised by specific fraught tensions. Using the novels of Robbe-Grillet to make a broader point about his reading of modernism, Josipovici expresses disappointment with Robbe-Grillet's later novels since they lack the tension characteristic of his earlier novels. Josipovici explains, with passing reference to Krauss:

It is as if he had suddenly discovered the free circulation of the sign, to use Rosalind Krauss's terminology, had made it possible for him to do anything he wished, and henceforth he does just that – but at the cost of leaving us indifferent to what he is doing, leaving us, in effect, just as Bacon described himself left by abstract art, bored by the lack of tensions.¹³²

The target of my critique in readings of the *informe* have been precisely those moments which too easily embrace abstraction and become striking for their 'lack of tension'. As opposed to the suspension of a modernist quasi-dialectical tension, the disavowal of either

¹³¹ Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*, p.241.

¹³² Gabriel Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?*, pp.123-4.

historical or theoretical contradictions (dissemblance/resemblance) resolves the conflictual aspect of the *informe* a little too neatly in abstraction. Didi-Huberman's insistence on the paradoxes of reaching for dissemblance but being dependent upon resemblance to do so is not a debilitating hesitation, but a reminder of the internal conflict and tension which drives an operation like *informe*. The fraught paradox highlighted by Didi-Huberman does not entail the 'closure' which Krauss and Bois attribute to dialectical thinking but accentuates the productive aspects of the *informe*. The lack of tension I have highlighted in moments of Bois and Krauss not only results in the kind of aesthetic dissatisfaction felt by Josopivici when confronted by pure abstraction, but also leads into problematic conceptual territory: in an anti-dialectical affirmation of difference, in not taking more space to think difference's intrinsic and complex relationship with identity, the *informe* is in danger of becoming an identity all of its own against Krauss and Bois's intentions, as Hal Foster suggests. What was meant to resist system becomes susceptible to a counter-system.

Chapter Conclusion

In closing this chapter, a return to Derrida's reading of Bataille will help illuminate my reading of Bataille's *informe* as a unique iteration of a modernist tension, a reading which is largely opened up by the ground-breaking work of the *October* critics but is at the same time often compromised by a logic of separation and exclusion in their work. This loose conceptual opposition between an aesthetics of tension versus one of abstraction mirrors the opposition in the French reception of Bataille I referred to between a Derridean aesthetics of contamination and tendency towards purity exemplified in certain readings of Barthes covered at the beginning of the chapter.

In Derrida's essay on Bataille one of the central preoccupations is whether sovereign operations are possible anymore, whether one can ever really escape the logic of totalizing discourses and systems. One possibility, he says, and he emphasises that it is only a

possibility with an italicized '*peut-etre*', might be the form of 'major writing' which Bataille sometimes exhibits, as referred to at the beginning of this chapter. Here is a crucial passage in which he ponders that possibility while quoting Bataille:

Peut-être par l'écriture majeure: 'J'écris pour annuler en moi-même un jeu d'opérations subordonnées (c'est, somme toute, superflu)' (Méthode de méditation). *Peut-être* seulement, et 'c'est, somme toute, superflu', car cette écriture ne doit nous assurer de rien, elle ne nous donne aucune certitude, aucun résultat, aucun bénéfice. Elle est absolument aventureuse, c'est une chance et non une technique.¹³³

This hesitation could be taken as another example of a typical Derridean equivocation, but it is precisely in that equivocation, of refusing any complacent confidence in the efficacy of aesthetic practice, the persistent pre-occupation with the burden of tradition as well as the recuperability of totalizing discourses and systems, that crucially differentiates it from an unquestioning affirmation of difference or transgression. Krauss and Bois become too confident in the transgressive efficacy of their iteration of the *informe*. Reading Bataille via Barthes, Krauss writes of the semiotic chain of signifiers at work in *Histoire de l'œil* constitute, a 'combinatoire [...] a machine for the production of images' and maps this onto her reading of artistic transgression. Contra Derrida's reading above, she comes to emphasise technique above chance, with a confidence in the transgressive legitimacy of the results, in a manner uncharacteristic of relentless self-questioning and uncertainty emblematic of a Bataillean modernism.

Another striking thing about the Derrida essay is the emphasis upon the burden of tradition. In this case the specific tradition he's referring to is 'Hegel'. He asks why has the influence of Hegel upon Bataille been so 'lightly borne':

Si légère qu'une allusion murmurée à tels concepts fondamentaux - ce prétexte parfois, à ne pas faire le détail -, une complaisance dans la convention, un aveuglement au texte, un appel à la complicité nietzschéenne ou marxienne suffisent à en défaire la contrainte. C'est peut-etre que l'évidence serait trop lourde à supporter et qu'on préfère alors le haussement d'épaules à la discipline. Et à l'inverse de ce que fit

¹³³ Derrida, *L'Arc*, 32 (1967), p.42.

Bataille, c'est pour être, sans le savoir et sans la voir, *dans* l'évidence hegelienne, qu'on croit souvent s'en être délesté.¹³⁴

We could substitute 'history' or 'tradition' for the word 'Hegel' in relation to that passage and a similar point would stand as a riposte to the *October* readings I have explored: that if the conditions for embracing a breakdown of form, or a breakthrough to abstraction, are not carefully borne, then the evasion of historical weight and contradiction we saw with Bois in particular lends itself susceptible to new contradictions and 'counter-systems'. The emphasis upon historical weight is not a retreat from new readings, or a plea to territorialisation and authenticity, but an argument for the necessary burdens to be traversed in order to affirm the new. These issues come to the fore in reading Bataille in our examination of the 'historical turn' in the following chapter.

¹³⁴ Derrida, *L'Arc*, 32, p. 24.

Chapter Three – ‘Un Bataille différent’: The Historical Turn

The previous chapter has considered the initial academic reception of Bataille's work through ‘French Theory’ with particular focus on the *October* journal. While arguing for the formally innovative ‘conceptual contamination’ with which critics such as Rosalind Krauss read Bataille, it also explored how some critical readings at *October*, particularly by Yve-Alain Bois, often neglected, or showed an aversion to, historical and political issues. This chapter traces a sharply contrasting scene of reception in which historical issues were the focal point. I argue that the emergence of historical readings of Bataille in Anglo-American academia finds a significant pre-cursor and influence in Jean-Luc Nancy's work on the theme of community. However, the Anglo-American academics examined often share an aversion to a poststructuralism or ‘theory’, and are thus antithetical to Nancy in many other respects. I use Nancy's work to critique the implied separation between ‘theory’ and ‘history’ in the Anglo-America readings explored.

The historical scene of reception is especially exemplified by the work of critics such as Allan Stoekl and Michèle Richman, and to some extent later critics such as Andrew Hussey and Michael Richardson. It includes the first Anglophone academic book published on Bataille, Richman's *Reading Georges Bataille* (1982), Stoekl's *Agonies of the Intellectual* (1992), and includes later work in the nineties such as *The Absence of Myth* (1994) and *Georges Bataille* (1994) by Michael Richardson as well as Andrew Hussey's *The Inner Scar* (2000). Special attention will be given to two review specials which exemplify the climax and consolidation of an historical perspective, the *Stanford French Review*, 12, special issue on Bataille in 1988 and the *Yale French Studies*, 78, issue in 1990. It will also involve reference to non-Anglophone readers of Bataille, such as Jean-Michel Besnier and Marina Galletti, who have similarly emphasised the importance of the historical.

The diverse Anglo-American readings of Bataille share a sense of dissatisfaction with, and in some cases an outright antipathy towards, Bataille's reception through 'theory', in counterpoint with a renewed emphasis upon 'history'. The historical readings react against Bataille's posthumous reception, whether it is broadly characterised as being read through 'post-structuralism', 'theory' or 'postmodernism'. There is a renewed desire to situate his work within its original historical context, and Bataille thus becomes realigned with the surrealists. Historicist critics seek to separate Bataille from his successors not only historically but ethically and politically. This heavy emphasis on Bataille's marginality to, or separation from, a posthumous generation of theorists generates a moralizing discourse which seeks to separate Bataille from a 'bad' postmodernism, one which rarely receives an adequate definition.

The historicists criticise postmodern thought primarily for its apparent rejection of history. However, at the same time they often fail to address historiographical issues and conflate postmodern critiques of teleological conceptions of history with a simple outright dismissal of history. This mistaken assumption, in which the historicists do not adequately address historiographical problems, leads to the reassertion of often simplistic and outmoded models of literary-historical analysis in reading Bataille. Thus while I argue that this scene of reception brings essential historical and political issues to the fore of Bataille reception, it does so in a deeply problematic manner that leads to theoretical contradictions which I will examine in the latter half of the chapter. The chapter concludes by underlining the surprisingly overlapping treatment of Bataille's 'marginality' and outsider status in both historicist and postmodern readings, despite their antipathy in most other respects.

Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée* and the Origins of the ‘Historical Turn’

Since the beginning of the eighties the theme of community has occupied an important place within contemporary continental theory, largely stemming from three central books: Maurice Blanchot's *La Communauté inavouable* (1983), Jean-Luc Nancy's *La Communauté désœuvrée* (1986) and Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community* (1990). Each of these major studies paid considerable attention to the spectre of totalitarianism in their theories of community and the first two were largely concerned with the work of Bataille. Nancy's work was instrumental in the turn towards community. His 1986 book was a development of an essay he had published early in 1983 for *Aléa* no.4 which influenced Blanchot to write his book as a response.

The turn towards community was not coincidental but was intimately bound up with a specific historical and geopolitical context. In *La Communauté désavouée* (2014), Nancy tells us that this theoretical turn ‘naissait, sans aucun hasard, de l'épuisement de ce qu'on avait nommé le “communisme réel” et mettait en jeu la pensée que ce “réel” avait défigurée’.¹ The last decade of the Soviet Union and the feeling that this was a period marked by a ‘fermeture irréversible du communisme historique’ demanded a reconsideration of the questions of community and communism according to Nancy.² The essay which became *La Communauté désœuvrée* was written at the end of one year of teaching classes on diverse theories of community centred on the work of Bataille.³ It also emerged against the backdrop of Nancy's involvement, along with co-founder Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, in the ‘Centre de Recherches Philosophiques sur le Politique’ based at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris between 1980 and 1984. The centre took as its initial theme the concept of the ‘retrait du politique’. ‘Ce travail’, Nancy tells us, ‘était en somme parallèle à celui qui vint ensuite sur la communauté: mais, en un sens, ces parallèles ne se rejoignaient pas et témoignaient

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désavouée* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2014), p.14.

² Nancy, *La Communauté désavouée*, p.15.

³ See Nancy, *La Communauté désavouée* p.22.

précisément de l'impossibilité de fonder une politique sur une communauté bien comprise tout autant que de définir une communauté à partir d'une politique supposé vraie ou juste'.⁴

The word 'communauté', Nancy tells us, had a febrile existence during the previous twenty years. The events of 1968 formed a pivot in this adventure of 'community' but the radicalism of that moment seemed markedly distant at the turn of the eighties. The attention to the theme of community emerges from a preoccupation with the political, but also equally attests, as the above quote suggests, to an increasing sense of pessimism that is specific both to the intellectual milieu of the French Left as well as the broader geo-political imaginary. Soviet Communism, for Nancy, showed that 'communism' was no longer the unsurpassable horizon of the epoch. The grim outcomes of actually existing Soviet Communism attested to more than a simple betrayal of an idea but suggested for Nancy and others that there was always a latent totalitarianism inscribed within the word and idea of communism itself. In this sense, Nancy turned to Bataille to rethink the political beyond the confines of communism, fascism or liberal capitalism. He finds parallels with Bataille's moment and his contemporary moment. One of the more interesting parallels is in reconsidering Bataille's thoughts on political betrayal in light of the trajectory of Soviet Communism. Nancy highlights Bataille's early perception of communism as an insufficient concept of liberation:

Bataille a tout d'abord connu l'épreuve du communisme 'trahi'. Il découvrit plus tard que cette trahison n'avait pas à être corrigée ou rattrapée, mais que le communisme, s'étant donné l'homme pour fin, la production de l'homme et de l'homme producteur, était lié dans son principe à une négation de la souveraineté de l'homme.⁵

The centrality of work and a vision of man as occupying an instrumental role in productive expenditure implied that communism was not necessarily 'trahi' but was compromised from the beginning. The insufficiency of 'communism' is inscribed within its very etymology as Nancy argues in his theory of community. In dialogue with Bataille's work, Nancy develops

⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté affrontée* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), pp.31-2.

⁵ Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1999), pp.44-5.

an account of community which gives primacy to the relational. Community which is defined as a substance, an essence or a unified body entails a closure. This kind of community will necessarily lead to unpleasant and oppressive forms of exclusion. A community which conceives itself on this basis attempts to eliminate difference. The etymological dissatisfaction with the word communism thus arises from its implied unification in one body, a sense of *being* as common. A relational account of community would rather insist on the absence of any defining substance or body. Community would be formed from a being in common, a sharing of a *lack of* identity over any assertion of a common identity. For both Bataille and Nancy, communication takes place in a space beyond the particularity of subjects. Nancy's literary communism is not the proposal of a new myth but a call for community that operates on its very absence. The only way to maintain a possibility of total inclusion that avoids the projection of external violence is to renounce any possibility of the community's self-enclosure, by constantly affirming the lack at the heart of community, the absence it is based on.

The version of Bataille Nancy was drawing on was that of the immediate post-war period in which a critical distance from his pre-war activities was evident. Where Bataille's nostalgia for 'communion' had led him to actually experiment with idea of human sacrifice with the secret society *Acéphale*, Nancy's post-war Bataille was more attuned to community as an 'impossible' experience, to the necessity to consider myth from the perspective of an 'absence of myth' in an implicit critique of lingering nostalgia for pre-modern forms of the sacred. While Nancy regularly evoked Bataille's dilemmas in the face of fascism throughout the nineteen thirties, he more often cited from the postwar texts with which his own work bore a closer affinity. Bataille, he says, 'comprit ainsi la nature dérisoire de toutes les nostalgies de la communion'.⁶ Nancy later clarified his perspective in *La Communauté*

⁶ Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, p.47.

désavouée (2014), writing ‘Je négligeais, dans ce texte, le Bataille des années de Contre-attaque puis d’Acéphale car il m’avait semblé qu’alors avait été éprouvée la limite d’une exigence de communion sociale [...] Suivant le mouvement de Bataille dans les années 1950, je devais enregistrer l’abandon de toute affirmation qu’on aurait pu dire “communiste”’.⁷

However Nancy, like Bataille, is equivocal and ambivalent on the communist point. In the original text he wrote that despite reservations, Bataille was haunted by the ‘motif obscur mais persistant que du côté du communisme, malgré tout, s’était enfuie la promesse communautaire’, undermining his assertion of completely abandoning communism.⁸ Nevertheless Nancy says that from *La Souveraineté* onwards, the notion of community becomes more indistinct and this is partly due to the effect of ‘une extrémité de l’épreuve du monde dans lequel il vit – ce monde que déchira, avec la guerre, une négation atroce de la communauté et un embrasement mortel de l’extase’. Such a world was haunted by both the absence of any transcendental point of reference for community and marked by the fact that the ‘figure trop humaine du communisme’ had crumbled. ‘D’une certaine façon, ce monde est toujours le nôtre’, he says, looking back to Bataille’s politics of despair in order to consider the contemporary political impasses.⁹ Nancy says he was reading Bataille during this period searching for something he could not give him, and most likely that no one could: ‘je cherchais une politique’.¹⁰ The historicist readings in Anglo-American academia I examine here are often guided by a similar concern for the political. A thorough exploration of the theme of community and the precise coordinates of Bataille’s influence on Nancy, Blanchot, Agamben and others is beyond the scope of this analysis. I am concerned rather with a turn towards an historical portrait of Bataille within his Anglo-American academic reception and the attempts to politicise his work in dialogue with the contemporary moment.

⁷ Nancy, *La Communauté désavouée*, p.31.

⁸ Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, p.59.

⁹ Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, p.58.

¹⁰ Nancy, *La Communauté désavouée*, p.31.

These developments need to be understood in light of Nancy's preoccupation with thinking community and the political which often stressed the importance of understanding Bataille's work from a somewhat neglected historical perspective. This 'historical scene' of reception marks a clear break with the perspective of *October* discussed in the last chapter. As stated above, Nancy's choice of texts are largely those from the post-war period, texts which depict a much greater sympathy to and affinity with the Surrealist movement. While citing from a large range of texts across his work the critics who advocate a more historical Bataille follow Nancy's lead here, often arguing for an even closer affinity with the surrealists.

The 'Historical Turn' in Anglo-American Academia

Around the same period as Nancy's initial writings on community in the early eighties, the first Anglo-American academic work on Bataille was produced, Michèle Richman's *Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the Gift* (1982). Richman is a Professor of Romance Languages and her interest in Bataille has primarily been from a social, historical and political perspective. Her later book *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie* (2002), for example, argued for the importance of the Collège de Sociologie's work on social effervescence in relation to the political. The chapter headings of her first book are marked by typical Bataillean themes such as 'Sovereignty' and 'Transgression' but with a final section which stands out from the rest, 'Reading Bataille in History'. Her engagement with Derrida in this chapter is much more patient and sensitive than many of the sweeping 'anti-postmodern' perspectives discussed later in this chapter. However, there is an opposition set up in Richman's writing which frames history in opposition to post-structuralism, and this exemplifies an early iteration of the historical scene of reception. In this way her writing bears a distinct difference to the *October* critics in a number of respects. Where the *October* critics often depicted Bataille as a complete adversary of the surrealists, Richman points towards his alignment, quoting the passage 'I situate my effort in the path of, and alongside,

those of the surrealists'.¹¹ Where *October* often amalgamated Bataille's thought with contemporary *aesthetic* theoretical developments, Richman repeatedly insists on situating Bataille within the *socio-historical* epoch of inter-war France.¹² Where the *October* critics were strongly influenced by a structuralist view of literature which problematized stable historical grounding, Richman in contrast suggests that Bataille's approach to literature took place firmly within a historical and social dialectic, and that such factors must be primary considerations in approaching his work. Consider for example, her atypical depiction of *La Littérature et le mal*:

The reflections of *La Littérature et le mal* are those of a mature man for whom age has only sharpened the passions of the youth convinced that literature bears within it the hope of revolution. Its confines are coextensive with social constraints: 'It is not a question of verbal limits, but of real, social limits' (II, 73).¹³

Where *écriture*, as discussed in the last chapter, represented a challenge to conventional expressions of opposition, an 'ailleurs' with conflicting implications, Richman reads Bataille in much more explicitly political terms. Moreover, she does not only cite texts from the thirties which would more easily fit with a political narrative. Where Bataille's postwar trajectory is often depicted as depoliticising, she argues that his writing, even if centred around literature or aesthetics, remains explicitly political. Her reading of Bataille's view of literature is one which stresses the potential for an impact upon social and political realities *beyond* and *outside* the space of the text. Richman's emphasis on historical context and her departure from structuralist textual readings is made explicitly clear when she concludes:

Furthermore, the readings of Sartre and Derrida indicate that the evaluation of the general economy, effected through the interplay between limits and transgressions

¹¹ Bataille (*OC* V, 193) quoted in Michèle Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the Gift* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p.126.

¹² See, for example: 'In a review of Jules Monnerot's "Les Faits sociaux ne sont pas des choses" Bataille identifies himself with the generation that attained maturity between the two world wars and that distinguished itself by its consciousness that "society" was not fixed, but a product of historical change', Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille*, p.43. This perspective becomes more pronounced in later writing, such as the essay discussed below, 'Bataille Moralism? Critique and the postwar Writings' in *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), 143-68.

¹³ Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille*, p.137.

determining the Batailleian anthropology, cannot be confined to the microcosm of textual comparisons indifferent to the broader perspectives of a historical analysis.¹⁴

The historical approach advocated by Richman becomes the defining feature of an intellectual scene chiefly emanating from two review specials on Bataille, the 1988 *Stanford French Review* special, and the 1990 *Yale French Studies* special. Nancy, whose essay 'Exscription' featured in the latter review, described the critical blindspot which the historicists attempted to correct when he wrote 'Dans l'intérêt, malgré tout encore trop mince (quand il ne fut pas frivole) qu'on a porté à sa pensée, on n'a pas encore assez remarqué à quel point elle était issue d'une exigence et d'une inquiétude politiques – ou bien, d'une exigence et d'une inquiétude au sujet du politique, et que commandait la pensée de la communauté.'¹⁵

The historico-political exigencies referenced by Nancy were what Allan Stoekl most heavily emphasised in his introduction to *Visions of Excess* (1985), which contextualised Bataille's thought in relation to the nineteen thirties and was thus a key moment in the historical turn. In the introduction to the volume Stoekl astutely notes that Bataille's text is bicephalic and leads in two opposing directions (social and asocial) at the same time. Stoekl concludes 'This is a choice that Bataille himself refused to make. And in the current "end of history" the labor of the "recognition" of unrecognizable negativity has just begun.'¹⁶ The consideration of new narratives around an 'end of history', which Stoekl points towards here often informs an especial interest in Bataille's political engagements during the thirties across many readings in the 'historical turn'.

¹⁴ Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille*, p.152.

¹⁵ Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, p.44.

¹⁶ Allan Stoekl, 'Introduction' in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1985), p.xxiii.

‘Un Bataille différent’

The 1988 Stanford French Review special on Bataille consolidates this historical turn. In the introduction, Jean-François Fourny tells the reader that Bataille has fascinated ‘notre modernité’ for nearly twenty-five years. The duration of this fascination is, he claims, ‘à la fois peu et beaucoup. C’est peu, parce que Bataille, contrairement à ses rivaux les plus immédiats, on pourrait ici citer André Breton ou Jean-Paul Sartre, a longtemps souffert du faux départ réservé aux “oustiders”’.¹⁷ This issue dedicated to Bataille, the first Anglo-American review dedicated to him since an *October* special in 1986, continued to underline a portrait of Bataille as marginal in every sense, evident in Fourny’s opening remarks. We get a view of Bataille as marginal in relation to the French literary establishment, in relation to philosophical thought, in relation to his reception as a ‘poète maudite’, even marginal in a socio-geographical sense when Fourny highlights Bataille’s provincial background and training as a Chartist, in contrast to the education through the grands lycées of Paris and l’École Normale Supérieure which many of his intellectual rivals had. The focus on marginality and inassimilable excess in relation to every orthodox intellectual position and status quo has been a marked feature of Bataille’s reception, as I have argued in relation to earlier treatment of his work. In the introduction Fourny goes on to note the many versions of Bataille that have been disseminated. During the sixties Bataille’s initial posthumous reception was characterised, for Fourny, in terms of its erotic aspects, as ‘un grand libérateur du corps et du désir’. It was also during this period, he tells the reader, that the first texts of Foucault on Bataille emerged. He writes that ‘Nous entrons ici dans la zone froide et abstraite de la “science” du discours, où le jeu de balance de l’interdit et de la transgression se réduit à un mécanisme dont il est à peine possible de parler si ce n’est pour le constater’.¹⁸ Fourny is not concerned with Bataille’s connections to sexual liberation nor the philosophical

¹⁷ Jean-François Fourny, ‘Introduction: comme un soleil noir’, *Stanford French Review*, 12 (1988), p.5.

¹⁸ Fourny, *Stanford French Review*, 12, p.7.

associations with structuralism and post-structuralism. Equally, Fourny notes that within Bataille's own lifetime his work underwent an apolitical turn testified by his post-war endeavours: rather than social groups like the Collège de Sociologie, he became focused on more solely intellectual, erudite endeavours such as the review *Critique*. In contrast to all these versions of Bataille, Fourny tells us that he is concerned with a different version. Partially thanks to Denis Hollier's work on the Collège de Sociologie he notes the discovery of 'un Bataille différent dont on n'avait jusqu'ici assez peu parlé, tant que les philosophies du désir occupaient le devant de la scène'.¹⁹ He describes current Bataille studies in America as being in the process of a renaissance, 'à laquelle le Bataille de la grande époque, c'est-à-dire les années trente, attachent tant d'importance'.

The Social and Ethical Imperative

Fourny's introduction shows yet again how Bataille's appeal across varying intellectual scenes is bound up with its marginal 'outsider' status. However, this particular emphasis on a historical perspective is unique to this scene, and given Fourny's delineation between a political and apolitical Bataille, the *Stanford French Review*'s particular focus on the nineteen thirties shows that the historical turn is bound up with a desire to repoliticise Bataille while positing itself in opposition to 'les philosophies du désir', in other words most thinkers associated with French Theory referenced at *Semiotext(e)* and *October*. The principal critics of the historical turn all make the nineteen thirties their focal point: Michèle Richman's essay in this review and her book focus on Bataille at the Collège de Sociologie, Marina Galletti's essay discusses Bataille's politics during the nineteen thirties and her major work on Bataille, *L'Apprenti sorcier*, is a collection of unpublished documents related to Bataille's engagements during the decade, as Stoekl's edition of *Visions of Excess* similarly focuses upon.²⁰

¹⁹ Fourny, *Stanford French Review*, 12, p.8.

²⁰ Marina Galletti, 'Masses: A Failed Collège', *Stanford French Review*, 12 (1988), 49-73.

Michèle Richmans's article for the *Stanford French Review*, 'Introduction to the Collège de Sociologie: Poststructuralism before its Time?' attempts to problematize any simple alignment of Bataille with poststructuralism. She points towards a sympathetic view of surrealism, quoting Bataille's appraisal of 'the originality of a movement that revised communication through a break with the instrumentality of language'.²¹ The previously understated proximity between Bataille and surrealism is again suggested, while she also warns against eliding 'the historical context' of the Collège when appropriating their ideas.²² The historical context she refers to is centred on anti-fascism and the mobilizations and failures of the left in 1930s France. Richman's essay, along with three others in the volume,²³ is characterised by this historical emphasis, best summarised by Marina Galletti's insistence that Bataille's political thought must be reconsidered in more problematic terms, 'above all, relative to its historical context'.²⁴

Just as Stoekl tends to emphasise the social over the asocial in Bataille's bicephalic text, Richman feels that the social aspects of his thought have not survived its poststructuralist reception. She wonders sceptically 'to what extent has the centrality of social thought, including the possibility for community, survived in Bataille's legacy to poststructuralism?'.²⁵ She argues that the Collège's notion of sacred sociology in some respects pre-empts the poststructuralist critique of Lévi-Strauss's 'codified exchange of signs' posited as a grounding of culture. The community, she explains, 'engendered by a sacrificial economy of expenditure is *dés-œuvrée* (Nancy 1983) as it constantly renews and repeats its sacrifice, thereby undermining the restricted economy that invests its signs exchanged in the

²¹ Michèle Richman, 'Introduction to the Collège de Sociologie: Poststructuralism before its Time?', *Stanford French Review*, 12 (1988), p.80.

²² Richman, *Stanford French Review*, 12, p.80.

²³ Essays by Marina Galletti, Allan Stoekl and Jean-Michel Heimonet all explicitly emphasise the importance of historical context in their examinations.

²⁴ Galletti, *Stanford French Review*, 12, p.50.

²⁵ Richman, *Stanford French Review*, 12, p.93.

form of goods, words, and women'.²⁶ The Collège is thus dissonant with Durkheimian sociology and structuralism but according to Richman, its legacy is also antagonistic in relation to post-structuralism for while it has much theoretically in common, it has a social basis overlooked in the latter philosophy. In this respect, Richman stresses 'communion, communication, and community' as inescapable corollaries to 'the meditations on sovereignty and expenditure', again emphasising the social against the asocial aspects. She is also more optimistic about the sustained importance of the political in his thought. Where Fourny delineated an apolitical Bataille, and Nancy was equivocal about Bataille's relation to communism, Richman is keen to stress the persistent importance: 'Well into the 'fifties, Bataille even considered the relevance of communism as a way to complete his speculations. And despite his disillusionment with the political realities labelled communist, the possibility of communism as an ethical opposition to the values fostered by capitalism nonetheless held a special appeal'.²⁷

Richman's critique and the sources she uses leave her in a somewhat compromised position. In the above quote she employs Nancy's notion of 'désœuvrement' as a critique of structuralism, but her further critique of post-structuralism's neglect of the importance of the social for Bataille is partially based on terminology and ideas derived from Nancy, a post-structuralist. We can see here a critical tendency to create a split between poststructuralism and history, as if the historical is exterior to, or beyond, poststructuralist criticism. The tension is only implicit and subtle within Richman's sensitive reading which resists any polemical tone but the essay provides a germinal version of a tendency that will become prominent in the culmination of this 'historical turn' as an 'anti-postmodernist' reading orientation: the deployment of 'History' *against* postmodernism and the critics explored in

²⁶ Richman, *Stanford French Review*, 12, p.87.

²⁷ Richman, *Stanford French Review*, 12, p.91.

this chapter frequently deploy the historical as an alternative to poststructuralist readings.²⁸ The consolidation of a binary choice between ‘History and/or Theory’ in Bataille reception is one which will be challenged later in this chapter.

Richman notes at the end of the essay that one can counter Habermas’s pointed attack on Bataille ‘by insisting on the revised notions of collectivity, *communitas*, and communication suggested above’. Richman, like the other thinkers of Bataille’s historical reception, accepts Habermas’s basic narrative but wishes to rescue Bataille and place him apart.²⁹ Habermas’s argument in this respect was that Bataille was a postmodernist before his time. Richman, Stoekl, Galletti, Fourny and later Richardson and Hussey counter this by situating Bataille within his own epoch and argue that Bataille had less in common with the generation of ‘postmodernism’ than commonly claimed. However, they are all accepting the basic narrative put forward by critics such as Jürgen Habermas, a moralizing one which suggests that postmodernism is simply ‘bad’ and inter-war modernism is ‘good’. Richman, with more nuance, is attempting to conduct an active trans-historical dialogue between the problems facing the Collège in the thirties and those facing the contemporary moment of writing. The social backdrop of each historical moment of writing, notes Richman, ‘may impede balanced evaluations’, as she considers the parallels between the political turmoil of the thirties and those of the eighties.³⁰ These readings thus show a dialectical progression in the reception of Bataille: on the one hand they are giving vital consideration to the neglected political aspects of Bataille’s work and sometimes make a conscious effort to resist illusions of historical objectivity, as Richman does in the above quote. On the other hand, many readings within the historical turn do not consider poststructuralist critiques of historical teleology, often do not question their own historiography, and betray nostalgia for a pre-

²⁸ Postmodernism here is used in the broad manner it is often employed by critics to encapsulate the thinkers of French Theory and post-structuralism.

²⁹ See Jürgen Habermas, ‘The French Path to Postmodernity: Bataille between Eroticism and General Economics’, *New German Critique*, 33 (1984), 79-102.

³⁰ Richman, *Stanford French Review*, 12, p.94.

postmodern intellectual world. A dialectical inversion of the blindspots identified in the last chapter occurs in these readings then: where Bois severed the *informe* from any context or conditions of its emergence, where he ‘deterritorialized’ the text, a historicist reading would wish to ‘reterritorialize’ it by putting it in its place. This response should be partially understood in the context of an Anglo-American reaction to French theory, or ‘postmodernism’ for some commentators. Within that reaction which generated sometimes conservative and reactionary readings, there were also useful correctives and sophisticated political readings which both affirmed the textual adventure (following Derrida in the last chapter), while at the same time not disavowing the conditions of emergence for the text. Against historicism, this would have more in common with a historical materialism in which the compromised position of the present is considered in dialogue with the past.

‘La communauté était un mot alors ignoré du discours de la pensée’: The Impact of Nancy on the Historical turn

Maintaining Bataille as a marginal and potent thinker has often entailed enlarging the scope of the political. In relation to the turn from politics exemplified by Acéphale, Marina Galletti has recently argued in *Revue des deux mondes* (2012) that ‘plus que d’abandon de la politique, il faudrait parler à propos d’Acéphale d’une modalité ultérieure de l’engagement politique de Bataille, ou, plus précisément, d’un déplacement qui se produit, ainsi que l’écrit Jean-Michel Besnier, comme “collusion du politique et du religieux”’.³¹ Few critics would contest Galletti’s well-founded assertion: just as Bataille showed the religious roots of fascism, his involvement with the secret society Acéphale and the Collège de Sociologie’s interests in religion and secret societies were clearly not divorced from the political.³² The historical readings often involve expanding conceptions of what constitutes the ‘political’.

³¹ Marina Galletti, ‘Autour de la société secrète Acéphale : Lettres inédites de Bataille à Carrouges’, *Revue des deux mondes* (2012), p.126. See the preceding chapter for a discussion of this point in relation to Jean-Michel Besnier’s analysis of the political in Bataille.

³² Similarly, Andrew Wernick has argued for a political reading of *Acéphale* as a ‘strategic’, symbolic move towards sacrifice : ‘This move in turn, it was hoped, would trigger others, summoning up the energies deemed

The 1990 *Yale French Studies* review contains a section entitled 'The Political and Social Imperative' with an essay by Michèle Richman entitled 'Bataille Moralist?: Critique and the post-war writings'. This essay focuses on Bataille's advocacy of persistent rebellion/insurrection in favour of revolution. In contrast to Roger Caillois, his contemporary at the Collège de Sociologie, Bataille's writing consistently demonstrates his suspicion and distrust of all forms of power, revolutionary or otherwise. The essay goes on to again challenge the view of Bataille as being apolitical in the post-war period as opposed to politically engaged before. Richman does this by arguing first that Bataille's 'inner experience' is not characterised by any retreat to interiority, a relatively indisputable claim. While much of Bataille's writings concerned with 'inner experience' came out of solitary meditation, the aim was for nothing less than a splitting apart of the subject, an opening up to what is beyond the individual self in order to communicate with the other.

However, given the noticeable lack of engagement with groups resembling the Collège de Sociologie in the postwar period, as well as the fact that his vision of community from that group onwards is often theorised in terms of small communities of artists and lovers rather than the broader *socius*, it becomes more difficult to argue that Bataille was a consistently political thinker. For Richman, however, a social imperative underpinned everything he wrote. While it may have changed in nature, she implies that it did not really diminish at any point of his writing career. On the social underpinnings of all Bataille's writings, she says:

A rebellion sparked at the fringes of social organization and which does not seek to appropriate power in the conventional sense, can nonetheless effect change at the level of social relations, the goal Bataille set for his own writing.³³

necessary to shatter the capitalist state. *Acéphale*, then, was a radically mobilising micro-politics.' Andrew Wernick, 'Bataille's Columbine : The Sacred Space of Hate', *CTheory*, published 11 March 1999, accessed via <<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=119>> [Accessed online February 1, 2016].

³³ Michèle Richman, 'Bataille Moralist? Critique and the postwar Writings', *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), p.166.

As mentioned above, the text does not only assert itself as political, but Richman is arguing that Bataille's text is consistently preoccupied with a political space exterior to it. Communication, she says, implies the experience of community without producing it, experiences he sought throughout his writing. With Richman extending the domain of the political which Galletti finds in Bataille to the post-war period, and with similar perspectives by Stoekl as well as Jean-Michel Besnier, the *Yale French Studies* special is clearly continuous with the historical perspective of the *Stanford French Review*. Richman's vocabulary, centred around 'communication' and 'community' again shows the influence of Nancy whose essay 'Exscription' is also included in the issue.

In this essay Nancy develops ideas related to literary communism and argues that writing should not be distanced from, nor subordinated to political goals. His emphasis on 'community' and his depiction of Bataille's motivations for writing as having an almost modernist thrust towards social change is consonant with a review that emphasises 'the social and political imperative'. Nancy's juxtaposition of Bataille alongside James Joyce is apt as the quotation suggests, in support of Richman's argument, that Bataille's writing was motivated by social orientations:

The reasons for writing a book can be reduced to the desire to modify the relations existing between a man and his fellows. These relations are judged unacceptable and are perceived as a dreadful misery. (Bataille)
Far calls. Coming, far. End here. Us then. (Joyce).³⁴

Nancy's perspective thus marks a break from some of the more textual and purist readings of *Tel Quel* exemplified by the late Barthes examined in the last chapter. The essential aspects of Nancy's reading which resonate throughout the historical readings, particularly with Richman and Stoekl, is the view that the text is not political in itself, but neither is there a simple return to a view of literature as an instrument of social change. A

³⁴ Nancy, 'Exscription', *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), p.59.

pointed desire for political and social change, but usually more complex than a simply instrumentalist one, informs some of the more interesting historicist readings.

The Return of Hegel

The assertion of an historical Bataille over a 'postmodernist' one entailed re-emphasising the Hegelian aspects of his thought against the Nietzschean. This entails aligning him with the social concern for political change associated with Bataille's pre-war endeavours as against the perceived asocial textual readings of *Tel Quel*, or to re-align Bataille with literary and philosophical modernism. The *Yale French Studies* special's most significant Bataille translation is his text 'Hegel, Death and Sacrifice'. Hegel is also heavily referenced through the introduction to the volume and editor Allan Stoekl also wrote an essay for the *Stanford French Review* entitled 'Hegel's Return'. Opening this essay, Stoekl says that 'It is in a historical context that we must pose the problem of Hegel in the text of Bataille', before he goes on to situate Bataille's discovery of Hegel in relation to his experience of the Alexandre Kojève seminars in the thirties.³⁵ Before the *Stanford French Review* special of 1988, the last academic journal special on Bataille had been the *October* issue of 1986, entitled 'Georges Bataille: Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Unknowing'. I have written about how the *October* critics more frequently distanced Bataille's thought from Hegelian influences, and claimed his thinking was anti-dialectical. The critical turn I've been outlining, in stark contrast, emphasises the influence of Hegel over Nietzsche. Instead of theory and unknowing, writers such as Stoekl emphasised history and knowledge.

In his essay Stoekl claims there is a Hegelian side and a Nietzschean side to Bataille's text, the two sides constantly working against and overturning one another, echoing and loosely paralleling Stoekl's earlier description of the text as bicephalic split between the social and the asocial. Perhaps to counter-balance the Nietzschean side that had dominated

³⁵ Allan Stoekl, 'Hegel's Return', *Stanford French Review*, 12 (1988), p.119.

critical commentary on Bataille however, Stoekl often seems to come down more forcefully on a Hegelian side of Bataille's texts where a model of history is affirmed, as well as a betrayal of 'non-savoir' for 'savoir':

We must recognize the fact that *La Part maudite* and all the other studies by Bataille that makes use of the 'human sciences' (sociology, psychology, anthropology, history) are fully Hegelian and, consequently, they betray non-knowing. They give us a model of history, of the end of history (at which time the necessity to expend will be recognized), and so on. If we suppose that writings like *La Part maudite* are such a betrayal, then we can see that a text like 'Hegel' makes this betray possible – a betrayal that is, moreover, necessary.³⁶

The 'betrayal' Stoekl refers to is an essential aspect of Bataille's thought and relates to the emphasis I have placed on 'contamination' where highly incompatible theoretical orientations co-exist at the same time. Stoekl emphasises betrayal from the perspective of historical construction. The 'rigorous writing of nothing' in Bataille's work is betrayed by unintended constructive ends.³⁷ Similarly the affirmation of 'dépense' in and of itself can have an inadvertently constructive economic and social orientation as Stoekl's work underlines. Stoekl's position towards Bataille here was elaborated in more detail in his book *Agonies of the Intellectual* (1992), where the relationship between reading Bataille historically and under a more Hegelian influence is explicitly linked to understanding the social and political in his writing. This book is an examination of a range of twentieth century intellectuals with special prominence given to Bataille. Stoekl frames his argument between two kinds of intellectuals, those such as Paul Nizan, Drieu La Rochelle and Sartre who subordinate the radicality of writing to a progressive social dialectic, and those such as Jean Paulhan, Blanchot, Foucault, Derrida and Paul De Man who, Stoekl claims, take the opposite perspective of refusing to

³⁶Allan Stoekl, *Stanford French Review*, 12 (1988), p.126.

³⁷ 'The betrayal of a rigorous writing of "nothing" that excludes all choice, all constructive action, is thus inseparable from a thematics of (the betrayal of) choice and constructive action on all levels, including the political or social. So perhaps in Bataille there is the enecessity of morality and representation, no matter how "accursed", along with its impossibility'. Allan Stoekl, 'Introduction', *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), p.5.

subordinate writing to social exigencies. Bataille stands apart, Stoekl argues, because the 'two possibilities are implicated across the strata of his text'.³⁸

Stoeckl thinks from the position of betrayal which academic writing and inquiry would seem to enact upon Bataille's thought but shows how such a betrayal, while being apparently 'untenable' is also 'necessary'. He is attentive to his compromised position in this regard as he explains why being a commentator on Bataille is necessary because it will 'reveal a coherence in Bataille's works that up to now has remained unexplored', and also explains how it is untenable 'to the extent that the awareness of a self-reflexivity of this development will reduce it to the status of a simple dialectic, conflating it with Hegel and entirely losing Nietzsche in the process'.³⁹ Although he is aware of the dangers of losing the Nietzschean aspects, his historic reading position of giving weight to neglected aspects of Bataille's work means that Stoekl finds it difficult to avoid falling into that trap. Stoekl emphasises that the post-Hegelian side to Bataille's thought evident as late as *La Part maudite* in which 'he is still thinking in terms of larger social structures and their conflicts [...] and not simply of rather tenuous groupings of absent and rather dead readers'.⁴⁰ The 'absent and rather dead' readers Stoekl refers to is a riposte to Blanchot's reading which sometimes portrayed community in Bataille's postwar thought as being centred on heterogenous couplings related to friendship, lovers and absent readers. Stoekl's point, echoing Richman's discussed earlier, is that in contrast to the image presented by Blanchot, Bataille's writing was in fact motivated by, and oriented towards, grander social and political concerns. There is, he says, a 'progressive social dialectic' at the heart of *La Part maudite*.⁴¹

³⁸ Allan Stoekl, *Agonies of the Intellectual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), p.297.

³⁹ Allan Stoekl, *Agonies*, p.262.

⁴⁰ Stoekl, *Agonies*, p.360.

⁴¹ Stoekl similarly argues for an ethical reading of Bataille in his first book, where Bataille gets less extensive treatment however. See Stoekl, *Politics, Writing, Mutilation: The Cases of Bataille, Blanchot, Roussel, Leiris, and Ponge* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1985). A similar ethical concern guides his more recent work where he argues 'to a large extent Bataille was a social and even utopian (or dystopian) thinker whose vision of the future entailed a radical alteration in (the study and practice of) economics, religion, and eroticism', Stoekl, *Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion and Postsustainability* (Minneapolis: University of

As well as the social dialectic, references to a Hegelian ‘end of history’ become more pronounced in the *Yale French Studies* special. The themes Stoekl alluded to in the *Stanford French Review* essay become more explicit in his introduction for the latter review. Stoekl mentions the increase in translation of Bataille’s major tomes in recent years, leading to the view of him as a ‘pornographer’ being overshadowed by acknowledging him as a major theorist in his own right. Indeed, in a relatively short period (1988-1992), a number of major translations of theoretical works appeared: Zone books published *Theory of Religion* (1989) and the three volumes of *The Accursed Share* between 1988 and 1991. *Inner Experience* was published in 1988 (Albany: State University of New York Press). *Guilty* (California: Lapis Press), Denis Hollier’s edited collected *The College of Sociology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) and *Tears of Eros* (San Francisco: City Light Books) all also appeared in 1988. *The Impossible* (City Lights Books) and *The Trial of Gilles de Rais* (Los Angeles: Amok) were published in 1991, and *On Nietzsche* (New York: Paragon House) in 1992.

Analysing Bataille’s enduring appeal, Stoekl speculates that it is the possibility of an ethics in his writing which is particularly attractive, a feature he suggests is lacking in the subsequent generation of postmodernist theorists. Moreover, Stoekl suggests that the retention of an ethical possibility in writing that is still transgressive and extreme is desperately needed in a particularly bleak cultural epoch:

Perhaps Bataille, so obviously a ‘precursor’ of much of the major post- or antihumanist work of the sixties, exerts a strong appeal because he nevertheless seems to hold onto the possibility of an ethics. This seems fitting enough in the current era of ‘glorious’ and shameful excess, religious, crisis, and paralysis (or end) of history – experiences that Bataille directly or indirectly addresses in his writing.⁴²

According to Stoekl, there is a historical consciousness and trajectory to Bataille’s thought that is absent from the ‘sixties generation’:

Minnesota Press, 2007), p.213. Since this book is focused on reading Bataille in relation to 21st century ecological problems, I have chosen to exclude it from the present focus on the historical scene in the late eighties and early nineties.

⁴² Stoekl, *Yale French Studies*, 78, p.2.

In Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida strategies are enacted –be they political or textual – which are necessarily divorced from a larger, coherent, goal or movement. In Bataille, on the other hand, in works such as *The Accursed Share*, there at least seems to be the promise of a direction for history, as well as of a way of coordinating in theory a fundamental and indeed universal economic factor [...] In other words, Bataille can tell us where we are going (a posthistorical period in which ‘expenditure’ will be, albeit impossibly, ‘recognized’) and how and why things change (social and cultural mutations are to a great extent nothing more than the various modes of affirming, or refusing, ‘expenditure’). Most important (and this is the ethical dimension), he shows how the ignoring of ‘expenditure’ is historically regressive and physically dangerous.⁴³

Stoekl again reinforces the necessity of rediscovering the political dimension and context of Bataille’s thought as a useful source of possibility amidst the bleak contemporary political landscape. The articles in this collection, he says, ‘attempt to revise the past and the future on the basis of his text. It is necessary work, I think, especially given the apparent “end of history” in which we find ourselves’.⁴⁴ The turn to a historical Bataille portrayed here is not a historically, statically fixed one. By putting the Bataille of the thirties in dialogue with Stoekl’s contemporary reading moment, he acknowledges the compromise of his position, does not claim historical omniscient objectivity and acknowledges a degree of performativity in Bataille’s text and reception. While Nancy emphasises the overlooked historical specifics from which Bataille’s thought emerged he says that the thought of community, towards which his and Blanchot’s writing turned in the early eighties, came from an increased consciousness of the fact that Communism was no longer the unsurpassable horizon of the time.⁴⁵ Similarly, we know that the Centre for Political Research was informed by a concern for what Nancy describes as a ‘retrait du politique’. The waning of any genuinely threatening alternatives to global capitalism, communist or otherwise, had influenced wide ideological shifts and changes among the French Left culminating in widespread abandonment of militant politics for less ambitious, ethical concerns such as individual ‘human rights’,

⁴³ Stoekl, *Yale French Studies*, pp.2-3.

⁴⁴ Stoekl, *Yale French Studies*, p.6.

⁴⁵ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, pp.14-15.

described by a range of intellectuals from Vincent Descombes to Alain Badiou.⁴⁶ The context of narrowing political horizons is repeatedly implied in Nancy's own reevaluation of Bataille, politics and history.

Nancy's reading of Bataille may not be the primary influence on the historical turn but given Richman's heavy referencing of his work in her *Stanford French Review* essay and his prominence throughout the *Yale Studies Review*, it is certainly a significant one. Nancy and the Anglo-American historicists share an urgency to read Bataille historically borne out of the impasses encountered in their geo-political and historical moment. The beginning of Nancy and Blanchot's enduring discourse on 'community' and of the rediscovery of 'un Bataille différent' is inextricably bound up with the increasingly evident absence of an alternative to neoliberal capitalism. A sense of an 'end of history' was already evident in continental theory well before the fall of Soviet Communism, with the widespread abandonment of Marxism by the French Left towards the end of the 1970s, and the emergence of Les Nouveaux Philosophes. Nancy draws parallels between Bataille's depoliticisation and his contemporary moment, highlighting the increasingly geo-political landscape as determining factors in both cases. He refers to Bataille's historical situation to explain why the notion of community becomes more indistinct. Nancy maintains that a politicised conception of community was a constant concern with Bataille but that that it was pressed down upon and gradually effaced by a grim geo-political and historical landscape. Despite the constancy of his concern, Nancy writes, Bataille was led:

à une extrémité de l'épreuve du monde dans lequel il vit – ce monde que déchira, avec la guerre, une négation atroce de la communauté et un embrasement mortel de l'extase. Dans cette épreuve extreme, il ne vit plus s'offrir aucun visage, aucun schème, ni meme aucun simple repère pour la communauté, une fois passées les

⁴⁶ Vincent Descombes on the Nouveaux Philosophes and others writes :
'They have all pointed to the anarchist solution of the political problem, namely the renunciation of all politics and the search for human comradeship beyond the limits and constraints of a polis'. Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. by L. Scott-Fox and J.M Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 13.

figures des communautés religieuses ou mystiques, et une fois close la figure trop humaine du communisme. D'une certaine façon, ce monde est toujours le nôtre.'⁴⁷

However, the thinking of community in the contemporary world faces an even greater challenge with the aforementioned waning of any communist horizon. For Nancy's generation, with the full implications of 'totalitarianism' even more evident, there was no such horizon or model from which to extract any potential of community. Nancy looks at the concessions Bataille had to make in the face of political impasses in which he turned from macro-cosmic to micro-cosmic conceptions of community (turning to smaller groupings of artists and lovers), in order to think through the impasses of Nancy's own contemporary moment. Nancy wrote retrospectively that the book on community should not be understood directly in parallel with the nineteen thirties but in the context of the eighties when a similar problem was clearly emerging: 'l'absence de tout antagonisme sérieux à la civilisation déterminée par le capitalisme [...] Un désenchantement profond de la démocratie.'⁴⁸

These shifts in Bataille's thought and Nancy's shift to thinking through the theme of community, partially arise from situations in which, as Nancy writes, 'La limite historique et la limite théorique s'entrelacent.'⁴⁹ The intertwinement of the historical and the theoretical, and the use of the past to think through the impasses of the present inform the turn to community and history in Nancy. The opening lines of his text make this explicit where he writes:

Le témoignage le plus important et le plus pénible du monde moderne, celui qui rassemble peut-être tous les autres témoignages que cette époque se trouve chargée d'assumer, en vertu d'on ne sait quel décret ou de quelle nécessité (car nous témoignons aussi de l'épuisement de la pensée de l'Histoire), est le témoignage de la dissolution, de la dislocation ou de la conflagration de la communauté. Le communisme est 'l'horizon indépassable de notre temps', comme l'avait dit Sartre.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, p.58.

⁴⁸ Nancy, *La Communauté affrontée*, p.35.

⁴⁹ Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, p.63.

⁵⁰ Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, p.11.

Yet Nancy notes, in the present context, ‘le communisme n’est plus notre horizon indépassable’.⁵¹ Part of Bataille’s contemporary relevance is from a position of disidence in nienteen thirties France, antagonistic towards distinctive geo-political positions, refusing Stalinist communism, fascism, and liberal capitalism, searching for a political ‘ailleurs’. Nancy’s evocation of the thirties is partially out of a politicised belief that ‘les années 30’ restent toujours possibles, autrement’.⁵²

Escaping the ‘End of History’

There is a similar focus on the thirties among the Stanford and Yale reviews with an attentiveness to extracting strategies and possibilities from Bataille’s predicaments for the contemporary epoch. In ‘The Political and Social Imperative’ section of the *Yale French Studies* review, Jean Michel Besnier has an essay on Bataille’s politics in the 1930s. The essay identifies Kojève as a major influence on the trajectory of Bataille’s thought. As we know, Bataille was particularly perturbed by Kojève’s diagnosis of an ‘end of history’ in which society had arrived.⁵³ Besnier, however, cites an interesting quote from Bataille, alluding to how a significant opening up of possibilities can emerge from seemingly nihilistic moments of political impasse:

‘It is a strange paradox: if one perceives the profound lack of a way out, the profound absence of an end and of meaning, then – and only then – can one actually, with a liberated spirit, lucidly tackle practical problems’ (OC 6, 251).⁵⁴

The period in which Besnier wrote this essay was characterised, socially and culturally, by another heightened consciousness of a ‘profound lack of a way out’. Commenting on the disappearance of the communist horizon, Nancy wrote that the political horizon is

⁵¹ Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, p.28.

⁵² Nancy, *Le Sens du monde* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), p.171.

⁵³ See ‘Lettre à X., chargé d’un cour sur Hegel...’, OC V, pp. 369-371, and ‘À Alexandre Kojève, Paris, 6 Décembre 1937’ in Georges Bataille, *Choix de lettres : 1917-1962*, pp.131-136.

⁵⁴ Bataille quoted in Jean-Michel Besnier, ‘Georges Bataille in the 1930’s: A Politics of the Impossible’, *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), p.179.

characterised by ‘résignation’.⁵⁵ In the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and soon to be collapsed Soviet Communism, the thesis that we were living in the ‘end of history’ gained near-universal acceptance. This time it was pronounced from a distinctly right-wing perspective, given its most famous iteration by Francis Fukuyama in an essay following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and later a book in 1992, enforcing the sense of an all-encompassing power of neoliberal capitalism, to which there was apparently no alternative.⁵⁶ The emphasis on both Hegel and historical perspectives throughout this intellectual scene is linked with the desire to revive some kind of thinking of negativity in the face of such an historical impasse as Stoekl’s comments to the ‘end of history’ in the introduction to the *Yale French Studies* special attest.

Like Stoekl’s reference to a Kojève-Bataillean ‘end of history’ in dialogue with a contemporary one, we find the same linking of the two political moments in the Stanford special. Richman’s piece in particular, argues that the period which gave birth to the College of Sociology is particularly relevant to the contemporary epoch:

Just as the rediscovery of the College was facilitated by the post-1968 process of self-criticism, so must one consider how the period of the College, all too relevant to the present, may impede balanced evaluations. The breakdown of distinctions between right and left, the resurgence of rightwing extremism during the term of a socialist government in decline, racism, anti-semitism, and the question of French identity are all figures out of a painful past, which many French sought not to face for over forty years and which history is now compelling them to answer.⁵⁷

Richman, however, writing in 1988, places the comparison of the two epochs within the national borders of France. With Stoekl, and the *Yale French Studies* special in 1990, the comparison takes on a much more explicitly international dimension, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the omnipresence of the Fukuyama thesis.

⁵⁵ Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, p.8.

⁵⁶ See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992).

⁵⁷ Michèle Richman ‘Introduction to the Collège de Sociologie: Poststructuralism Before It’s Time?’, *Stanford French Review*, 12, p.94.

Hauntology: Mourning Lost Futures

This reaction to historical catastrophe was not unique to Nancy, for a sense of returning to, or mourning, ‘lost futures’ came to haunt French theory with the Collapse of the Soviet Union, the landmark University of California conference ‘Whither Marxism?’ (1993) at which Derrida presented the talk which developed into *Spectres de Marx* (1993), as well as major responses such as the essay collection *Ghostly Demarcations* (1999), examining the relationship between Marxism and Deconstruction. Where Bataille was confronted with a Kojevian ‘end of history’ on the eve of the war, the French poststructuralists were confronted with Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ in the face of neoliberal capitalism. The latter situation influenced Jacques Derrida in his development of the concept of ‘hauntology’ in *Spectres de Marx*. Hauntology was not based on a simple nostalgia or mourning for the past, but rather a mourning for a future that never came, hence a ‘lost future’.

Derrida’s argument, inherent to the thought of deconstruction, is that time must always be ‘out of joint’ or ‘hauntological’, since the present can only ever be defined in relation to a past that has passed and a future that is always out of reach, and thus can never be fully self-present. Derrida’s philosophy of time is thus trans-historical, not specific or confined to one moment of course, but relevant to all accounts of time. However, a sense of ‘hauntology’ does become particularly accentuated amidst the unique geopolitical climate of the early nineteen nineties in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union. Few could really claim that the social organization of the Soviet Union and the disastrous trajectory of Stalinism actually constituted a realization of ‘Communism’. Hauntology is thus also understood as a condition of mourning for the unfulfilled futures latent in the past. Expanding upon the non-synchronicity of time inherent in deconstruction, the reference to ‘time is out of joint’ from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* also implies the continuous interruption of the present by the past, by a perennial haunting of the dreams, failed utopias, and struggles of the past for a future that never was: fragments of a failed endeavour, often leading to disorientation. Derrida’s

description of time might thus become a social and cultural pathology of a specific historical moment when nostalgia for lost futures and absence of alternatives in the contemporary moment are omnipresent.⁵⁸ A cultural and social condition of hauntology becomes accentuated in an epoch where eschatological narratives prevail, or where the absence of alternatives overwhelms any sense of agency or historical engagement.

The quote from *Hamlet* was also directly referenced in Bataille's writing when, in one of his diary entries in *Sur Nietzsche* he considers the absence of alternatives and his anxiety in relation to the 'end of history':

Au delà de tout règlement, une nouvelle sorte de saut? Si l'histoire est finie, saut hors du temps ? m'écriant à jamais : 'Time out of joints' [*sic*].⁵⁹

Bataille's anxiety over the posthistorical and hauntological are of such ongoing appeal partially for the political realism and pessimism found within. If Bataille's thought is returned to for political possibility, it is for its non-duped attitude to projects and utopianism. While there is the idea that 'les années trentes restent toujours possible, autrement', that possibility is afforded only by confronting and acknowledging how devastating and catastrophic the cultural and political situation is. This is why Besnier focuses on the aforementioned passage from Bataille, where he insists that only when one acutely perceives the sense of despair, the profound lack of a way out, 'only then can one, with a liberated spirit, lucidly tackle problems'. This pessimism, or 'revoltés de l'inespoir', constitutes part of Bataille's marginality in opposition to global capitalism but from a position of dissidence with any mainstream left.⁶⁰ It permits, for example, the appeal to ethics and leftist politics to which Stoekl's writing refers, but positions itself as 'non-duped' by any optimism, idealism or political utopianism.

⁵⁸ On this point see Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. (Winchester: Zero, 2014).

⁵⁹ OC VI, p.97.

⁶⁰ Besnier, *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990), p.169.

Similarly, Marina Galetti's essay in the *Stanford French Review*, draws attention to Bataille's politics of despair and anguish:

Bataille opposed the 'violence of desperatism' and 'liberating anguish' to the impotent optimism of Communism: 'Dans le malheur seulement, elle (l'affectivité révolutionnaire) retrouve l'intensité douloureuse sans laquelle la résolution fondamentale de la Révolution, le "ni Dieu, ni maîtres" des ouvriers révoltés perd sa brutalité radicale' (1: 334).⁶¹

The critical historical moment of the absence and withering of any alternative in the face of neoliberalism is thus a significant and influential backdrop to the critical turn towards 'un Bataille différent', an historical and political one. By focusing on the thirties as the backdrop for Bataille's ideas on community, the writers look to find parallels with their own contemporary epoch, thus looking for links and new routes of applications of ideas. In this sense, the readings explored so far have been relatively attentive to the tension between wanting to historicise thought while considering that the object of analysis is one which seeks to elude any fixed, stable historical grounding. Similarly, the repeated references to the contemporary context that I have underlined display sensitivity to the impossibility of an omniscient, objective historical perspective. There is, to some extent, acknowledgement of the compromised historical position of one's reading position. These delicate balances are not always maintained in the historical turn as we will see, and the readings become more problematic the more it is suggested that 'theory' and 'history' are separate and in some cases even mutually exclusive. Bernard Sichère's essay on Bataille's Nietzsche in the *Stanford Review* captures and tends to sustain these apparently contradictory impulses. His comments on the theory-history tension are worth considering:

Il est exact que sans la prise en compte de l'histoire concrète de la pensée, les pensées qui comptent pour nous demeurent en grand partie énigmatiques et inopérantes, mais il est vrai également, plus peut être, que l'histoire de la pensée, n'est jamais que le mouvement hasardeux et rompu de ces pensées, à chaque fois singulières, qui sont la transmission d'une expérience subjective avant d'être un système ordonné des concepts, ce que d'ailleurs elles se refusent parfois ouvertement à être, comme c'est le

⁶¹ Galetti, 'Masses: A Failed College', *Stanford French Review*, 12, p.62.

cas pour Nietzsche, puis pour Bataille, contestent l'un et l'autre la forme même, traditionnelle en Occident, de l'exposition de la pensée philosophique.⁶²

Sichère draws attention to the importance of considering the concrete historical conditions facilitating the emergence of intellectual thought but at the same time calls for a self-reflexive self-questioning of how difficult intellectual thought might be historicised. Moreover, while Richman and Stoekl are often sensitive to historically determined position of their own reading practice, they nevertheless sometimes betray a separation between 'theory' and 'history' which becomes more explicit in other readings. The historiographical questions Sichère raises are often neglected and avoidance of such issues leads to a simplistic perception of intellectual history as teleological and lacking any contingency.⁶³ I have attempted to show that the antipathy towards postmodern reading practices found in the historical turn was compromised from the beginning: much of the historical revising of Bataille was pre-empted in key post-structuralist readings such as Nancy. In this regard, Nancy's work, following Bataille, shows that the division between 'history' and 'theory' is incoherent and subsequent historical readings thus often appear deeply compromised and puritanical in their attempt to re-affirm 'History'.

One of the principal manners in which the Anglo-American historical readings differ from their French counterparts is the importance attributed to Hegel. In his *Yale French Studies* essay 'Georges Bataille in the 1930s: A Politics of the Impossible', Jean-Michel Besnier writes that Bataille's originality consisted in 'his refusal of Hegelianism as a means of legitimizing the desire to revolt. In this respect he seems qualitatively more radical than the Surrealists, who had, in any event, more than one opponent in their race for subversive

⁶² Bernard Sichère, 'Le Nietzsche de Bataille', *Stanford French Review*, 12, p.15.

⁶³ In this regard I follow Benjamin Noys's criticism of what he describes as a group of 'post-post-structuralist' readings as promoting a simplistic view of intellectual history from one movement to the next. Benjamin Noys, 'The Reception of Georges Bataille: Post-structuralist Readings' (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Sueex), p.109. However rather than a broad 'post-post-structuralist' milieu of readings which Noys focuses on, I have attempted to focus on the specifically 'historical' dimension of readings which separate out 'history' from 'theory' and the contradictions which arise in that separation.

audacity'.⁶⁴ In contrast Stoekl, particularly in the 'Hegel's return' chapter of his book *Agonies of the Intellectual*, wishes to stress the inescapability of Hegel in Bataille's work. Where Besnier emphasises a refusal of Hegelianism in relation to politics, Stoekl positions himself against Nancy's ignoring of Hegel. He writes that 'To *eliminate* Hegel and the subject from the problematic of the community, however, as Nancy attempts to do, leads not so much to the accomplishment of a Heideggerian community, as to another more resolute, version of Hegelianism'.⁶⁵ For Stoekl, this is because Nancy's interruption of the myth of the writer entails a critique of the 'old-style intellectual', the secular cleric', but such an elimination of the position of the intellectual gives rise to essential contradictions claims Stoekl: 'But such a simple elimination *in practice* cannot be carried over directly into theory [...] An elimination *tout court* smacks of a sacrificial and speculative logic of expulsion and closure. Instead, the intellectual resurfaces as the "disappearance of the writer"'. This is quite a large claim that is not given much substantiation. Furthermore, the problematic distinction between theory and practice is not given elaboration and the references to Nancy in the final pages simplify and overlook some of his essential arguments. Stoekl frames Nancy's *La Communauté désœuvrée* as follows:

As was the case with Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy is also answering Heidegger here, showing how a community, founded not on the destruction of singularity and the subordination of limitation to a higher totem or fetish (as was the case with Nazism) but on the affirmation of singularity and the deconstruction of monocephalic power, can be derived from Heidegger's work itself. In this way Nancy's essay looks back to the Bataille of the prewar Acéphale period, or to early essays by Bataille such as 'The Obelisk' and 'The Labyrinth', but also across to other contemporary French Heideggerians who would defend Heidegger from himself, such as Jean-François Lyotard.⁶⁶

Nancy's position is vastly simplified in the context of an anti-Heideggerian polemic here. Stoekl refers to a problematic 'sacrificial and speculative logic of closure' and he refers to

⁶⁴ Jean-Michel Besnier, 'Georges Bataille in the 1930s: A Politics of the Impossible', *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), p.171.

⁶⁵ Stoekl, *Agonies*, p.300.

⁶⁶ Stoekl, *Agonies*, p.299.

Nancy's interest in a pre-war Bataille, but he does not mention one of the central thrusts of Nancy's work here, that it is in fact a critique of the logic of sacrifice, and a critique of Bataille's pre-war trajectory, which, as discussed in chapter one, manifested itself in a problematic desire to 'communicate with' death. Nancy's version of Bataille actually arises out of that essential critique of nostalgia for pre-modern forms of the sacred. While Nancy does critique the notion of the subject, this is not with a view to eliminating any kind of political agency. This is the progressive import of emphasising the relational as against substances or subjects in Nancy's reading of Bataille. In this respect, it is precisely as a means to resist the closure Stoeckl accuses him of.

While theoretical problems and simplifications such as these can be found in Stoeckl's text, one of the more progressive imports of the historical turn is Stoeckl's politicised re-reading of negativity in relation to the 'end of history'. In the wake of Alexander Kojève's proclamation of another 'end of history' in the nineteen thirties, Bataille considered man's position in such circumstances. If man was principally defined by his negativity, then a posthistorical state would leave his negativity 'unemployed'. Stoeckl, however, writes that negativity is 'always out of a job, even at the moments in which it is most intensely employed [...] leaves only a ghost in the dialectic'.⁶⁷ He attempts to introduce a model of negativity that disrupts the vision of a simple transition from rational progression to posthistorical festivity. Stoeckl's version of Bataille's negativity is an 'implementation *in society* of a violence that mimes every articulation point of the dialectic'. While noting the difficulty of imagining this Stoeckl says 'it must be stressed that Bataille fully intended his writings to "change society": his discussion of the Marshall Plan at the end of *The Accursed Share* make this clear enough'. Bataille's 'unemployed negativity', Stoeckl shows, is not simply posthistorical for, in a sense,

⁶⁷ Stoeckl, *Agonies*, p.293.

articulating a violence inseparable from the movement of history ‘would indicate that the end is always here’.⁶⁸

The two chapters Stoekl dedicates to Bataille in *Agonies of the Intellectual* move from ‘Sur Nietzsche’ to ‘Hegel’s Return’. This mirrors Stoekl’s emphasis on a particular type of methodological and intellectual betrayal. Where Bataille wrote ‘il faut le système et il faut l’excès’, Stoekl starts from the opposite point of transgressive excess which is then necessarily betrayed by the need for system:

This second Bataille is Hegel, the transgression of Bataillean-Nietzschean textual transgression, the night in which not-knowing itself is lost, the figure of the writer who mimes Hegel by taking seriously a project in which not-knowing is instituted in society – an intellectual, in other words, who sees expenditure, laughter and sexuality as inseparable from the motors of history, who foresees an end of history in which the domination of sheer negativity will somehow be clearly established.⁶⁹

Negativity, in other words, comes to have an unintended use-value with politically progressive consequences, and ‘unemployed negativity’ is not confined to a posthistorical state at the ‘end of history’ but accompanies the dialectic.

There is a further difficulty of considering historical issues in Bataille’s text stemming from Bataille’s own inherently paradoxical position towards the historical. In ‘Le Sens morale de la sociologie’, for example, he writes that ‘Il se peut que les hommes aperçoivent enfin clairement qu’il n’est pas de débat intérieur si profond que le seul mouvement historique des sociétés humaines ne lui donne un sens’.⁷⁰ Man’s condition, it is suggested, can be understood in relation to the unfolding of history, yet in a letter to Dionys Mascolo in 1958 Bataille seems to directly contradict this, when he directly refutes Mascolo’s suggestion that ‘on est mis à vivre dans un contexte historique donné’.⁷¹ Such paradoxical positions leave

⁶⁸ Stoekl, *Agonies*, p.294.

⁶⁹ Stoekl, *Agonies*, p.294.

⁷⁰ OC XI, p.66.

⁷¹ Bataille, *Choix de lettres*, p.477. Also referred to in L. Ferri ‘L’Histoire Bataille ?’ in *L’Histoire Bataille* [actes de la journée d’études consacrée à Georges Bataille, Paris, École nationale des Chartes, 7 décembre 2002, réunis par Laurent Ferri et Christophe Gauthier], p.15.

it difficult to assert any one methodology for reading Bataille but I have argued for a methodological excess in which the co-existence of incompatibles is affirmed. Stoekl has stressed the ‘bicephalic’ aspects of Bataille’s texts and following his reading of Bataille’s negativity, he argues that ‘the interrelation of periods and positions in Bataille must be seen from both a dialectical and a transgressive view point of view’.⁷² This leads Stoekl to set Bataille apart from the other intellectuals studied in his book. Bataille is ‘unique’ and he ‘goes beyond the authors we have studied [...] in that he refuses to attempt to subordinate one side to another, to confine safely textuality within a social movement [...] or society within the textual’.⁷³

The moralising tenor of this argument is more pronounced in the introduction to the *Yale French Studies* special. Stoekl makes a polemical gesture to set Bataille apart not only historically but theoretically from a generation of thinkers associated with postmodernism. As a precursor to these ‘post-’ or ‘antihumanist’ thinkers, Stoekl says that his unique contemporary appeal may be that he ‘nevertheless holds on to the possibility of an ethics’. There is an implicit conflation of anti-humanist philosophy as anti-ethical, with Bataille being an exception. Moreover, it is beyond the scope of this study to point out the various ethical instances found in the work of Bataille’s successors, but to claim that Bataille stands apart in that regard, or that ethics are absent from the theorists Stoekl implicates is quite a large generalisation with little foundation offered. Stoekl goes on to say that in Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault strategies are enacted which are ‘necessarily divorced from a large coherent goal or movement’. However, in works like *The Accursed Share*, ‘there at least seems to be the promise of a direction for history [...] In other words Bataille can tell us where we are going’. Similarly, Julian Pefanis in his 1991 *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille*,

⁷² Stoekl, *Agonies*, p.262.

⁷³ Stoekl, *Agonies*, p.295.

Baudrillard and Lyotard makes reference to the ‘ahistorical sphere of French Theory.’⁷⁴ Postmodernism and ‘French Theory’ are thus regularly evoked in Bataille reception as dangerous ahistorical appropriators of Bataille’s thought. And this generates a repeated process of ‘rescuing’ Bataille in what appears often appears as moralistic and generalizing reading manner (postmodernism is ‘bad’).⁷⁵

This process of rescuing Bataille has been enacted in differing directions throughout his reception. As noted in the thesis introduction, as a target of attack from the major intellectual figures of his epoch this led to his initial champions beginning from a defensive position, while his controversial views on fascism also generated necessary defence. The *Yale French Studies* special suggests a more pronounced tendency towards ‘rescuing’ Bataille on the part of American readings. Jean-Joseph Goux takes a more antagonistic position, for example, placing Bataille in a guilty position in a sense by showing the uncomfortable proximity of his politics of excess with contemporary postmodern politics of excess, while Richman in contrast attempts to argue for a consistently politically progressive vision of Bataille. More broadly however, this wave of Anglo-American academic readings often implies Bataille needs rescuing and setting apart from his champions. In Stoekl’s terms above, it is because Bataille can set us back on the path of history with the implication that his successors listed are ahistorical or at least ‘divorced from a large coherent goal or movement’ in a way that Bataille is not. The worthy and necessary reading practice of considering a thinker in his singularity is taken to an extreme by often overstating Bataille’s separation from everyone else. This use of Bataille’s marginality can become beholden to purity, as morally and historically superior to his successors. While the reception of French theory was characterised by certain dehistoricizations, as François Cusset and others have

⁷⁴ Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard and Lyotard* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p.20

⁷⁵ It should be noted that while Pefanis describes French Theory as an ‘ahistorical milieu’ his perspective does not participate in the same kind of problematic moralizing about postmodernism which I am describing here.

noted, it also came with important historiographical challenges which the historicist critics simplistically elide. Stoekl, for example, betrays a nostalgia for a vision of history as simply teleological, history as a progress with a coherent movement and direction. The critique of Bataille, and numerous thinkers within post-structuralism, towards this view of history is not addressed.

A brief consideration of Derrida's 1993 *Spectres de Marx* can help us refine our consideration of the historical in reading Bataille's reception. In this text, Derrida notes that the Kojevian end of history entailed the ending of a certain determined vision of history and allowed the historicity of history to be articulated. A comment on historicity and emancipatory politics is worth quoting at length here. Derrida writes that a certain deconstructive procedure:

consistait dès le départ à mettre en question le concept onto-théo – mais aussi archéo-téléologique de l'histoire – chez Hegel, Marx ou même dans la pensée énochale de Heidegger. Non pas pour y opposer une fin de l'histoire ou une anhistoricité mais au contraire pour démontrer que cette onto-théo-archéo-téléologie verrouille, neutralise et finalement annule l'historicité. Il s'agissait alors de penser une autre historicité – non pas une nouvelle histoire ou encore moins un '*new historicism*', mais une autre ouverture de l'événementialité comme historicité qui permet de ne pas y renoncer mais au contraire d'ouvrir l'accès à une pensée affirmatrice de la promesse messianique et émancipatoire comme promesse : comme *promesse* et non comme programme ou dessein onto-théologique ou téléo-eschatologique. Car loin qu'il faille renoncer au désir émancipatoire, il faut y tenir plus que jamais, semble-t-il, et d'ailleurs comme à l'indestructible même du 'il faut'. C'est là la condition d'une ré-politisation, peut-être d'un autre concept du politique.⁷⁶

In other words, for Derrida, 'une certaine expérience de la promesse émancipatoire' always remained 'irréductible à toute déconstruction'.⁷⁷ Deconstruction did not inherently entail deconstruction of emancipatory politics nor a dismissal of history but a careful reconsideration of historical thinking. And the consciousness inscribed in deconstructive thought pre-empts Nancy's return to the historical and the political in *La Communauté*

⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), pp. 125-6.

⁷⁷ Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, p.102.

désœuvrée. We bear witness, he says in the opening lines to ‘l’épuisement de la pensée de l’Histoire’, capitalized. What has been exhausted is the idea of ‘History’ as a transcendental signifier, sure of its own self-presence, telos and emancipatory direction. Thus, rather than theory discarding history, the two are intimately bound up. As Geoffrey Bennington and Robert Young note ‘Post-structuralism and the question of history then, far from being a matter of the absence of history, involves nothing less than what Fredric Jameson has called the “crisis of historicity itself.”’⁷⁸

While Stoeckl emphasises the grand social and historical narratives of expenditure in *The Accursed Share* he does so at the expense of effacing the critique of historical teleology throughout Bataille’s work and its reception. Bataille’s affirmation of the Nietzschean Eternal Return, for example, is for its anti-ethical rupturing of progress and teleology, its intensification of singular moments liberated from a progressive continuum, or from direction towards an end. In *Sur Nietzsche* Bataille writes that all ethics imply ‘que chaque instant de votre vie soit *motivé*.’ In contrast, ‘Le retour *immotivé* l’instant, libère la vie de fin et par là d’abord il la ruine. Le retour est le mode dramatique et le masque de l’homme entier : c’est le désert d’un homme dont chaque instant désormais se trouve immotivé’.⁷⁹

Sacrifice was posited as an alternative to teleology, as a means of rupturing servile progress.⁸⁰ Bataille’s Nietzscheanism does not preclude a historical and politicised reading of his work, but readings which take into account these aspects often re-emphasise ‘History’ as a safe transcendental signifier which does not question its own assumptions over historicity, advocating a pre-postmodern world view and ending up with a somewhat one-sided version of Bataille. For Besnier, Bataille’s ‘politics of the impossible’ is underpinned by ‘a rejection

⁷⁸ Geoffrey Bennington and Robert Young, ‘Introduction: Posing the Question’, *Post-structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. by Attridge et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.7.

⁷⁹ OC VI, p.23.

⁸⁰ OC VI, p.52.

of the Hegelian-Marxist eschatology which portends the inelectable end of History'.⁸¹ The 'politics of the impossible' deconstructs both eschatological and teleological narratives about history, but Stoekl unwittingly reasserts the latter which his insistence on a 'direction of history'. Deriving the possibility of an ethics from that conception of history, there is mistaken conflation here: that politics, political or ethical imperatives can only exist within a teleological framework of history. The essential historiographical critiques of 'History', critiques that are in themselves political (as with Nancy), are not engaged with. The deeply problematic suggestion then, found far beyond Stoekl's work as we will see, is that political readings of Bataille can only take place within a simplistic and developmental historical framework.

A 'Passion for the Real': Bataille 'Beyond Language'

The longing for a pre-postmodern Bataille implicit in the historical turn becomes more explicit in certain nineties texts on Bataille, particularly the work of Michael Richardson and Andrew Hussey. Richardson and Hussey both oppose 'postmodernist' or 'post-structuralist' readings of the texts and attempt to strengthen that opposition by realigning Bataille as a figure that held more in common with his own generation, particularly the surrealists, than with his successors. In *The Inner Scar* (2000), Hussey writes 'The prevailing view of Bataille, in France and elsewhere [...] is then as a thinker whose work has primarily a textual value'.⁸² Similarly, Hussey claims that Derrida's reading of transgression 'refuses all referents beyond the immediate experience of language and text'.⁸³ Hussey thus emphasises the importance of lived experience and 'real conceptual thought' as against other theorists who saw 'language as preceding experience', or elsewhere 'those post-modernist critics who

⁸¹ Besnier, 'Georges Bataille in the 1930s: A Politics of the Impossible', *Yale French Studies*, 78, p.179.

⁸² Andrew Hussey, *The Inner Scar: The Mysticism of Georges Bataille* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p.16.

⁸³ Hussey, *The Inner Scar*, p.13

have considered his work merely a textual drama'.⁸⁴ The implication that Derrida is only concerned with the *immediate* experience of language and refuses external referents is deeply problematic. Hussey here echoes a wide-spread assumption about Derrida's work, that it is only concerned with the merely linguistic or textual, something that has been repeatedly shown to be untrue, not least by Derrida himself. *Écriture* and the thought of the 'trace' consistently extended to the extra-textual in Derrida and in this respect his entire work emerged out of a *critique* of linguistic idealism, which many mistakenly saw him as advocating. Derrida himself situated deconstruction's beginning as:

a putting into question of the authority of linguistics, of logocentrism. And this, accordingly, was a protest against the 'linguistic turn', which under the name of structuralism, was already well on its way. The irony – painful, at times – of the story is that often, especially in the United States, because I wrote 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte' [there is nothing outside the text], because I deployed a thought of the 'trace', some people believed they could interpret this as a thought of language (it is exactly the opposite). Deconstruction was inscribed in the 'linguistic turn', when it was in fact a protest against linguistics!⁸⁵

Where Derrida's project, far from a linguistic idealism, entailed a deconstruction between language *and* worldly experience, Hussey's reading of Bataille in contrast attempts to enact a separation, where experience always precedes language, and he argues that 'the attempt to fix thought beyond language is the first principle of inner experience'. As I argued in the introduction however, Bataille's base materialism attempted to deconstruct simplistic

⁸⁴ Hussey, *The Inner Scar*, p.23. Hussey's reading of Derrida here takes 'text' in overly-literal terms where in fact 'text', in Derrida, does not always simply refer to writing on a page but often marks the limits of any one discourse or narrative system for ordering the world. As Derrida writes, 'Ce que j'appelle *texte* est aussi ce qui inscrit et déborde "pratiquement" les limites d'un tel discours. Il y a un tel texte général partout où (c'est-à-dire partout) ce discours et son ordre (essence, sens, vérité, vouloir-dire, conscience, idéalité, etc.) sont *déborderés*, c'est-à-dire où leur instance est remise en position de *marque* dans une chaîne dont c'est structurellement son illusion que de vouloir et de croire la commander. Ce texte général, bien sûr, ne se limite pas, comme on l'aura(it) vite compris, aux écrits sur la page. Son écriture n'a d'ailleurs pas de limite extérieure que celle d'une certaine *re-marque*. L'écriture sur la page, puis la "littérature", sont des types déterminés de cette *re-marque*. Il faut les interroger dans leur spécificité et, à nouveau frais, si vous voulez, dans la spécificité de leur "histoire", et dans leur articulation avec les autres champs "historiques" du texte général.' Derrida, *Positions* (Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), pp.81-2.

⁸⁵ Derrida continues, 'I do the best I can to mark the limits of the linguistic and the limits of the rhetorical – this was the crux of my profound debate with Paul de Man, who had a more 'rhetorician' interpretation of deconstruction'. Jacques Derrida, 'I Have a Taste for the Secret', Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. by Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p.76.

separations between ‘real’ experience and language/theory. Peter Tracy Connor has developed a similar critique in relation to ‘inner experience’. Connor writes that there has been a ‘misconception’ about Bataille, ‘namely, that this reluctant writer, famous for his hostility toward discursive expression, acknowledged and accepted that the intimate truth he struggled to communicate lay beyond the reach of language’.⁸⁶ As Connor implies the ‘truth’ of Bataille’s text cannot be fixed ‘beyond’ language.⁸⁷

This anti-postmodernist position which privileges ‘real’ experience was a position Hussey shared in many respects with Michael Richardson, whose work on Bataille exacerbates a number of problems which were only more subtly present in earlier ‘historical’ readings. Richardson published *The Absence of Myth* (1994) with Verso, a collection of Bataille’s writings on surrealism, with an introductory essay by Richardson attempting to reframe Bataille alongside the surrealists. The same perspective guides Richardson’s *Georges Bataille* (1994), published by Routledge, which attempts to disentangle his work from its posthumous reception and reinscribe it within its original moment. He notes that Bataille:

tends to be read through post-modernism and, with the popularity of thinkers like Derrida and Foucault, his work has thereby gained a sort of reflected prestige [...] Indeed, despite its surface relation to ideas popularised by post-modernism, Bataille’s thought fits uneasily into the supposed ‘post-modern’ condition. Even if it has been appropriated pell-mell into it, frequently his precepts have been reversed in the process and it is arguable that Bataille’s appeal may have come about despite rather than because of the interests of post-modernism.⁸⁸

The above quote contains a strange conflation between the post-modern ‘condition’ (by which we can imagine he’s referring to the cultural and ideological zeitgeist of late capitalism) and theorists who came to prominence during the epoch broadly referred to as

⁸⁶ Peter Tracy Connor, *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p.2.

⁸⁷ In this respect Hussey’s contention that Bataille’s ongoing relevance lies in ‘the active negation of theory’ is even more problematic. The implication seems to be that ‘theory’ is only being given the status of a static historical event rather than relating to an ongoing engagement with, and challenge, to the limits of any one discourse. This perspective also implies a deification of Bataille, as if the entire trajectory of his reception simply misunderstood his work and must be negated. See Andrew Hussey, *The Beast at Heaven’s Gate* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).

⁸⁸ Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.3.

postmodernism, such as Derrida and Foucault whom he names. The implication that Derrida, Foucault and others within French Theory somehow supported the cultural and ideological hegemonies of their epoch is again a huge and manifestly problematic generalisation which it is beyond the scope of this study to disprove, but it shows a certain reactive polemical use of the term ‘postmodernism’, particularly pronounced in the case of reading Bataille because of his delayed and posthumous reception. Moreover, the statement that Bataille ‘tends to be read through post-modernism’ is virtually meaningless. The reader does not know whether Richardson is claiming Bataille is read through theorists who came to prominence during a postmodern period or through the deployment of certain postmodern reading practices which are not specified. The call for a historical reading thus comes from an unhistorical perspective. By returning Bataille to the epoch of the surrealists and situating himself in opposition to postmodernism, Richardson’s argument brings with it the claim that we can read Bataille ‘outside’ the specificities of our own reading moment, as if we can access an omniscient historical perspective ‘outside’ an epoch described as ‘postmodernist’ or otherwise. The call for a ‘historical’ Bataille is accompanied by a completely unhistorical absence of any self-questioning of the historical specifics and limitations of one’s reading practice.

Like others in the historical turn, Richardson is sympathetic towards Habermas’s critique of post-modernism but wishes to rescue Bataille from such associations. Richardson’s disentanglement of Bataille from post-modernism continues ‘While there are undoubtedly legitimate reasons for post-structuralism and post-modernism to see a pre-figuration of certain of their themes in Bataille’s work, too often (and this is an ideological problem inherent in the post-modernist position in so far as it tends towards a contempt for the unfolding of history) it appropriates his work in a way that is contemptuous of its determinants.’ For Richardson, ‘it is problematic to append to its dominion a thinker who

died before even structuralism had really become established as a specific methodological approach'.⁸⁹ While Richardson's reading is more overtly simplistic and problematic, it does illuminate a hidden idealism found in more sophisticated readings within the historical turn: the idealism of the 'original text' and the 'original reading', that only one reading can occur, and that we can return to an original context free of the specific coordinates of our own reading moment. 'History' is being posited as a transcendental guarantee free of the complexities of actual historical or historiographical thinking. In this sense, we might say these readings are addressing the challenge issued by the diverse array of thought labelled 'postmodernist' or described as 'postmodernism', a challenge which Peter Osborne describes as a 'revenge of the philosophical discourse of modernity upon Marxism for neglecting problems in the philosophy of history'.⁹⁰ While Richardson's opposition to postmodernism may not be developed in explicitly Marxist terms it is one which takes for granted 'history' with no self-questioning of the historiographical framework implied.⁹¹ Like Stoekl's wish to disentangle Bataille from postmodernism in order to assert a 'direction for history', Richardson rejects postmodernism because, as he puts it, it has a contempt for 'the unfolding of history'. A fundamental conflation is being made throughout the historical scene: a postmodernist critique of certain developmental models of history is misinterpreted as a negation of history as such. That simplistic model of history is then reasserted by critics as varied as Stoekl and Richardson.

Similarly, Richardson's reading of a historical Bataille against 'Theory' attempts to construct two separate edifices, 'History' against 'Theory'. I argue that the strict separation of history and theory can only lead to deeply problematic theoretical contradictions as well as quite conservative readings. The one term is always contaminated by the other, and thinking either term in isolation disavows its entanglements in the opposite: any progressive reading

⁸⁹ Richardson, *Georges Bataille*, pp.4-5.

⁹⁰ Peter Osborne, *The Politics of the Time* (London: Verso, 1995), p. ix.

⁹¹ Although it is noteworthy that *The Absence of Myth* was published by Verso.

practice must recognize that theory does not take place in a historical vacuum and history cannot simply be posited outside of complex theoretical issues. Deconstruction provides a useful example as it is often the target of generalisations that suggest it neglects or ignores history but this is precisely the point of Osborne's remark: a critique of conventional historiography has often been mistaken for a dismissal of history. As Geoffrey Bennington has argued 'it would not be difficult to construct an argument showing that deconstruction, insofar as it insists on the necessary non-coincidence of the present with itself, is in fact in some senses the most historical of discourses imaginable'.⁹²

If, as I argued in the last chapter, *October* critics such as Yve-Alain Bois sought to purify Bataille's thought from the political entanglements, a major problem latent in the historical turn is the desire to disentangle Bataille's writing from its posthumous reception, seeking to 'return' to a pre-postmodern ideal of the original text, thus at times positing the most idealist and unhistorical manoeuvre under a 'historical' guise. The moralism of this position is also evident in subtler accounts, such as that of Stoekl who does not quite make the same generalizations as Richardson yet still posits postmodernism as 'bad' in contrast to Bataille who, as he says above, retained the possibility of an ethics.

My critique benefits from hindsight and is of course compromised within the very processes I am criticizing. But the two broad positions I have been engaging with in the past two chapters, 'theory' and 'history', show, and can perhaps only show with the benefit of hindsight this study benefits from, the need for a methodological excess when reading Bataille. The co-existence of incompatibles: not history *or* theory but history *and* theory. I am not arguing for an explicitly poststructuralist or a historical Bataille. My research shows, rather, that any reading of Bataille should consistently recognise its own contamination on a conceptual level. For example, the majority of the historical readings position themselves in

⁹² Geoffrey Bennington, 'Demanding history', *Post-Structuralism and the question of history*, ed. by Attridge et al., p.17.

opposition to post-structuralism, or more broadly postmodernism. The painful irony is that an early reading calling for a more historical perspective, as I have shown, came from Jean-Luc Nancy, a post-structuralist philosopher. While certain polemical breaks generate interesting new readings, the lack of reflection upon how one's own reading practice is implicated in what it claims to be negating also generates deeply problematic binaries such as 'history and 'theory' or 'experience' and 'language', and the consolidation of such oppositions and neat separations generate weak reading practices.

Separation and Fetishisation: Bataille Consistently Set Apart

In a 1995 article for the magazine *Art Press*, former *Tel Quel* writer Jean-Louis Houdebine considers a resurgence of interest in Bataille, prompted by the appearance of three new books, Georges Didi-Huberman's *La Ressemblance informe: ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*, the publication of conference proceedings entitled *Georges Bataille-après tout* and a reedition of the texts of the Collège de Sociologie.⁹³ Houdebine expresses dissatisfaction with the historical reading of Bataille but he makes little claim for a political reading of Bataille either. 'Not that Bataille ever got bogged down in politics', he writes, a highly contestable claim.⁹⁴ He makes acute remarks about the static nature of historical readings. He notes that the desire to 'update' the historical perspective, considering Bataille in a 'post-transgressive' and 'post-totalitarian' world, is sensible however he notes that 'its main effect is nonetheless to make Bataille an object, an object of historical knowledge amenable to specialist analyses of textual strategies, theoretical and aesthetic issues and of Bataille's inscription in the political and cultural context of the age. In a nutshell, Bataille as literary-historical object'.⁹⁵

⁹³ Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe : ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris : Macula, 1995), *Georges Bataille après tout*, ed. by Denis Hollier (Paris: Belin, 1995), *La Collège de Sociologie*, ed. by Denis Hollier (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

⁹⁴ Jean-Louis Houdebine, 'l'Enjeu Bataille: What Bataille Means Today', *Art Press*, 204 (1995), p.42

⁹⁵ Houdebine, *Art Press*, 204, p.43.

Here we might note that at least Stoekl consistently refers to his contemporary moment in his reading of Bataille and thus shows a degree of sensitivity to the compromise of his position, unlike Richardson who wants to simply return to the inter-war literary-historical object. However, Houdebine himself repeats the position of the historicists in seeking to mark a separation between Bataille and everyone else. ‘There is a Bataille syndrome’, he writes, ‘whenever you try to talk about him people at once throw in his escorts – Blanchot (the limpet), Leiris and Caillois, Benjamin and Foucault and so on. As if the fact of their meeting at a given historical moment made all these names and texts equivalent; as if Bataille were not *a unique case, beyond equivalence*.⁹⁶ As if, as V. Kauffmann points out in her paper, the function of Bataille’s work were not to move all forms of “community” not “towards construction, but towards destruction.”⁹⁷ Like Stoekl’s wish to separate Bataille apart from all the theorists he is compared with, Houdebine too wants to set him apart in quite an absolute sense. This is strange in Houdebine’s case as with *Tel Quel* a lineage was established where Bataille’s name was regularly listed in conjunction with other transgressive writers. Michael Richardson repeats the same contradictory manoeuvre: he lists Bataille among a list of outsiders but then asserts that Bataille is the ultimate outsider, ‘beyond equivalence’ in Houdebine’s terms, despite having posited an equivalence.

Richardson writes that ‘Bataille saw himself in the line of nineteenth-century outsiders like Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and even Comte, the vitality of whose thought he believed was conditioned by the fact that they remained outside the confines of an academic career properly speaking’.⁹⁸ Richardson goes on to valorise Bataille for a certain marginality, dissidence and authenticity, in terms we encounter in subtler iterations throughout Bataille reception. He writes that ‘it seems rather ironic that most of his post-modernist admirers advance their ‘deconstruction’ from within secure university posts, quite content to sit in

⁹⁶ My emphasis.

⁹⁷ Houdebine, *Art Press*, 204, p.43.

⁹⁸ Richardson, *Georges Bataille*, p.16.

front of the academic fireside and play games with the statement of the wind rather than confront the wind itself.’⁹⁹

Richardson does not give the reader an indication of exactly what confronting ‘the wind itself’ would entail. This is not the first time Bataille’s outsider status has been used in relation to the university. We noted earlier how *Tel Quel* and Sollers in particular used Bataille’s outsider status to reinforce a sense of marginality and dissidence in relation to the French university system and Parisian publishing scene. However, the appeal to authenticity is, of course, in complete opposition to *Tel Quel*. More interesting is the absence of reflection upon Richardson’s own compromised position as an academic. Indeed, if ‘deconstruction’ was severely compromised for Richardson by its secure university position, it was relentlessly self-questioning of its own compromise and complicity. Richardson again appeals to a space of authenticity and purity beyond the university and beyond the confines of language. The reader gets an opposition between language ‘games’ separate from reality itself.¹⁰⁰ Such oppositions and appeals to authenticity ignore quite a significant history of critical theory and continental philosophy and assert a reading of Bataille (as simplistically privileging experience over language, as if the former is purely the domain of the Real) that has been virtually discredited by Peter Connor’s analysis of inner experience in *The Mysticism of Sin*.

The appeals of the historicists to authenticity and to a non-discursive real in the face of postmodernism attest to what Alain Badiou has called a ‘passion du réel’.¹⁰¹ This tendency becomes exacerbated within postmodern culture, seeking to discard the surfeit of signification characteristic of late capitalism, in a usually misguided attempt to isolate a raw fragment of the real. It reacts against postmodernism with the naïve implication that critical

⁹⁹ Richardson, *Georges Bataille*, p.16.

¹⁰⁰ For Alenka Zupancic, the tendency that ultimately identifies the Real ‘with some unspeakable authenticity or Truth is the nihilist tendency par excellence’. Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 2003), pp.129-30.

¹⁰¹ See Alain Badiou *Le Siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2005).

reading entails little more than a process of ‘unmasking’ the semblance to discover the ‘truth’ content beneath, a truth that lies beyond language, these readings suggest, failing to consider the complex intertwinement of language and experience/history. Even Fredric Jameson, not always the most sympathetic reader of postmodernist theory, has emphasised our inability to access history except through discourse, and thus noted the compromised implications. He proposes ‘that history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious’.¹⁰² The oppositions between language and a more authentic history are thus inherently contradictory.

In the last chapter it was noted that the predominance for the abject in contemporary art represented a similar ‘passion for the real’, to communicate with an intensity outside the abstractions and significations characteristic of postmodern culture. While historical and political issues were sometimes elided at *October*, the strength of critics such as Krauss and Foster in reading Bataille was the emphasis on contamination on a *conceptual* level. This meant that Bataille’s influence extended into broader and more adventurous theoretical and conceptual issues rather than being merely associated with specific aesthetic affects, such as the abject. When either the abject, or ‘History’, have been over-emphasised in reading Bataille, it has usually been in the context of wanting to make Bataille’s text more ‘real’, but the conception of what constitutes the real is a simply reactionary idea of ‘beyond language’. By ignoring their own complicity in what they claim to be negating, such readings, particularly in the historicist case, go against interdisciplinarity. Bataille’s marginality becomes a separation, set apart from everyone else in moralizing puritan terms, and discourses and disciplines become separated out, forcing divisions between ‘history’ and

¹⁰² Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Verso, 2002), p.20.

‘theory’. While this scene of reception thus gave some necessary reconsiderations to the centrality of political issues in Bataille’s work which I have attempted to trace, I have also shown the limitations of such a historicist trajectory in reading Bataille.

Chapter Four - 'Entryism' and 'Marginality': Exploring a Counter-Tradition of UK Music Journalism

Introduction

In this chapter I examine the reception of Bataille within a tradition of popular music journalism in the UK. This tradition has been loosely characterised by the cultural theorist Mark Fisher as an exemplar of 'popular modernism'. For Fisher this meant that the 'elitist project of modernism was retrospectively vindicated. At the same time, popular culture definitively established that it did not have to be populist'.¹⁰³ A particularly exemplary case of 'popular modernism' for Fisher is the weekly music paper *New Musical Express* (NME) during the post-punk period (1978-1984). During this period the NME was marked by an abundance of references to French theory and an often intellectual and erudite writing style that was also targeted at a wide non-specialist readership, reflecting Fisher's contention that 'difficulty' and the 'popular' are not incompatible terms.

The music journalist Simon Reynolds has offered a more specific theorisation of 'popular modernism' in music journalism and has also quoted Bataille with an exceptional regularity.¹⁰⁴ For this reason Reynolds will be a central figure in this chapter as both a secondary source framing the scene of reception but also a key writer whose own use of Bataille will be examined in detail. In his first book *Blissed Out*, a collection of journalism from 1990, Reynolds describes a marginal and unorthodox 'counter-tradition' of journalism which has challenged preconceived notions about music writing. He identifies this as a 'renegade tradition'. Reynolds includes some writers dating from the sixties but the 'renegade tradition' was largely consolidated around, and influenced by, post-punk music and the

¹⁰³ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Future* (Winchester: Zero, 2014), pp.22-23. For context, Fisher also writes about theory and music journalism that 'along with public service broadcasting, the NME constituted a kind of supplementary-information education system, in which theory acquired a strange, lustrous glamour'. Fisher, p.17.

¹⁰⁴ Bataille's place in popular music journalism is inconsistent and sporadic in terms of who referenced him and when. Reynolds is a rare example of a mainstream music journalist who consistently references Bataille. To take the example of some of his major books, Bataille is directly referenced on four occasions in *Rip it uUp and Start Again*, six times in *Energy Flash*, twice in *Bring the Noise* and on many occasions throughout *Blissed Out* as discussed later in this chapter.

writing coming from the *NME* during that period.¹⁰⁵ Reynolds's description of the 'renegade tradition' could be broadly compared to a popular rewriting of *Tel Quel*'s conception of *écriture*. Against the unifying practices of reading, with its tendency to consolidate 'meaning', music writing for Reynolds disrupts meaning. He describes the 'renegade tradition', in the terms of Roland Barthes, as a turn from plaisir to jouissance, away from the 'secure enjoyment of identity through time' to a discourse that plays 'havoc with those tidy schemes'.¹⁰⁶ Reynolds describes his dissatisfaction with a number of critical discourses, such as literary criticism with its emphasis on authenticity, or cultural studies with its claims to subversion and unconscious resistance. These various discourses hold in common a fixation on interpretation and judgement. The rock discourse he is concerned with, in contrast, has 'been host to a renegade tradition'. He establishes this outsider tradition as follows:

Instead of arbitration, these writers opt for exaltation. Instead of interpretation and elucidation, they seek to amplify the chaos, opacity and indeterminacy of music. Instead of reading and writing, they prefer rending and writhing. Instead of legibility/legitimation, they prefer the illegible and illicit. Instead of seeking to align rock music with constructive ends, they prefer deconstruction/destruction, the sheer waste of energy into the void. This counter-tradition would include figures like Nik Cohn, Lester Bangs, Paul Morley and Ian Penman, Barney Hoskyns and Chris Bohn.¹⁰⁷

This chapter examines Bataille's place within that 'renegade tradition'. Post-punk holds a particular importance as this was the period in which the 'renegade tradition' came to prominence. Post-punk as a cultural turn created a space quite receptive to Bataille's theory, particularly in its aesthetic bleakness and political pessimism. This will necessitate a brief pre-history looking at some of the major counter-cultural changes from the libertarianism and

¹⁰⁵ In the introduction to his history of post-punk, for example, Reynolds refers again to the tradition emphasising the new importance for music writing during this period, seen almost on the same level as the music itself: 'The writing of the new generation of music journalists who took over – Morley, Savage, Ian Penman, Jane Suck, Dave McCullough, Chris Bohn, to name only the most influential – seemed to be made of the same *stuff* as the music they championed'. Reynolds, *Rip it Up and Start Again* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. xviii.

¹⁰⁶ Reynolds, *Blissed Out* (London: Rock's Backpages, 2011), Amazon Kindle e-book ('Introduction', para. 2, location 101).

¹⁰⁷ Reynolds, *Blissed Out*, ('Introduction', para. 5, location 101).

utopianism associated with the sixties counter-culture to the contrasting predominance of restraint and dysopia in post-punk. Bataille's appeal is initially for the anti-idealist political realism informing post-punk. Bataille is also cited in the context of post-punk music journalism which views alienation as something seductive and counter-intuitively attractive. In this regard Bataille's theory of the abject was central because it entailed embracing marginality and using exclusion from mainstream culture as a potentially subversive position. I trace a number of key readings of the Bataillean abject by music journalists including Barney Hoskyns, Chris Bohn and David Keenan, examining the ambivalence between an anti-idealist perspective and anti-political one. I comparatively analyse these readings of Bataille with parallel tendencies in academia. Nick Land's work displays a similar fetishisation of both cultural marginality and a non-discursive conception of the real in what I argue is a largely reactionary reading of Bataille that bears close comparison with key readings examined in the 'renegade tradition'. After elaborating a critique of parallel readings of Bataille in both music journalism and academic readings I return to the work of Simon Reynolds at the end of the chapter. Bataille has an important impact on how Reynolds thinks the relationship between music, the political and the Dionysian. In February 1987, Reynolds wrote an article for the music weekly *Melody Maker*, entitled 'The Heat of Noise', outlining his philosophy in terms evocative of a manifesto. 'The pleasure of noise lies in the fact that the obliteration of meaning and identity is ecstasy (literally, being out-of-oneself)' he writes. Expressing his antipathy to idealistic conceptions of the political in music, Reynolds puts forward an anti-political Dionysianism:

Forget subversion. The point is self-subversion, overthrowing the power structure in your own head. The enemy is the mind's tendency to systematize, sew up experience, place a distance between itself and immediacy...
The goal is OBLIVION (a.k.a jouissance, the sublime, the ineffable ...).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Simon Reynolds, 'Noise', *Audioculture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. By Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), p.57.

The authors of *Rock Criticism from the Beginning* note that the article reads like an ‘antihumanist manifesto’ and draw out the explicit comparisons with the French avant-garde. ‘The manifesto is a typical avant-garde genre’ they note. ‘But instead of reading the avant-garde through Situationism, Reynolds chooses Bataille’s radical version of the classical avant-garde’.¹⁰⁹ The authors of *Rock Criticism* point towards two routes of French avant-garde impact on popular music writing, one through a politicised Marxism of the Situationists, the other through the proto-poststructuralist reading of Bataille. However, the significance of Bataille is only mentioned in passing. My research unearths the empirical and direct ways in which Bataille’s work was used by Reynolds and the marked influence it had on his work. I argue similarly that it was an antipolitical reading of Bataille which had the most impact but I go on to show the various specific uses of Bataille by Reynolds, which are much more varied than suggested here, sometimes using Bataille’s work in unexpected ways. Where I show in the first half of the chapter that Bataille’s work has principally been used in relation to dark nihilistic aesthetics, the importance of Reynolds’s readings are the contradictory oscillations: Bataille’s theories are applied to aesthetically dark, nihilist music, but he also reads Bataille alongside effeminate and surprisingly politicised aesthetic styles. Reading Bataille through Reynolds, the sense of uncertainty of which cultural space his text might ‘belong’ to keeps the performativity of the text alive in a progressive manner. Similarly, the oscillations between the political and the anti-political raise valuable critical insights in relation to the academic readings explored in chapters two and three. Bataille has been read on both sides of the ‘theory wars’ as mutually exclusive with the other. Chapter two focused on Bataille through theory, chapter three on readings emphasising the historical, with both intellectual scenes sometimes displaying an incompatible antagonism towards the other. The application of Bataille to vastly conflicting aesthetic styles examined in the latter

¹⁰⁹Ulf Lindberg et al. *Rock Criticism from the Beginning* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), p.282.

half of the chapter allows us to develop a ‘methodological excess’ in reading Bataille, to consolidate the argument that ‘history’ or ‘theory’, or the political and the anti-political, are opposing tensions which can actually be simultaneously affirmed, and that reading Bataille across different cultural spaces demands such paradoxes.

A Selective Prehistory of Post-punk

The factors enabling the receptivity of Bataille in the aftermath of punk were myriad. One of the central issues I wish to focus on is the differing conceptions of the political arising from punk music, generally vastly more pessimistic than other subcultural movements which preceded it. Historical accounts of punk and post-punk have repeatedly framed this counter-cultural turn as a transition from utopianism of the cultural politics of the sixties to the bleak, quasi-dystopian cultural affects which became more dominant in the nineteen seventies. The music journalist, and historian of punk, Jon Savage has observed the strikingly gloomy and apocalyptic mood which dominated British culture from early in the decade. Savage identifies one of the most popular musicians of the time, David Bowie, as being exemplary in this regard, particularly on three peak albums: *Aladdin Sane* evoked imminent world war, *Diamond Dogs* was a concept album based on Orwell’s *1984*, again evoking imminent dystopia, while *Ziggy Stardust*’s ‘Five Years’ was a countdown to the apocalypse. Savage elaborates:

Like the best pop, this connected with what people were feeling. In 1974, the lights were going out: the OPEC oil-price rise of the previous year was pushing an already unstable economy into recession. Reeling from the three-day week of the previous December, the Heath government had finally fallen in February to a successful miners’ strike and the collapse of its credit boom, which had been devised to buy the way out of trouble. The long postwar party was over, and with it the democratic consumer ideal.¹¹⁰

Among a number of factors, the rise of punk has often been framed partially in response to the bleak socio-economic reality of Britain described by Savage. The narrative around punk

¹¹⁰ Jon Savage, *England’s Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p.77.

has also been compounded by the fact that such socio-economic decline occurred in the aftermath of a particularly idealistic counter-cultural moment in the late sixties. 'Punk' is thus often framed as being generated out of an antipathy towards the misleading idealism of sixties 'hippy' culture, and its political and social naivety. On similar terms, David Wise and Stuart Wise wrote a pamphlet dating from 1978 entitled the 'End of Music' which traced the genesis of punk alongside English situationism. The Wises identify an exceptional negativity as being characteristic of both punk music and English situationism, a negativity divorced from any political usefulness. For example, commenting upon many groups' preoccupation with serial killers such as Jack the Ripper and Mary Bell, they write:

The most deranged manifestations of hate against the present organisation of society were greeted with fascination [...] Look at the monstrosities produced by bourgeois society – isn't that sufficient to condemn the golden afternoon of hippy ideology? There was a greater emphasis on such negatives than the revolutionary negative. Socialism or barbarism? Rosa Luxembourg's stark choice was giggled at – better barbarism. Better to be horrible than a pleasant, altruistic hippy, as a kind of undialectical over-reaction to a hippy.¹¹¹

The critic Ellen Willis has similarly described the development of rock music since the sixties as a move away from any affirmationist tendencies to an increasingly uncompromising negativity, with a growing sense of political and social despair. In the introduction to a collection of her writings dating from the sixties, she writes:

The pieces on rock-and-roll included here trace its development as an expression of youth culture, from the expansive mix of rebellion and affirmation that informed sixties rock [...] to the harsh, defiant, no-exit negativism of punk rock in the late seventies. The collective NO! has only gotten louder as rap and heavy metal, in different ways and (so far) for different audiences, transmit youthful anger at marginality and powerlessness; affirmation is still hard to find.¹¹²

The political negativity of post-punk coincided with a cultural turn which not only destabilized the boundaries between high and low culture, but emphasised the ambiguity and

¹¹¹ David Wise and Stuart Wise, 'The End of Music', *What is Situationism: A Reader*, ed. by Stewart Home (London: AK Press, 1996), p.67.

¹¹² Ellen Willis, 'Introduction to Second Edition', *Beginning to See the Light* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), pp. xxvi-xxvii.

complicity of all forms of resistance within capitalism. The critic Robert Garnett has noted that punk's emergence in 1976 was roughly contemporaneous with the rise in currency of the term 'Postmodernism' within intellectual culture. Garnett writes that 'It was around punk that the reconfiguration of the interface between high art and popular music first began to be conducted'.¹¹³ In this respect a leading intellectual trend of postmodernism, or the 'cultural turn', was the work of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies. Garnett notes that one of the first studies to examine popular culture from the perspective of semiotics was Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, written in the aftermath of punk in 1979. Similarly, Stuart Hall's landmark essays appeared during this period in which he developed arguments and methodologies for popular culture as an essential field of academic and political analysis.¹¹⁴

Cultural Studies viewed subcultures such as punk as a process of 'containment/resistance'.¹¹⁵ In other words, Cultural Studies avoids any easy moralizing dismissals of consumerism and searches for points of subversion within popular consumption. The consumerist impulses guiding subcultures does not render them a 'pure' form of resistance but neither does it completely de-legitimize them as practices of resistance within and against capitalism and alienation. The 'renegade tradition' shares this sense of ambivalence and complicity around forms of resistance within postmodernism, but as we will see, Simon Reynolds and other music journalists are often in direct antagonism with Cultural Studies' notions of 'subversion' and 'meaning', preferring instead 'self-subversion' and a 'pure waste of energy into the void'. Reynolds and others follow the attempts to destabilize high and low culture characteristic of postmodernism and Cultural Studies, however I argue

¹¹³ Roger Garnett, 'Too Low to be Low', *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, ed. by Roger Sabin (London: Routledge, 1990), p.19.

¹¹⁴ See for example, Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson eds. *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. (London: Harper Collins, 1991), and Stuart Hall 'Notes on Deconstructing "the Popular"', *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. by John Storey (Essex: Pearson Prentice Hall, 1998), pp. 442-453.

¹¹⁵ Hall, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, p.443.

below that the direct influence of Bataille comes in the form of a break with such concern for subversion in favour of a sometimes nihilistic antipathy to the political.

Post-Punk Politics: ‘Time to Wake Up’

In the aftermath of punk music’s cultural climax (1976-1977), the flourishing of an intellectual culture around music journalism during the post-punk period (1978-1984) created a receptive cultural space for Bataille’s work. The complex evolution of conceptions of the political within music journalism and subcultures can help us understand this. Leaving aside the specifically musical developments, post-punk shared the bleakness and negativity of punk but with a more sophisticated political consciousness. The primal anger or ‘agit-prop protest’ of punk music quickly came to be seen as too simplistic.¹¹⁶ Simon Reynolds, in his study of post-punk, writes that as well as recognizing that ‘the personal is political’, ‘the most acute of these groups captured the way in which “the political is personal” – how current events and the actions of government invade everyday life’.¹¹⁷ An exploration of the insidious effects of ideology on everyday life was a more viable and realistic political expression than a merely oppositional one which punk sometimes limited itself to. The *NME* journalist Andy Gill exemplifies this perspective on subtlety in post-punk politics in his 1979 review of an LP by The Residents who, he writes, ‘instead of identifying a cultural malaise and ranting on about it’, have instead ‘made an album which *hints* at a problem and, without laborious explanations or crocodile tears, actually implements a possible solution, forcing the listener to adopt a role other than consumer’.¹¹⁸ Rather than directly confronting ideological and political issues, the argument is that their insidious effects on our lives demand a response which is similarly indirect and implicitly evocative.

The combination of this more sophisticated political perspective with a virulent antipathy towards previous forms of counter-cultural idealism is usefully exemplified by the

¹¹⁶ Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984*, p. xxii.

¹¹⁷ Reynolds, *Rip it Up*, p. xxiii.

¹¹⁸ Andy Gill, ‘The Residents: Eskimo’, *NME*, 6 October 1979, p. 50.

group This Heat. Their music displayed the influence of many facets of European modernism such as existentialist literature, musique concrète and krautrock. Their challenging, agitated and paranoia-inflected music was intended to awaken the listener, to instil a political consciousness. From this perspective they were unsurprisingly hostile towards ‘hippy’ culture. In order to instigate a painful state of alertness in the listener they deliberately avoided any music that might sound ‘psychedelic’ or ‘drifty’. Band member Charles Hayward described the aesthetic aims:

Our intent was not to get people drunk or stoned with our music but to get people to free themselves up. It’s like psychedelic methodology, but with the characteristic post-punk coldness and dryness, the angularity and sobriety [...] The postpunk Zeitgeist was very sharp-edged, it was all about ‘time to wake up’. Demystification was the big word. It was abrasively anti-Romantic. But that was because it was an urgent time: music that was about blissing out or otherworldly what-not seemed decadent.¹¹⁹

The music did not aim for intoxication but a sense of alertness. This anti-romantic cold angularity did not amount to a socially realist aesthetic but it could be described as a particular kind of ‘realist’ political sensibility. For post-punk bands like This Heat, the preoccupation with alerting oneself to the harsh conditions of the present meant awakening from dreams of utopian futures which characterised psychedelia, or even progressive-music (which This Heat’s Hayward described as ‘decadent’). In this sense, post-punk’s ‘realism’ entailed elements of dystopia, horror and surreality, viewed as being embedded in contemporary life. The political realism, or anti-idealism, will be essential for elaborating the reception of both Bataille and theory more broadly within the ‘renegade tradition’ of music journalism.

¹¹⁹ ‘This Heat Interview by Simon Reynolds: A Totally Wired Outtake’ *The Quietus*, published February 11, 2009. <<http://thequietus.com/articles/01122-this-heat-interviewed-by-simon-reynolds-an-outtake-from-totally-wired>> [accessed 10 September 2014].

The Turn to Europe

Post-punk groups were often more directly influenced by literature and art than music. A turn away from America to Europe for inspiration also shaped the new counter-culture. There is an abundance of European, especially French, literary references throughout post-punk. To take an example of several prominent groups, The Fall took their name from the title of the Albert Camus novel, The Pop Group referenced French writers such as Jean Genet, Scritti Politti had songs such as 'Jacques Derrida' and read extensively in French theory, the Subway Sect's Vic Godard was a noted Francophile, and art-rock groups such as Wire and the explicitly Marxist Gang of Four were influenced by the theories of the Situationist International, as were many of their contemporaries.

The influence of European modernism upon the politics and aesthetics of post-punk music is partially exemplified by a series of albums recorded by Iggy Pop and David Bowie in Berlin where both performers shifted from popular mainstream and rock styles to more contemplative, experimental and introspective musical styles and subject matter. For many key figures in the transition from punk to post-punk, Europe evoked a horizon of intellectual sophistication signalling a shift from more primitive rock music to something closer to high art.¹²⁰ The rise of a new bleak European aesthetic in popular music, often focused on Berlin in particular, was so perennial that it became the subject of mockery. Writing in the *New Musical Express* (NME), music journalist, and key 'renegade' figure Ian Penman expressed frustration with musicians seeking to emulate a 'New Europe' aesthetic centred on Berlin, which he compared to the fin de siècle Vienna circle. Penman writes 'Why does West Germany (or half-formed illusions about it and allusions to it) qualify as this strange "New Europe" horizon. Whither Tunisia, Italy or Spain'.¹²¹ However Penman was not entirely

¹²⁰ Howard Devoto was a member of the punk group but left after one EP in 1977 to form his own group, Magazine. Devoto has said that he wished to form a group that took the energy and spirit of punk but informed it with the atmospherics and sophistication of David Bowie and Iggy Pop's Berlin LPs.

¹²¹ Ian Penman, 'The Further Decline And Fall Of The Western World', *NME*, 9 September 1978, <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/ultravox-isystems-of-romancei>> [accessed 20 January 2013].

critical of the aesthetic in itself, merely the hackneyed versions of 'New Europe' which were beginning to proliferate. In fact, Penman's writing exuded a well-read background in European modernism and French philosophy which majorly contributed to a significant change in how music was written about at the *NME*, ushering in a new wave of music writing. The perspective of new writers like Penman and Paul Morley created a contrast with previously dominant writers such as Charles Shaar Murray and Nick Kent. Murray's review of David Bowie's *Low* offers a particularly useful example of how music journalism changed around post-punk, with its increasing turn towards European modernism. Murray was a leading *NME* writer of the early nineteen seventies. As a journalist who often championed more stereotypically masculine guitar-solos and stadium rock groups such as Led Zeppelin, Murray finds the moodiness and introspection of Bowie's ground-breaking record 'passive', 'in-ward looking' and 'egotistical'. Murray says that it is 'decadent in the sense that it glamourizes and glorifies passive decay and I don't give a shit about how clever it may or may not be'.¹²² The shifting tide from extrovert rock groups to introverted experimentation, from an Anglo-American sensibility to a more European one, and especially in what Murray refers to as the glorification of 'passive decay', offers an example of the emergence of a new cultural moment which Murray does not quite grasp. However, beginning approximately with the editorship of Neil Spencer, from 1978 onwards, a new wave of writers came to prominence with the *NME*, much more receptive to 'passive decay', nihilism and introspection exemplified by Bowie's *Berlin*.

'Theory' and 'Music': The Renegades' Critique of Cultural Studies

During this period *NME* writers began to regularly refer to French philosophers and to make other intertextual references in their music reviews. In his history of the *NME*, Pat Long

¹²² Charles Shaar Murray, 'David Bowie: Low', *NME*, 22 January 1977, accessed via <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/david-bowie-ilowi-3>> [Accessed 20 January 2013].

noted ‘suddenly the pages of NME assumed something of the atmosphere of the staff common room of the philosophy department of a small provincial university’.¹²³

Ian Penman’s first article for the *NME* was a 1978 live review of Adam and the Ants which makes reference to Nazi Death Camps and Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty.¹²⁴ In a live review of Iggy Pop in the summer of 1978 Penman describes the singer’s stage arrival in dramatic terms. ‘No coloured, only white lights on’ he writes. ‘Musicians subdued. Iggy steps forward. He could be *the* existential hero, he could be a cabaret singer.’¹²⁵ This oscillation between existential hero and cabaret singer encapsulates the shifts taking place in writing about music at this point, indicative of the broader postmodern, or cultural turn, where the distinctions between high and low culture were becoming increasingly destabilized.¹²⁶ Penman’s writing suggests that the excitement and collective experience generated at a popular concert creates a visceral impact, but also a space for intellectual reflection. Midway through the gushing review in which Penman struggles to find words to match the intensity of the experience he declares ‘I need a new vocabulary for this.’ Penman’s attempt to grapple with the ineffable in a mass cultural format exemplifies what Mark Fisher refers to as ‘popular modernism’. This form of journalism suggests that ‘difficulty’ and ground-breaking aesthetic representation are not the preserves of any one genre, social class or cultural hierarchy. For Penman, a pop concert is an encounter with important and challenging culture. Similarly, as is implied here, a popular music review in a mass circulation music magazine was as valid a format of exploring the limits of linguistic representation in relation to cultural experience as any other

¹²³ Pat Long, ‘The Ghost of Roland Barthes is Suitably Perplexed: NME in the Post-Punk Era’, (London: Portico books, 2012) Excerpt published:< <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/the-ghost-of-roland-barthes-is-suitably-perplexed-nmei-in-the-post-punk-era>> [Accessed 24 October 2013].

¹²⁴ Ian Penman, ‘X Ray Spex, Adam and the Ants, The Automatics: The Roundhouse: London’, *NME*, 20 May 1978, accessed via< <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/x-ray-spex-adam-the-ants-the-automatics-the-roundhouse-london>> [Accessed 24 October 2013].

¹²⁵ Ian Penman, ‘Iggy Pop: Music Machine, London’, *NME* 24 June 1978, accessed via <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/iggy-pop-pure-popfor-iggy-people>> [Accessed 24 October 2013].

¹²⁶ See Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn* (London: Verso, 1998).

form of writing. This attitude was not unique to Penman but was exemplified by many writers at the *NME* during this period.

One of the problems with some conventional Cultural Studies accounts of the relationship between popular music and theory, or between low and high culture in postmodernism, is that the same hierarchical schemas are maintained, merely with different points of emphasis, the low substituted for the high, unwittingly producing an unpostmodern form of binary thinking. In this regard Roger Garnett offers a pertinent critique of Simon Frith, the noted cultural studies scholar, and his landmark *Art into Pop* (1987, co-authored with Howard Horne). Frith's perspective, Garnett explains, does not really deconstruct the relationship between 'art' and 'pop', but merely affirms the 'popular' side of the equation, 'which is, consequently, over-privileged and thus the opposition is re-enforced. When reading studies like this, it is not difficult to detect behind the "postmodernist" façade a misplaced counter-chauvinistic prejudice against the aesthetic'.¹²⁷ The 'renegade tradition' at its best challenges the false populism of this postmodernist perspective where the 'popular' is overstated and overcompensated for. The inverse problem would be that 'theory' would educate music by elevating it to the status of art, overemphasising 'art' as a privileged term. This is sometimes encountered in the 'renegade tradition'. For example, in his obituary of the Joy Division singer Ian Curtis, Paul Morley polemically wrote 'Joy Division make art'.¹²⁸ Morley's argument to support the seriousness of this form of popular music is certainly pertinent and well-intentioned but it risks competing on the pre-existing terms of what constitutes 'art', and thus having to raise popular music to the status of art.

The 'renegade tradition' at its best, however, disrupts and deconstructs such forms of binary thinking. The tradition advances the idea that theory can be a generative process of its

¹²⁷ Garnett, 'Too Low to be Low', *So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, p.19.

¹²⁸ 'Paul Morley on Ian Curtis – 'The Myth Gets Stronger'', accessed via <www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/paul-morley-on-ian-curtis-the-myth-gets-stronger> [Accessed online 13 May 2015] (Originally published in *NME*, June 1980).

own, rather than merely a representation of reality. Theory contributes to the constitution and intensification of a reality, more than description or simply representation.¹²⁹ Ian Penman has often challenged the very distinction between theory and music. In an essay on the 1995 Tricky LP 'Maxinquaye', Penman astutely notes 'But the mistake that all too many too-literal critics still make is to keep "music" and "theory" separate. "Theory" is still what the critic cooks up – later – out of the "raw" matter of the Song. But dub unsettles that whole schema'.¹³⁰ In other words, weird and ground-breaking music (in this case Dub music) *necessitates* a theoretical vocabulary ('I need a new vocabulary') to evoke the uncanny within. Challenging concepts are not simply added on to the music. From this perspective, it is already, to an extent, immanent. Similarly, Kodwo Eshun argues that the use of theory in conventional music journalism and academia placidly delibidinizes and stabilises the music rather than intensifying and accentuating its chaos. Eshun complains that 'theory always comes to Music's *rescue*. The organization of sound is interpreted historically, politically, socially'.¹³¹ Eshun instead accentuates the immanence of theory *within* music, and its libidinal pull towards disorientation, with the same hostility as Reynolds towards 'interpretation'. Reynolds often argues that the appeal of theory is 'precisely its power to intoxicate'. But there is a tension running through the 'renegade tradition' between this idea of *theory as an intoxicant*, and Penman's implication of *theory as a critical necessity*. If too much emphasis is placed upon the idea of theory as an intoxicant, then this potentially portrays the writer in the position described by Penman 'cooking up' ideas out of the 'raw matter' of the music. However, an over-emphasis of the use of theory as being solely informed by necessity would also be problematic. This would imply that the music has an objective ontological status with a stable truth to be extracted. Theory would be an

¹²⁹ The key exemplar of this approach is Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. (London: Quartet Books, 1998).

¹³⁰ Ian Penman, 'Black Secret Tricknology', *The Wire* 133 (1995), p.39.

¹³¹ Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*, 00 [-004]. Eshun's book uses an unconventional pagination system.

epistemological/ontological exigency. But surely the view of theory being advanced is based on the instability of any one narrative about epistemological or ontological reality. At its best then, the 'renegade tradition' advances both positions at the same time. The consciousness that concepts and theory are immanent to certain musical forms, that abstract thought is a necessity, is accompanied by a libidinal investment in theory and an awareness that the writing is also intensifying the music, taking the listener/reader's experience of it in new directions. If we think of the role of theory as either libidinally alluring or critically necessary, both sides of this tension deconstruct the false populism of certain less critical iterations of postmodernism, as pointed to by Garnett, where the separation between 'theory' and 'music' is simplistically and sometimes unwittingly reinforced.

The appeal of Bataille's base materialism for such a conception of theory within music journalism is strong. As a precursor to deconstruction, Bataille's base materialism disrupts such forms of binary thinking from a position of immanence. Music is already contaminated by theory for Eshun, Reynolds and the 'renegade tradition' just as the high is already corrupted by the low in Bataille, with the base, the third term, acting as a continuous interruption. My argument is not that Bataille was significantly more influential on the framing of theory in the 'renegade tradition' than any other thinker. However, I argue that Bataille does have a crucial unexamined role in this tradition, particularly in relationship to the anti-political in the work of Simon Reynolds, and that by examining this role we can critically extend our understanding of the broader reception of Bataille. Before elaborating this argument, the following section begins by examining the first references to Bataille within this tradition of music journalism.

‘The Violence of the Sacred’: The Birthday Party

A recurring tendency in Bataille’s reception we have noted is that he is inserted in a lineage, listed as a name amongst names, often as a means of reinforcing a transgressive tradition of outsiders. At the same time the special treatment Bataille’s work has demanded and generated has created a tension: he is repeatedly listed as equivalent to a transgressive pantheon of outsiders, yet at the same time it is often claimed that he is ‘beyond equivalence’.¹³² The reception of his work in popular music writing explored in this chapter is striking for its parallel tendency of repeatedly inserting Bataille in a lineage but his special place as ‘beyond equivalence’ is less often encountered, most likely because the writers do not have an academic specialist interest in Bataille but also because popular cursory readings are unlikely to be accompanied by a knowledge of the complexities of reception. With less awareness of the condemnations by Sartre and Breton, and the critiques of his complicity with fascism, the writers who have partial and fragmented encounters with Bataille in this chapter are often liberated from the necessity to ‘rescue’ him.

Bataille was first directly quoted in the *NME* in 1983 at a time when he remained relatively unknown to a non-academic readership. *Visions of Excess*, the first edited collection of his essays did not emerge until 1985. The only major theoretical writings available in translation were *Literature and Evil* and *Eroticism*. When the journalist Barney Hoskyns quoted Bataille in an interview with the singer Marc Almond in 1983 it was a reference to Bataille’s most famous work, *Story of the Eye*. Writing on Almond’s recent LP *Torment and Toreros* (1983), Hoskyns elaborates on Almond’s interest in bull fighting and the significance of bullfights in art and literary history, referencing ‘the coincidence of the Sacred and the Sexual’ in Leiris’s *Manhood* and Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*. ‘Like Bataille’s’ writes Hoskyns, ‘Marc Almond’s febrile sexuality is aroused by the danger and grandeur of

¹³² See discussion of Jean-Louis Houdebine in previous chapter. This tension is characteristic of both historicist and more postmodern readings of Bataille as already discussed.

the bullfight. He watches and is transformed, just as in Jacques Brel's "The Bulls" (The album's third song), the grocery clerks turn into Don Juan'.¹³³ The version of Bataille that arrives in mainstream music writing in the UK then is what Simon Reynolds would later describe as 'avant-pornography'.¹³⁴ In a similar vein, Hoskyns's first reference to Bataille, earlier in 1983, quoted from *Madame Edwarda*. Reviewing the 'Bad Seed' EP by the group The Birthday Party, Hoskyns concludes with the following reference to Bataille:

If you prefer to take you take your 'love' songs with coffee and notebooks, there's always Squeeze. The Birthday Party alone suggest the frenzy of desire given voice, of dread staged as ritual. As Bataille wrote, 'the nature of our own accord to join in the terrible dance whose rhythm is the one that ends in collapse and which we must accept as it is and for what is it, knowing only the horror it is in perfect harmony with (...)' From bad seeds grow demon flowers.¹³⁵

Hoskyns sets up an opposition where on the one hand love is depicted as placid and unthreatening. If it contains intellectual pretence, it is an arid and sober intellectual association with 'coffee and notebooks'. The contrasting attraction of The Birthday Party, for Hoskyns, is in a Bataillean affirmation of superficially incompatible elements, and love as a frenzied and threatening experience. It is intellectual but at the same time violently primitive. Abstract ideas are invested with primal desire.

Ultimately what Hoskyns is celebrating in the Birthday Party echoes what Bataille identified as the 'left-hand', or impure, sacred. The distinction in these terms of left and right originated from sociologist Robert Hertz's essay 'Death and the Right Hand' which associated the right-hand sacred with purity and attraction, and the left-hand sacred with impurity and repulsion. Bataille referred to the story of Jesus at the Collège de Sociologie as

¹³³ Barney Hoskyns, 'Give this man an Oscar: The Wild Side of Marx Almond', *NME*, 6 August 1983, accessed via <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/give-this-man-an-oscar-the-wilde-side-of-marc-almond>> [Accessed online 26 August 2013].

¹³⁴ Interviewing the post-punk group Devo, Reynolds associates this label with Bataille. In reference to the 'deep-seated disgust with the human body' that comes across in their music, he says 'I know you were into Henry Miller [...] were you also into that whole area of avant-pornography, things like Georges Bataille?', Simon Reynolds, *Totally Wired: Post-Punk interviews and Overviews* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p.47.

¹³⁵ Barney Hoskyns, 'The Birthday Party: The Bad Seed EP', *NME*, 5 February 1983, accessed via <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/the-birthday-party-the-bad-seed-ep>> [Accessed online 17 January 2015].

a vivid example of transition from a left to right hand sacred.¹³⁶ Jesus associated with beggars and took pity on the outcasts of society. He went through torture and scourging, his body becoming a repulsive sight before being resurrected and ascending to be seated at the right-hand of the Father. Divinity thus emerges from a vile and tortured body. Similarly, as discussed in *Sur Nietzsche*, Christian universalism was only possible through the sin of crucifixion. Where the Robert Hertz essay identified the left-hand sacred simply with the profane, Bataille contested that simple confinement. The left-hand is sacred in its own right as it incites a horror and tragic weight incompatible with the profane world of the everyday.

The idea that extreme profanation offers access to the sacred is what Hoskyns celebrates with the Birthday Party. He ends the review with a Bataille quote referencing ritualistic invocations of the sacred while earlier in the piece he argued that the Birthday Party have ‘ripped open rock’s sanctified domain with an unkempt violence equivalent to the sacking of a temple’. The profanation involved here of rock’s ‘sanctified domain’ does not necessarily amount to a pure negation of everything, but could be understood as a reassertion of what constitutes the sacred. Hoskyns writes that the EP takes ‘the violence of the sacred’ to its logical extreme. He then says ‘I am sick to my own death of the happy fools in this profession whose ears are so stopped up with mucus like Combat Rock that they hear nothing in BP creations besides junk/sex/death.’¹³⁷ There is a very specific discursive struggle taking place in this passage which offers a crucial indication of the importance of Bataille’s thought in post-punk more broadly. The reference to *Combat Rock* is a 1982 LP by The Clash who many *NME* writers viewed as morally righteous in their politics, offering little more than an unthreatening form of predictable oppositionality. Hoskyns is arguing that expressing an affinity to the abject pop of the Birthday Party, and opposing pious forms of politics exemplified by The Clash, does not mean one is simply accepting an apolitical passive

¹³⁶ See ‘Attraction et repulsion II. La structure sociale par Georges Bataille, Samedi 5 février 1939’, *Le Collège de Sociologie 1937-1939*, ed. by Denis Hollier (Paris : Gallimard, 1995), pp. 143-68.

¹³⁷ Hoskyns, ‘The Birthday Party: The Bad Seed EP’, *NME*, 5 February 1983.

nihilism of ‘junk/sex/death’. His implicit argument is that the Birthday Party’s exploration of such themes could be described in Nietzschean terms as an ‘active’ nihilism rather than ‘passive’ nihilism, in an engagement with a potential transvaluation of values. It is a Bataillean assertion of the left-hand sacred immanent to intense profanation.

‘The Dionysian Spirit’: Hoskyns and Reynolds

Where The Clash represented a dull humanist socialism for Hoskyns, he viewed The Birthday Party as representative of an anti-humanist Dionysian view of the political directly in line with Bataille. The music journalist Simon Reynolds followed a similar schema to Hoskyns in his music writing during the eighties. Reynolds began writing for *Melody Maker* in 1985 and he describes his work there, alongside his colleague David Stubbs, as an attempt to emulate the approach to music writing of *NME* writers such as Hoskyns, Penman and Morley.¹³⁸ Reynolds cites this exact Bad Seed review by Hoskyns for setting him on the quest for ‘the Dionysian spirit’ in rock music.¹³⁹ Reynolds’s references to the Dionysian more often evoked Bataille than Nietzsche however, or at least the latter mediated through the former. Bataille is referenced through many of Reynolds’s books and reviews and where he is not explicitly referred to, Bataille’s theories of sovereignty, unproductive expenditure and the abject are recurrent. Writing about the abundance of murdered women in Nick Cave songs, Reynolds (co-writing in this case with Joy Press) contextualises the music amidst a transgressive lineage naming Bataille:

The idea that death – whether via a suicide pact or amorous murder – is the pinnacle of transgressive eroticism runs from the Marquis de Sade through the Romantic poets, to Genet, Bataille, Mishima, Miller, Marguerite Duras’s *Moderato Cantabile* [...] ¹⁴⁰

In a 1987 interview article on Nick Cave, Reynolds writes that Cave’s preoccupation with defiled bodies is one aspect of his ‘abject imagination’. Like Hoskyns, Reynolds seems to be

¹³⁸ See Simon Reynolds, ‘Music and Theory’, *Frieze*, published online September 18, 2009, accessed via <http://blog.frieze.com/music_theory/, September 18 2009 > [accessed 24/10/2013].

¹³⁹ Reynolds quoted in Ulf Lindberg et al. *Rock Criticism from the Beginning*, p.279.

¹⁴⁰ Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender Rebellion and Rock’n’Roll* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1995), pp.31-2.

advocating an anti-political reading of Nick Cave underpinned by Bataillean vocabulary. However, an implicit potential for politicisation is usually at work in superficially ‘anti-political’ assertions. For example, Reynolds writes that ‘Really, Cave and his ilk are “agitating” for a broader definition of the human, one that incorporates lapses into the inhuman, incompleteness, a certain dilapidation and impoverishment of the soul. They’re harking back to an older, more religious notion, one where it’s not a question of wholeness of being, but of holes.’¹⁴¹ The assertion that Cave is not simply rejecting the human but arguing for a broader definition demonstrates an oscillation between ‘passive’ and ‘active’ nihilism, asserting a left-hand sacred *as* sacred rather than merely profane, as we saw with Hoskyns. The use of alienation as something to be accentuated (‘holes’) rather than retreated from (‘wholeness of being’) echoes Bataille’s ideas on community and the absence of myth as the only possibility of myth discussed in the previous chapter. I am concerned here with tracing the precise contours and references to Bataille within this scene of music writing but we can also note the broader resonance of Bataille’s account of community as founded upon division. The taste for alienation in counter-cultures stemming from punk creates a more fertile cultural milieu for Bataille’s theory than subcultures which would retreat from alienation. The precise impact of Bataille on this line of thinking, elaborated in relation to the abject, is traced below following further elaboration of how Cave’s music has evoked the work of Bataille for many journalists.

‘The Ethics of Violence’

For Reynolds, Nick Cave offered something unique in the context of post-punk. Contemporary bands, claims Reynolds, often wrote about love as if it was a social contract. The ‘dark side’ was acknowledged but usually in order to be purged within a socialist project.

¹⁴¹ Reynolds, ‘Of Misogyny, Murder and Melancholy: Meeting Nick Cave’, *National Student* 1987, accessed via <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/of-misogyny-murder-and-melancholy-meeting-nick-cave>> [accessed June 15 2013] This is the complete interview which forms the backdrop of Reynolds and Press’s remarks on Cave in *The Sex Revolts*.

Against this retention of use-value, Cave with *The Birthday Party*, writes Reynolds ‘was almost alone in reinvoking love as malady, monologue, abject dependence, a compulsion to devour and be devoured’.¹⁴² In a more recent (2009) review of Cave’s work which gives more clues to the ‘dark side’ link between Cave and Bataille,¹⁴³ another writer from Reynolds’s ‘renegade tradition’, Ian Penman couples the two in the following terms in a retrospective account:

Nick Cave’s image at the time of these mid-1980s albums was huffy poète maudit, drug-pricked singer [...] He was Bataille sung as the blues. He was John Lee Hooker as St. Augustine starring in *Friday The 13th*. He was sui generis: a self-invented preacher come to restore to rock’n’roll its primal daimon.¹⁴⁴

Where John Lee Hooker is substituted as symbolic of ‘the blues’ then the synthesis of ‘St. Augustine’ and ‘Friday the 13th’ in the following line are loosely metonymic substitutions for ‘Bataille’: a mixture of sacred religiosity and pulp horror. Following earlier associations made by Hoskyns and Reynolds, Penman makes explicit that the specifically Bataillean qualities of Cave are his transgressive outsider image as a ‘poète maudit’ and more precisely his evocation of sacred horror.

The first chapter of this thesis explored Bataille’s dissonance with the libertarian sexual politics associated with the sixties counter-culture. Here we can see what appears to be a more natural consonance with the post-punk counter-cultural milieu of both Reynolds’s writing and Cave’s music. The ‘violence of the sacred’ discussed by Hoskyns takes on an ethical dimension, described as an ‘ethics of violence’, in Reynolds’s writing on Cave. For Bataille, transgression is an accession to the sacred which necessarily entails a consciousness of others. This was the basis of his critique of Sade who advocated selfishness and internal

¹⁴² Simon Reynolds, ‘Of Misogyny, Murder and Melancholy: Meeting Nick Cave’, *National Student* 1987 <<http://www.rockbackpages.com/Library/Article/of-misogyny-murder-and-melancholy-meeting-nick-cave>>.

¹⁴³ Fred Botting and Scott Wilson also find links between Bataille and Nick Cave in Botting and Wilson, ‘Pow Pow, Pow’, in *Bataille* (Palgrave: New York, 2001), pp. 127-144. This was originally published as ‘Pow Pow Pow: Hamlet, Bataille and Marxism Now’, *Parallax*, 4 (1997), 119-135. See end of chapter for a brief discussion of this article.

¹⁴⁴ Ian Penman ‘The Boomerang: New Issues on the Rebound’, *The Wire*, 302 (2009), p.64.

considerations as the sole motive of transgression. In contrast to Sade's celebratory selfish advocacy of transgressive violence, Bataille argued for the *dépense* of such cruel tendencies on more ethical terms.¹⁴⁵ Similar to Bataille's perspective in this regard, Nick Cave's fascination with evil does not amount to a pure celebration. Rather, he proposes that a rigorous morality results from a profound complicity with evil. Cave says that 'I think there is a certain kind of numbness in the world today [...] that accepts certain kinds of violence, but is against other kinds of violence'. Cave does not elaborate but agrees with Reynolds's suggestion that he is concerned with an 'ethics of violence'. Reynolds sets it up in direct opposition to Sade in terms reminiscent of Bataille's critique:

Cave proposed a kind of ethics of violence. Defining himself against 'a certain numbness in the world today', he proclaimed his belief in the nobility of the crime passionnel as opposed to 'sadism, or violence through greed'.¹⁴⁶

He is not celebrating violence then but implying that certain kinds of violence are ethically necessary which the modern world ('the world today') rejects in favour of others. Just as the Hoskyns review reflected that *The Birthday Party's* appeal was not a facile nihilist rejection of the possibility of any morality, here it is evident that Cave's vision is akin to Bataille's elaboration of the left-sacred. Beyond the morality of good and evil Bataille argued that the transformation of the world demanded a different conception of morality, one that entailed acknowledging the necessity of violence, without which 'there could be no revolutionaries, there could only be a revolting utopian sentimentality'.¹⁴⁷ Bataille's entire critique of Western thought since the Enlightenment is articulated on these terms, that the 'violence of the sacred' has been domesticated and suppressed, the loss of which Nick Cave clearly mourns as well. There is a sense here in which embrace of alienation cannot fully dispense with nostalgia then. Cave, and Bataille, as Reynolds writes, prefers 'holes' rather than 'wholeness' in being.

¹⁴⁵ See for example 'Le Morale du malheur', *OC XI*, pp. 237-250.

¹⁴⁶ Reynolds, 'Of Misogyny, Murder and Melancholy: Meeting Nick Cave', *National Student* 1987, <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/of-misogyny-murder-and-melancholy-meeting-nick-cave>>.

¹⁴⁷ Bataille, 'The Use Value of D.A.f. De Sade', *Visions of Excess*, p.101.

There is a comfort with the uprooting and abstracting forces of modernity, but not with the rationalizing consequences, the Bataillean reaction to which is a longing for pre-modern forms of the sacred which entailed violence and horror as essential to intensely social experience.

The Anti-Political

The negation of the social then is partly based on a desire for another vision of the social. The ‘violence of the sacred’ from Bataille which informs Hoskyns’s and Reynolds’s reading of Nick Cave thus informs an anti-political perspective on contemporary music. As opposed to an ‘apolitical’ position of passive apathy, an anti-political perspective in this respect responds to the impasses of contemporary political debates with a religious Dionysian will towards self-loss and ecstasy, turning away from wider political and social concerns to a more localised idea of ‘self-subversion’. Considering his time at *Melody Maker* and casting a critical re-evaluation of his early work and his first book, Reynolds writes that ‘My writing in MM wasn’t apolitical, though, so much as anti-political: “resistance is futile, let’s get blissed.” At that particular point, notions of protest rock or music as a site for resistance and community seemed like a completely exhausted and failed tradition.’¹⁴⁸ This may be a generally accurate portrait of his writing overall during this period, but when we read both Reynolds and Hoskyns describing Nick Cave, as described above, the writing is not quite as flippant as ‘resistance is futile, let’s get blissed’. An antipathy towards politics in any conventional sense is certainly present as is a will towards bliss. But the influence of Bataille we find emerging is very similar to his place within French theory as discussed in chapter two. The rejection of traditional forms of political oppositionality in music writing informed by Bataille and theory more broadly follows the ‘neither/nor/but...’ schema developed from Peter Starr in chapter two, in an attempt to transgress pre-existing forms of debate. For

¹⁴⁸ Reynolds, *Blissed Out* (‘Afterword’, para. 25, locations 3332-3346).

Barney Hoskyns, and more implicitly for Reynolds, this takes the form of ‘neither’ humanist socialism, with his aversion to ‘Combat Rock’, ‘nor’ lazy apolitical assertions of passive nihilism, with his dismissal of ‘junk/sex/death’, ‘but’ a Dionysian (anti-)politics of the ‘violence of the sacred’.

The beginning of this chapter quoted Reynolds’s passage from *Blissed Out* in which he sets up a ‘renegade tradition’ of music writers. In that passage Reynolds expresses this tradition’s antipathy to ‘interpretation’, instead seeking to ‘amplify the chaos.’ Reynolds goes on to say that following post-punk a renewed Dionysian energy took hold of rock in the eighties while at the same time him and his writing colleagues discovered for themselves certain ‘ancient truths’:

In particular the truth discovered, separately, by Wittgenstein and Bataille, among others: that thought is a ladder you ascend only to pull behind you and abandon; that it is only through language that you can reach that which lies beyond language’s reckoning. In other words, the only way for rock to live again was if the rock discourse could somehow manage to end itself – again and again. Enter gladly into an endless end. And so we directed our enmity towards ‘meaning’, and in particular, against punk. Or rather what punk had turned into [...] a stifling fixation on the text, and overbearing neurosis for meaning and relevance.¹⁴⁹

When Reynolds described the tradition’s opposition to meaning and constructive ends, favouring instead a ‘waste of energy into the void’ he was clearly implicitly referencing Bataille’s theory of unproductive expenditure. His subsequent naming of Bataille here makes his influence explicit. The entire theorisation of the ‘renegade tradition’ is thus, for Reynolds, loosely indebted to Bataille’s theory. Reynolds was reading newly emerging Bataille translations from an early stage, as well as Bataillean ideas filtered through other theorists such as Kristeva and Barthes. Many references to Bataille are found throughout this first collection of journalism. An article on the group the Butthole Surfers, originally published in 1988, quotes from *Visions of Excess*. ‘Psychic breakdown’, ‘arbitrary violence’ and ‘Unemployable negativity (Bataille)’ are the appealing alternatives in the Dionysian music

¹⁴⁹ Reynolds, *Blissed Out* (‘Introduction’, para. 13, loc 143).

Reynolds championed as against the sanctifying and narcissistic tendencies of pop music. He writes that 'Bataille's key notion was that of expenditure without return', which he is reminded of in relation to the music of the Butthole Surfers. He spends several paragraphs explaining some of Bataille's theory. 'From the fetid depths of his mind', he continues, 'Bataille dredged up a fantasy of human evolution one part pseudo-science, one part myth':

The point of this myth is that the base and the elevated, the profane and the sacred are intimately related, depend on excluding each other for their self-definition. For Bataille, the ultimate destination of rational thought is the revelation that we know and can know nothing, beyond the realization that all the towering projections of the human spirit are based on a primary denial of the abyss out of which we were formed. The realization that 'elevation is the fall; humanity is animality; insight is blindness; health is terminal pathology; God, when he knows, is a pig' (Allan Stoekl).¹⁵⁰

'It's this fall, this unseating of our lofty conception of ourselves (as conscious, self-determining spirits) that Butthole Surfers love to induce', he says bringing it back to the music and briefly elaboration a discussion of the centrality of abjection. He concludes that 'It's as though only the worst in human beings is what's real, the hard core of reality. This is anti-kitsch – the idea that only shit exists'.¹⁵¹ However, Reynolds claims that their strength lies in 'their heterogeneity; they don't turn "filth", "the dark side" into a religion-in-negative, like so much hardcore, heavy metal, etc'. With Bataillean vocabulary, and an evocation of the materialist critique of ideal matter in many essays included in *Visions of Excess*, Reynolds is clearly attuned to the problems of fetishizing the abject.

For Reynolds, the Dionysian turn in music is all about a 'flirtation with the abject', and similarly a parallel Dionysian 'renegade tradition' of music journalism becomes consolidated around debates on the subject of abjection in the eighties. While a tradition of outsider musicians is often set up against a transgressive lineage, the same lineage is actually used for the writers themselves. Reynolds, for example, describes an emblematic 'renegade'

¹⁵⁰ Simon Reynolds, *Blissed Out* ('Wasted Youth', para. 15 Loc 1052).

¹⁵¹ Reynolds, *Blissed Out*, (loc 1052).

music journalist, Paul Morley, as being influenced by the ‘avant-porn pantheon’ of Sade, Bataille and Genet,¹⁵² just as the group DAF are similarly described as ‘erotic renegades in the tradition of Genet, Sade, and Bataille’.¹⁵³ Bataille appears to be, once again, a name amongst names, adrift in an ambiguously defined lineage, which parallels his citation within a transgressive lineage within the academic sphere. However just as Bataille played a crucial role in *Tel Quel*’s political positioning in the context of the events of 1968, I argue that his influence in popular music writing actually played a crucial role in the renegotiation of the relationship between politics and music in the wake of post-punk.

‘Marginality’ and ‘Entryism’: A New Chasm Between the Underground and Overground

The context for this paradigmatic shift in thinking through popular music’s relation to the political is wide-ranging debate about the relationship between the underground and the overground that emerged in the early eighties. The advances of post-punk experimentalism gave rise to a polarising dilemma: to attempt to adapt to a more mainstream sound and radicalise from within or embrace complete marginalisation and negation in a clearly defined ‘alternative’ milieu. Paul Morley was the chief advocate of the former position, ‘entryism’, an attempt to bridge the gap between progressive music and chart music, exemplified by a genre of music that became known as ‘New Pop’.¹⁵⁴ Morley’s philosophy was partially based on hegemonic contestation. He argued that the mainstream could be fought for and radicalised from within. This position entailed political self-legitimation against the accusation of ‘selling out’. When reviewing the landmark Human League LP, ‘Dare!’, for example, Morley pre-emptively defended himself against accusations of apoliticism or escapism in such embrace of the mainstream, ‘Love can make plenty happen! So ‘Dare!’ is as much ‘political’

¹⁵² Reynolds, *Rip it Up*, p.505.

¹⁵³ Reynolds, *Rip it up*, p.340.

¹⁵⁴ See ‘Style it Takes. Criticism and New Pop (1978-1985)’ in Lindberg et al. *Rock Criticism from the Beginning*, pp. 219-258, and Simon Reynolds, ‘New Pop and Its AfterMath’ in Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin eds. *On the Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 398-402.

as it is blue flash art'.¹⁵⁵ On similar terms, Morley's colleague Penman attacked the puritanism of some *NME* readers' who implied that dissident politics had no relationship to desire or mainstream music: 'Odd how it is assumed that one word about PLEASURE means that the writer in question doesn't have any POLITICS', wrote Penman in defence of Morley.¹⁵⁶

In contrast to Morley's embrace of the mainstream, Barney Hoskyns took the opposing perspective of embracing marginalisation. In a 1981 feature article for the *NME* which appeared one month after Morley's review of 'Dare!', Hoskyns championed the separatism and negativity of the group The Fall for the potential to reconstruct political antagonism on terms completely incompatible with 'pop'. Hoskyns singles out the lyric from their first LP, 'We are The Fall, Northern white crap who talk back', as carrying out a very pointed meaning in this regard. In reclaiming patronizing and derogatory perceptions of northern working class identity, the message implies that there will be no process of sanitisation to become more palatable to the London music press. Hoskyns writes that with this seemingly simple identification Mark E. Smith portrayed the group as 'fiercely intelligent, with none of the sanctioned palatability that is requisite for working-class people to be intellectual. The working-class hero was hackneyed now, and the Clash's struggle against the "man" perpetuated that problem'.¹⁵⁷ Again, Hoskyns makes reference to the Clash as the outmoded symbol of political dissent in contemporary music. And again the contempt for such forms of opposition does not lead to apoliticism but rather a reconstruction of the terms of antagonism, as Hoskyns claims: 'Rather than posturing and attacking a thinly constructed "them" Mark E. Smith subversively reinvented the relationship between working class identity, politics and rock music.'¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Paul Morley, 'The Human League: Dare (Virgin)', *NME*, 17 October 1981, p.41.

¹⁵⁶ Ian Penman, 'Readers's Lives Judged by Ian (Sign of the Times) Penman', *NME*, 1 May 1982, p.58

¹⁵⁷ Barney Hoskyns, 'Hip Priest: The Mark Smith Interview', *NME*, 14 November 1981, p.14.

¹⁵⁸ Hoskyns, *NME*, 14 November 1981, p.14.

In this feature article, Hoskyns reinforced the split that was emerging between two opposing perspectives: ‘entryism’ or marginality: ‘Real desire cannot be attained inside the insidious synaesthetic-cultural trick of pop. The Fall may politically propel you outside it.’¹⁵⁹ Authenticity and genuine political challenge are situated on the ‘outside’. This position of separatism and uncompromising negativity extended far beyond The Fall and encompassed a broad theoretical response to New Pop. Its principal theoretical framework, especially for the ‘renegade tradition’ of writers, was abjection. As Hoskyns wrote in a live review of The Fall in the same year, Smith ‘simply kicks us head first into the *shit* of proletarianism – booze, barbiturates, bingo parlours, slates, slags, etc. – and rubs us in it’.¹⁶⁰

The Objects

Ian Penman similarly evoked the object when discussing The Fall, as well as appraising a vision of the anti-political in their music. During an article from 1980 Penman expresses frustration with the lingering nostalgia for the memory of 1968 and the sixties counter-culture more generally. He writes that there is a persistent bad faith in the spirit of 1968 and hopes ‘Maybe we’ll actually get rid of the sixties in the eighties’.¹⁶¹ Penman’s focus on The Fall suggests that they are one potentially progressive source of jettisoning such nostalgia, and in the following paragraph Mark E. Smith discusses the significance of ‘northern white crap’. Penman similarly sees the presence of abjection in The Fall as a source of breaking free from the nostalgia and idealism which the memory of 1968 signifies in popular music. While the object would come to be associated with musical styles more markedly dark and often gothic in style than The Fall, most accounts of the object share this idea of a transgressive break with any form of idealism.

¹⁵⁹ Hoskyns, *NME* 14 November 1981, p.15.

¹⁶⁰ Barney Hoskyns, ‘Anti-Social Workers: The Fall at North London Poly’ *NME*, 13 October 1981, accessed via <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/anti-social-workers-the-fall-at-north-london-poly>> [Accessed online January 25 2015].

¹⁶¹ Ian Penman, ‘The Fall: All Fall Down’, *NME*, 5 January 1980, accessed online via <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/the-fall-all-fall-down>> [Accessed online January 25 2015].

The abject became more prominent in rock discourse as part of an anti-idealist and ‘dark side’ turn within post-punk music but there are noteworthy historical precedents and antecedents. Within many of the major musical scenes he has written on Simon Reynolds has focused on a dialectic between utopia and dystopia, and expressed his morbid fascination for the latter. In his book on dance music, *Energy Flash*, he says that a major interest running throughout is ‘the utopian/dystopian dialectic [...] the way the hunger for heaven-on-earth almost always leads on to a ‘darkside’ phase of drug excess and paranoia’.¹⁶² When Reynolds wrote a 1996 essay on this ‘darkside’ turn in previously euphoric dance music, he expressed his enthusiasm for the bleaker aesthetic and political pessimism in terms very similar to those used by Charles Hayward in describing the aforementioned post-punk realism: ‘Wake up, that dream is over. Time to get real.’¹⁶³ Similarly a broad narrative of counter-cultural turn from the utopian to the dystopian frames the interest in Dionysian and abject rock. Reynolds locates the roots of a tradition of abject rock in marginal groups of the late sixties. He says, writing with Press, ‘The abject began looming in rock when the insurrectionary energy of the late ‘60s started to flag, and rock turned heavy. After the high, the comedown.’¹⁶⁴

In a chapter of *The Sex Revolts* entitled ‘Flirting with the Void: Abjection in Rock’, Reynolds and Press frame ‘abject rock’ as follows:

The idealism of combat and crusading rock is an attempt to transcend the biological reality of adolescence: hormonal turmoil, unfamiliar and insistent urges, unsettling bodily changes. Icarus rock’s ascent into a sublime higher realm (political righteousness, spiritual abstractions) is a flight from the base animalism of the human condition, an attempt to over the dank, dark realm of abjection.¹⁶⁵

The fact that such rock music is described as displaying an idealistic, icarian, transcendental tendency in contrast to the ‘base’ realm of abjection strongly suggests that his critique is

¹⁶² Reynolds, *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013), p.xxx.

¹⁶³ Reynolds, ‘Slipping into the Darkness’, *The Wire*, 148 (1996), p.62.

¹⁶⁴ Reynolds and Press, *The Sex Revolts*, p.87.

¹⁶⁵ Reynolds and Press, *The Sex Revolts*, P.85.

informed by Bataille's critique of the idealism of the surrealists, with its use of the same vocabulary. Furthermore, the use of this vocabulary directly derived from Bataille is further supported by the fact that *Visions of Excess*, containing precisely those essays that critiqued surrealist idealism, is listed in the bibliography of *The Sex Revolts*.

Reynolds is also following Hosykns's vocabulary here when he refers to 'combat' rock for outmoded political righteousness. This framing follows that of the 'Bad Seed' review which Reynolds said sent him on the quest for the Dionysian in rock. Music informed by political idealism and sanctimony is repeatedly slandered by Reynolds as 'icarian Rock'.¹⁶⁶ However he does not propose the complete dismissal of such 'seriousness' or ambition, but rather searches for a more 'credible seriousness', which he associates with a distinctly Bataillean 'ecstatic moment'¹⁶⁷ and quest for the Dionysian in 'abject rock'.

The emergence of Bataille in music writing centred on the abject in mid nineteen eighties, elaborated in relation to figures such as Nick Cave, is largely attributable to a dialectically antagonistic response to post-punk exemplified by Reynolds. On the one hand Reynolds is heavily influenced by it, by its (anti-)political pessimism and realism, exemplified by Charles Hayward's quote from above, 'time to wake up', an idea to which Reynolds would often return. On the other hand, Reynolds was left somewhat frustrated by the 'overbearing neurosis' of post-punk, its tendency towards conceptuality and cerebral abstraction. The Dionysian and the abject, as read through Bataille, permits a return to libidinal intensity and dread to counter the abstractions of post-punk.¹⁶⁸ At the same time it expands the pessimism of post-punk and solidifies a space of marginality 'outside' (following Hosykns on the Fall and The Birthday Party) the clean, mainstream music of New Pop. Before returning to Reynolds later in the chapter, we can elaborate our understanding of this

¹⁶⁶ For example, see Reynolds and Press, *The Sex Revolts*, p.79, and p. 85.

¹⁶⁷ Reynolds, *Blissed Out*, (Introduction', para. 13, loc 143).

¹⁶⁸ Reynolds writes that after post-punk conceptualism he was 'looking and longing for a more intuitive, less super-ego controlled music', *Blissed Out* ('Afterword', para.26, loc 3346).

trajectory of the abject through looking at a number of key readings by Chris Bohn dating from the mid eighties.¹⁶⁹ In similar terms to Hoskyns and Reynolds, Bohn described the chasm which emerged between the abject underground and the New Pop mainstream in the following terms:

The 80s was a shallow, cynical, glitzy and gormless decade for pop music. The underground and the mainstream – terms which were once mutually exclusive but which increasingly have no meaning – were so far apart at the time that they had nothing useful to say to each other. Almond was a rarity among major label artists that he kept a dialogue going between the charts and the darkside colleagues such as Coil, Foetus, Cave and the like.¹⁷⁰

Where Almond is an exception in bridging the gap between different cultural milieus, Bohn's writing normally expressed an affinity with 'Cave and the like'. Bohn, usually under the pseudonym of 'Biba Kopf', wrote a series of articles on 'abject pop' for the *New Statesman* dating from 1985, and then a column for *The Wire* magazine over a number of years, entitled 'Round up the Usual Suspects'. These articles referred to many of the musicians named above under the theory of the abject derived from Bataille. For Bohn, the legacy of New Pop had resulted in a sanitisation of popular music, the best response to which was to embrace filth. He referred to a loose agglomeration of 'darkside' musicians as 'the Objects'.¹⁷¹

The Origins of the Abject

Before looking at exactly how Bohn framed the theory of abject pop then, it will be beneficial to briefly look at its origins in Bataille. Abjection was one variation of Bataille's 'base materialism' as developed in several articles in the late twenties and early thirties, characterised by the disruption of hierarchical divisions through initially accentuating a destabilizing and active base matter. As explained in the thesis introduction, base materialism

¹⁶⁹ Chris Bohn wrote for *Melody Maker* and *NME* in the late 70s and 80s. He has written for *The Wire* since the mid eighties and he is now editor of the magazine. He has also written for publications such as *New Statesman* as discussed below.

¹⁷⁰ Chris Bohn, 'Marc Almond Interviewed', *The Wire*, 141 (1995), p.38.

¹⁷¹ See for example Biba Kopf, 'Round up of the Decade', *The Wire*, 70 (1989), p.14, and Biba Kopf, 'Abject Pop ("Down and In")', *New Statesman*, 27 September 1985, pp.40-41.

and abjection were ideas first elaborated upon in *Documents* and were ideas partially formed as a means of countering the sublimating tendencies, and Icarian movement of surrealism. They were also formed in explicitly political terms during this period. Where orthodox Marxism puts more emphasis on poverty as an inherent and inevitable condition upon which capitalism thrives, Bataille placed emphasis on a much more sadistic emphasis at work in the ruling classes.¹⁷² The ruling classes cannot resist oppressing and crushing the popular classes, and these sadistic assertions of power need to be considered as well as the abstract mechanism of capital.

Bataille's theory of abjection should be understood in two movements. Firstly, the subjects of abjection are those who are excluded from society, ignoble men in contrast to the nobles. Politically, Bataille linked this to the lumpenproletariat, the poor and excluded portion of the population who have no institutional representation, and no support networks such as unions. They are thus even excluded from the organized working class. Examples include prostitutes, homeless people and the famous figure of the ragpicker. In its second movement, Bataille implies that those who are excluded as abject can autonomously claim a state of abjection. Such exclusion does not participate in the dialectic of struggle between ruling and working classes, so the abjects have the potential to rupture that dialectic. All social formations depend on an exclusion, but that exclusion when seized upon and amplified has the capacity to threaten the social structure. Abjection thus describes a process of excess which has threatened to unstable that structure from which it has originally been excluded. Bataille stresses that abjection is negative in a very formal sense and must pass through a passive phase of exclusion. He notes, for example, that 'elle est formellement distincte des perversions sexuelles dans lesquelles les choses abjectes sont recherchées et qui relèvent de la

¹⁷² See for example 'La Notion de dépense', *OC I*, pp. 302-320.

subversion'. Abjection thus arrives initially 'par impuissance en raison de conditions sociales données'.¹⁷³

As a seizure of a base third term which attempts to rupture dialectical relations between high and low, abjection is an exemplary iteration of base materialism. While it is closely related to broader concepts in Bataille such as base materialism and transgression, abjection is only the exclusive and detailed subject of one essay by Bataille, 'L'Abjection et les formes misérables', which was to form part of an unrealised book project on fascism in France. Bataille's development of the concept, as discussed in chapters one and two, was largely in relation to social and political considerations, particularly the rise of fascism. Bataille stresses the 'conditions sociales' from which the idea arises in the essay on abjection.¹⁷⁴ In a short fragment on fascism he notes that, 'la transformation de la répulsion en attraction se produit seulement lorsque la charge affective liée primitivement à l'élément abject a pu être déplacée et liée à un élément voisin', taking the transition from 'passive' to 'active' and 'repulsion' to 'attraction at work in the abject'.¹⁷⁵ He then links this movement, with its displacement of dialectical subversion through an excluded term, to social movements, specifically fascism.

However, the theory of the abject was developed more extensively by Julia Kristeva in her *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980) and evidence suggests that Simon Reynolds's and Chris Bohn's ideas on the theory of the abject were heavily shaped by the 1982 English translation, *Powers of Horror*.¹⁷⁶ Reynolds has written that as well as having his life changed by the

¹⁷³ Bataille, 'L'Abjection et les formes misérables', *OC* II, p.219.

¹⁷⁴ *OC* II, p.219.

¹⁷⁵ 'En effet la vie humaine...', *OC* II, p.163.

¹⁷⁶ As outlined below it is clear Simon Reynolds has been reading Bataille since he first started writing at *Melody Maker*. Bohn uses Bataillean ideas and theory but his use of the abject is more indebted to Kristeva, as Reynolds's reference also suggests.

‘Nietzsche-infused ravings’ of Hoskyns, his discovery of Kristeva’s book, which he borrowed from Chris Bohn, also had a big impact on theoretical writing in his journalism.¹⁷⁷

‘Abject Pop’

As noted above, Bohn followed Hoskyns’s tendency to write about the abject in relation to a loosely connected group of ‘anti-pop’ stars depicted as a ‘darkside’ milieu, often referred to as ‘the Objects’.¹⁷⁸ His most explicit theorisation of abject pop came in the form of several articles for the *New Statesman* in 1985. Clearly framed in terms of the ongoing debate between New Pop ‘entryism’ and marginalisation/abjection, his article ‘Abject pop’ emphasises the chasm between the underground and the mainstream in popular music. He chastises ‘right on’ artists and musicians for espousing the same left-wing positions in very predictable, repetitive and sanitised conditions. Bohn says that ‘In their refusal to force an issue, to transgress the boundaries of its debate, lies their powerlessness. Further, they too readily accept the place allocated to them.’¹⁷⁹ This means that they end up becoming more and more complicit within the system they are apparently opposing. The subsequent result is that those (among whom Bohn includes himself) who want a more libidinated, adventurous pop music that falls outside the parameters of a conservative mainstream are ‘made to feel dirty and somehow diseased’. This mirrors the first part of abjection discussed in Bataille, the passive operation of exclusion. Bohn’s writing then echoes the second step, arguing for an autonomous embrace of abjection:

Well, these disaffected might respond, if dirty we are, then dirty we shall be. If pop rejects us, makes us feel abject, abjects us from its social club, then we shall in turn embrace all that is abject. In the abject we shall dig our hole, make the hole our own, thereby become whole.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Simon Reynolds, ‘Music and Theory’, published in <http://blog.frieze.com/music_theory/>, 18 September 2009, [Accessed 24/10/2013].

¹⁷⁸ Biba Kopf, ‘Round up of the Decade’, *The Wire*, 70, (1989), p.14.

¹⁷⁹ Biba Kopf, ‘Abject Pop (“Down and In”)', *New Statesman*, 27 September 1985, pp.40-41.

¹⁸⁰ Biba Kopf, ‘Abject Pop’, *New Statesman*, p.41.

As with most iterations of the abject in pop music which we've explored so far, it has emerged as an anti-political gesture, seeking to break with outmoded humanist forms of resistance which are seen as impotent and futile. Embracing abjection is not seen as a totally nihilist gesture but as a means of transgressing the 'boundaries' of 'debate'. Similarly, the negation of the social pre-empts a new form of the social, where digging a 'hole' opens up a new opportunity to 'become whole'. This pre-empts Simon Reynolds description of Nick Cave and 'his ilk' (the Abjects) as agitating for a broader conception of the human where 'it's not a question of wholeness of being but of holes'.

Fetishizing the Abject: Chris Bohn, David Keenan and Nocturnal Abjection.

It is difficult to discern where Bohn's writing is informed by either Kristeva or Bataille. However, given that Bataille's short essay on the abject was not yet available nor ever widely disseminated in translation, and that we know from Reynolds that Bohn was reading *Powers of Horror*, it seems that Kristeva's development of the abject had a greater impact.

The importance of abjection as a theoretical concept in music comes to the fore in Bohn's introduction to *Tape Delay: Confessions from the Eighties Underground* (1987), a collection of interviews with many of the anti-pop stars Bohn championed in his writing, such as Genesis P.Orridge, Lydia Lunch and Clint Ruin. This article deals with the concept of the abject primarily by portraying the 'outsider' practitioner of experimental and noise music in contrast to the passive subject of mainstream pop music. Bohn says that the practitioner of experimental music, paralleling the movement from passive to active abjection mentioned above, must seize his destiny and 'shouldn't expect anyone to light his way from passive voy(ag)er to dormant antibody and on to active abject'.¹⁸¹ Throbbing Gristle, for example, and their 'grim disinterment/reportages occasionally leavened by a death's head crackle

¹⁸¹ Biba Kopf, 'Bacillus Culture', *Tape Delay: Confessions from the Eighties Underground*, ed. by Charles Neal (London: SAF Publishing, 1987), p.10.

earned them the everlasting stigmata of the true Abject'.¹⁸² While there is allusion made to the potential viral effects of the abject Bohn describes to 'spread, beyond a loose community of musicians, writers and artists', this piece nevertheless betrays a fetishization of the abject less for its disruptive qualities, than for its marginality as a value in itself.

A series of oppositions are created that allude to Bataille's theory of expenditure. In Bohn's metaphors, pop music is the world of work and utility while noise music is the world of night and unproductive expenditure. There is a series of oppositions established where noise music is equated with night and the world of unreason while pop music is the productive day-time world of reason. There does not seem to be any consciousness of the instability of such oppositions. Night-time is depicted with a very stable ontological consistency to which noise music is attached, consolidating a specific space and genre as being morally superior. While Bohn eventually points to the possible viral contagion that could be unleashed from noise music at the end of the piece, there is no acknowledgement or understanding of the ontological and semantic tenuousness of the oppositions in the first place. In his book *Noise/Music: A History* (2007), Paul Hegarty referred to theories by both Derrida and Bataille to underline the instability of such oppositions. While Hegarty defines noise as that which is inherently negative, wholly other, he describes one kind of noise music, industrial music, in the following terms:

Like Derrida, industrial music knows there is no outside to escape to that is not already consumed by the inside. Industrial music plays out the accursed share of modern society, staging sacrificial performances and making music that offers momentary collapse of rational thought in the shape of a listening that would know in advance what it would be listening to.¹⁸³

Bohn's version of industrial/noise music seems to persist in the belief that there is an 'outside' to escape to. Where night has a parodic, not simply oppositional, relationship to day

¹⁸² Biba Kopf, p.11.

¹⁸³ Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (London: Continuum, 2007), p.105.

in Bataille and Derrida, and where Hegarty emphasises the complicity and contamination of industrial music's marginal space, the sense of contamination is transformed into a theoretical purity in Bohn's narrative, as if industrial music can be simplistically separated from popular music, disavowing the complex entanglements between the two. If noise music is always 'night' time then this assigns it a very clear space and state of transgression. But as we know, a clearly defined space and state of transgression is a contradiction in terms. Transgression can only be thought in relation to shifting cultural, social and historical norms, and hence the construction of different cultural spaces around each. The delineation between 'music' and 'non-music' upon which 'noise' operates as a marginal practice is constantly changing across time. Paul Hegarty has similarly emphasised that noise music cannot quite reach a 'pure' state, as suggested by Bohn's smooth image of night, nor an 'extreme' end point. Taking the exemplary case of Merzbow, Hegarty writes that this noise is 'always haunted by that which it is not, that which surrounds it, threatens it and structures it by providing a frame that dissolves itself. Over and over'.¹⁸⁴ A similar perspective informs the various contributions to *Noise and Capitalism* (2009), where for example Casbaa Toth argues that 'it is the entire socio-cultural and historical matrix within which Noise is chosen, combined, and listened to that defines the genre'.¹⁸⁵ The association of abjection and transgression with specific temporalities across time, the simplistic separation of oppositions and the fetishisation of marginality as a value in itself suggested in Bohn's article are thus problematic realisations of Bataillean ideas in popular music.

The application of a Bataillean vocabulary to noise music and the problematic fetishization of marginality become even more pronounced in the writing of David Keenan, a staff writer at *The Wire* since the nineties. Reynolds's and Hoskyns's explicit quotes from Bataille make it clear that they had read many of his texts in translation. Bohn certainly read

¹⁸⁴ Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, p.157.

¹⁸⁵ Casbaa Toth, 'Noise and Theory', in *Noise and Capitalism*, ed. by Anthony Iles (Donostia-S. Sebastia: Arteleku Audioulab, 2009), p.27.

Kristeva and while he never quoted directly from Bataille, his extensive knowledge of the abject suggests he had to be at least familiar with his work. Keenan's writing is interesting in the context of our discussion because we can trace the secondary influence of Bataille. He also uses vocabulary derived from Bataille. Whether he actually read his work originally is not completely discernible. What is important is that his writing absorbs the Bataillean abject in music writing in a traceable route from Chris Bohn's reading of a Kristevan Bataille during the eighties. As Keenan's editor at *The Wire* Bohn has had an even more tangible influence on Keenan's writing.¹⁸⁶

In a 2004 article for *The Wire* entitled 'Noise: The Primer', Keenan gives an overview of noise music using almost exactly the same metaphorical framework that Bohn had used for the *Tape Delay* article discussed above.¹⁸⁷ 'If pop music is day time' he begins, 'a nine to five soundtrack regulating work and consumption, then noise is its night, populated by the squat shapes and inchoate shadows of desire and alienating despair'.¹⁸⁸ The same sets of oppositions are established where night is the experimental and transgressive terrain of noise music while day is where pop gets 'manufactured'. Keenan aligns noise music with the abject. He writes that it refuses pleasure, and instead embraces atrocity, often aligning itself with images of 'transgressive sex, power and violence'. 'Shatter the harmony and you shatter the social structure' Keenan continues. In the attack on harmony as an attack on social structure, Keenan echoes Bataille's anti-architectural metaphors and acephalic discourse, which were explicitly brought out by Jennifer Shrayne in her study of German Industrial group Einstürzende Neubauten. She described their early music as:

a working model of Bataille's concept of anti-architecture which stated that any attack on architecture is an attack on those complicit with authoritarian hierarchies and

¹⁸⁶ Keenan has been a regular contributor to *The Wire* since 1995. In his book *England's Hidden Reverse*, Keenan pays special tribute to Biba Kopf, 'a constant inspiration'. David Keenan, *England's Hidden Reverse* (London: SAF Publishing, 2003), p.7.

¹⁸⁷ David Keenan, 'Noise: The Primer', *The Wire*, 246 (2004), p.38.

¹⁸⁸ Keenan, 'Noise: The Primer', *The Wire*, 246, p.38.

serves the cause of the informe or the abject (to use Georges Bataille and Julia Kristeva's respective terminologies).¹⁸⁹

Indeed, Bataille's thought was distinctly characterised by a working against the authoritarianism of imposed structure. As he wrote in the *Documents* entry 'Architecture', the built environment was an expression of oppressive social authority. He also emphasised that every time 'la composition architecturale' is found other than in monuments and the physical environment, 'que ce soit dans la physionomie, le costume, la musique ou la peinture, peut-on inférer un gout prédominant de l'autorité humaine ou divine'.¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, the abject is conceived precisely as an unravelling of, and working against architecture. In this respect Bataille would seem to closely resonate with Keenan's description of noise as shattering a social structure by shattering harmony. But this self-proclaimed attack on architecture and hierarchy becomes deeply problematized by Keenan's re-imposition of other hierarchies. Following Bohn, he has written about noise as if it is a fixed genre that is automatically more virtuous and inherently more transgressive than other forms of music.

Keenan's framework puts forward the idea that if the music is anti-harmonic and anti-melodic and fits quite a narrow superficial definition of 'noise' then it is automatically aligned with the world of night and automatically subversive. Keenan's perspective matches what Ian Penman criticised in certain articulations of noise music as a tendency of 'preaching to the converted': 'Sometimes a hint of something like old old-time Protestant denial – the idea that if it's louder, difficult, more of an endurance trial, it is already more virtuous'.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Jennifer Shrayne, *Blixa Bargeld and Einstürzende Neubauten: German Experimental Music* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), p.12. Shrayne only briefly alludes to Bataille and prefers to engage Artaud and Walter Benjamin for theoretical discussion of Neubauten.

¹⁹⁰ *OC I*, p.171.

¹⁹¹ Ian Penman, 'A Dandy in Aspic', in *No Regrets: Writings on Scott Walker*, ed. by Rob Young (London: Orion, 2007), p.88. In this regard, Paul Hegarty's Bataillean conception of noise acts as an important corrective to those simplistic conceptions of noise which focus on the merely quantitative. Rather, in using Bataille's notion of excess to read noise, Hegarty develops the important point that 'Excess, though, is not quantitative, "louder", "harsher", "more shocking", etc: it is in the pushing to the ordinary levels of excess and then in the excess that occurs toward the listener. Excess is waste, not a surplus: it only is in being spent'. Paul Hegarty, 'Noise as Weakness' (Paper presented at Sonic Interventions conference, Amsterdam, March 2005), accessed online via <<http://www.dotdotdotmusic.com/hegarty2.html>> [Accessed 1 February 2016]. Beyond his major book, *Noise/Music: A History* cited above, Hegarty has written extensively on noise music, with particular reference to Bataille

Keenan thus ends up turning noise into an inverse genre hierarchy and the sense of an ‘endurance trial’ also results in a highly phallogentric discourse and unpleasant assertion of male subjectivity in a description of one arbiter of Noise, Merzbow, as ‘pornographic in the most hardcore sense [...] There’s no plot and no build-up; instead it cuts straight to the pay-off, a gonzo compilation of vivid, libidinous money shots. Like the greatest high energy rock, it’s gratuitously satisfying’.¹⁹² The machismo posturing is significant as this is a marked feature of certain readings of Bataille, particularly those in line with the abject, in both popular culture and academia which are overly-confident in their own claims to transgression or apparent originality.¹⁹³ Whether or not Keenan actually read Bataille does not discount the significance of this piece of writing as an amplification of the problems with the theory of the abject as it travelled from Bataille through Kristeva into anglophone popular journalism.

In Keenan and Bohn’s iterations of the abject, the entanglement of oppositional relationships become purified and simplistically disentangled. If we take another example of one of Bataille’s exemplary texts on base materialism, we can identify a useful tension between readings which stabilise conceptual oppositions against those which de-ontologize and destabilise such frameworks. ‘Le Gros orteil’ was written in 1929, two years before the article dealing explicitly with the abject. However, it provides some of the most illuminating treatment of oppositions within Bataille’s broad schema of base materialism. In this short article Bataille asserts that the big toe is ‘la plus *humaine*’ part of the body. This is because it is the part that differentiates us most from our evolutionary ancestors, anthropoid apes. In a typical emphasis on verticality, he says that this is because apes are tree dwelling whereas humans stand upright. We are elevated from the ground up thanks to the evolutionary acquirement of the big toe which permits our upright balance. The main part of the article

among other theorists. See bibliography for a selection of key articles. Aside from Hegarty’s work, an important Bataille-based discussion of noise is offered by Eugene Thacker in his article ‘Bataille/Body/Noise: Towards a Techno-Erotics’, in *Merzbook: The Pleasuredome of Noise*, ed. by Brett Woodward (Cologne: Extreme, 1999), pp. 57-65.

¹⁹² Keenan ‘Noise: The Primer’, *The Wire*, 246, p.42.

¹⁹³ See for example the discussion of Nick Land below.

however focuses on how the big toe has been a taboo for many cultures in history and is inherently unpleasant to the human imagination, that it has an aspect ‘hideusement cadavérique’.¹⁹⁴ Despite this, or partially because of it, the big toe has been a form of base seduction for many, particularly when belonging to nobility and royalty where this base attraction is in such contrast with the supposedly ideal human elevation juxtaposed. Most relevant for our discussion then is how Bataille’s thinking repeatedly shows that what distinguishes us as apparently noble humans with ideal values is often the ignoble and base seductions sending distinctions between the poles of value into chaos. ‘Le Gros orteil’ is one exemplary text that reminds the reader that noble humanity always has its roots in the ignoble animality of ‘la boue’.

The base is not valorized but used to show there are no fixed identities or pure values. The striking aspect of the appropriation of Bataillean ideas in the pieces I’ve examined by Chris Bohn and David Keenan in particular is that the base is valorized and is taken to be the ‘pure’ value in a reversal or inversion of hierarchy rather than subversion or displacement. Keenan’s emphasis on the purity of noise particular betrays a reversal of values. He describes Merzbow’s music as:

free improvisation liberated from the demands of communication, a series of instant decompositions where the players strain conventional musical relationships to the point that they break down entirely, thus allowing unmediated access to a realm of pure, nugatory sound.¹⁹⁵

The description of the sound as ‘pure’ and ‘unmediated’ follows Bohn’s separation and purification of night and day, noise music and popular music, simplistically severing relational tensions.¹⁹⁶ Formal music can also often strive for affective intensity that is not

¹⁹⁴ OC I, p.203.

¹⁹⁵ Keenan, ‘Noise: The Primer’, *The Wire*, 246 (2004), p.42.

¹⁹⁶ It could be argued that noise music partially operates on failure to achieve the sort of ‘unmediated’ states it strives for, and which Keenan conceives it as too easily attaining. As Paul Hegarty writes, the ‘failure to achieve the breakdown of self in noise is precisely how noise works : this failure will always occur, the listener and the performer learn, and this cycle of breaking out and coming back to order is where noise occurs. It is a mistake to say that here is music, there is noise’. Paul Hegarty, ‘Brace and Embrace : Masochism in Noise Performance’, in

inherently linked to the ‘demands of communication’. Another opposition is established here between formal and free-form music where by mere dint of operating in the latter is taken to be superior or more subversive. Noise music is characterised by an aim to find the unmediated moments or spontaneous outbursts of immediacy which transgress musical conventions. Keenan rightfully stresses the anti-mediational impulses guiding noise music. However his perspective leads to a naïve faith in the unequivocal ‘purity’ of that attempt.

A useful corrective to this perspective is offered by Anthony Iles in his editorial introduction for a collection entitled *Noise and Capitalism* (2009). Iles writes that rather than overcoming mediation, free-improvisation and noise are ‘in tension’ with it, which attests to the various difficulties in theorising it. For Iles, ‘Noise’ encompasses ‘that which locates itself self-reflexively at the limit of what can be accepted as music’.¹⁹⁷ This self-reflexivity and constantly shifting conception of noise in relation to the social and cultural conception of what constitutes music is much more consonant with a Bataillean reading of music which is both anti-authoritarian and self-reflexively performative. Firstly, it does not capitulate to ideas of ‘purity’ of genre, or otherwise: all identities are contaminated. Secondly, it is fluid and not fixed. (Like the ‘informe’ conceived as an operation rather than a static idea. Jennifer Shrayne directly articulated this in her writing on Neubauten: ‘L’*informe* it is not simply the opposite to form; in being form-less it negates meaning and threatens hierarchy – like noise-music’.¹⁹⁸) Throughout Bataille’s writings from l’informe to transgression, there is an emphasis on fluidity in the various related conceptual operations. There is no fixed object or substance which can be transgressive in itself. There must be a relationality across historical, social or juridical changes, a self-reflexive movement.

Sound, Music, Affect : Theorizing Sonic Experience, ed. by Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle (London : Bloomsbury, 2003), p.142.

¹⁹⁷ Iles, *Noise and Capitalism*, p.12.

¹⁹⁸ Shrayne, *Blixa Bargeld*, p.12.

Depoliticizing the Abject: The Critique of Kristeva

This trajectory of the abject through popular music writing amplifies some of the critical problems present in Kristeva's elaboration. In an interview with Kristeva, Sylvère Lotringer challenged her on some of the limitations of her reading of the abject as divorced from Bataille. Lotringer highlighted how Kristeva, and most American discussions around the abject, completely abstracted it from its political context in which Bataille explicitly developed it in relation to fascism. Lotringer says to Kristeva:

According to Bataille, the abject is not a particular substance, one that can be phenomenologically described, all that is rejected from the body, etc. And some critics have reproached you for thematizing abjection that way. The abject is, in fact, a construction. The abject is defined by the rejection, the exclusion that is made of it, and that interests me very much, because not only was Bataille referring there to this lumpenproletariat which does not even manage to organize into a party, a working class, and therefore cannot be integrated into the phenomena of struggle and subversion, but also this exclusion is the very gesture through which the fascists or Nazis define classes, races, etc. as abject, and thus make them abject.¹⁹⁹

The development of the abject by Kristeva and others has thus been characterised by a tendency to ontologize the abject reducing the centrality of performativity and mutability to the theory, as Lotringer writes.²⁰⁰ In this sense the fetishization of the abject by writers such as Keenan and Bohn reflects a more wide-scale problem of turning a self-reflexive and shifting theory, or in their case a musical concept, into an anti-universalist 'niche' genre. Following the essentializing tendencies in Kristeva, the abject becomes a fixed 'thing', and in a similar way noise, in Keenan's account, becomes a definite 'genre' confined to a specific ontologically certain space of 'night' with depoliticising implications.

Nina Power has succinctly described the depoliticising appropriation of abjection in noise, when the relations and conditions of emergence are simplistically severed, and solace is taken in a 'pure' cultural space. She describes the 'introspection of much of the noise

¹⁹⁹ Sylvère Lotringer and Julia Kristeva, 'Fetishizing the Abject', *More & Less*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer and Chris Kraus (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Semiotext(e), 1999), p.23.

²⁰⁰ Critics such as Rosalind Krauss and Patrick ffrench have echoed this criticisms. ffrench for example 'partially agrees with Rosalind Krauss that *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* involves a 'recuperation of the informe through making it equivalent to the referent, the thing'. Patrick ffrench, *The Cut: Reading Bataille's Histoire de l'œil*, p.22.

scene, as if the best response to a hostile world is to turn away from it and howl into a corner'.²⁰¹ The constitution of marginality as a value in itself where one can turn away from the world, which Power describes, raises the question of whether the reception of the Bataillean abject in music writing on subcultures has been characterised by an apoliticism. The voyage of the abject from an antipolitical tension in Hoskyns to an almost apolitical iteration with Keenan would appear to confirm this characterisation. But it is only a partial portrait of a more complex and multi-faceted reception of Bataille's theory throughout the 'renegade tradition'.

The emergence of references to Bataille and the abject in the *NME* in the context of the debate between 'entryism' and marginalised negation has shown that Bataille's work has more often provided intellectual sustenance and attraction for those wishing to embrace the margins and the 'outside'. While I have discussed the parallel usage of Bataille in a transgressive lineage in both academic and popular readings, this musical framing of the relationship between the margins and the mainstream has also had close parallels in academic readings of Bataille which emerged in the nineteen nineties. Another description from Simon Reynolds of the debate that unfolded between 'entryism' and abjection will provide useful in the subsequent critique and comparison with academic readings:

What was once a space seen now just as confinement, (a) retreat; a former purity now a niggling purism'/puritanism [...] Fretting beneath the imagery of mud, stagnation, skulking in the shadows, was the dilemma of entryism – what to do with your good intentions – stay pure but marginal, or try to reach the masses and risk compromise (the hard Left faces the same dilemma). Two rival definitions of musical 'power' – either purity of vision or extent of influence.²⁰²

Nick Land's Politics of the 'Outside'

The dilemma Reynolds describes is that those who embrace the margins risk taking solace in a cultural space that may be seen as pure and uncontaminated by the mainstream but can

²⁰¹ Nina Power, 'Women Machines: The Future of Female Noise', in *Noise and Capitalism*, p.103.

²⁰² Simon Reynolds, 'New Pop and Its AfterMath', in *On the Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, ed. by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), p.467.

quickly become a moralistic sense of purist retreat and an apolitical escape, while those tempted by ‘entryism’ risk compromise and bland conformism. The ultimately simplistic binary between ‘entryism’ and ‘escape’ finds a parallel description in Nick Land’s work on Bataille, but this time on explicitly political rather aesthetic terms:

The speculative model of revolution is one of ‘taking over’, the pessimistic model is one of escape; on the one hand the overthrow of oppression-as-exploitation, and on the other the overthrow of oppression-as-confinement.²⁰³

A bleak sense of pessimism and a violent negation of conventional revolutionary tendencies sets up an anti-political embrace of marginality which we have seen in the ‘renegades’ account of abjection, but it is a form of antipolitics which negates the current framework of ‘debate’ and thus posits itself as a transgressive form of politicisation. Land writes that ‘pessimism is the affect process of unconditional revolt’.²⁰⁴ His embrace of abjection, marginality and negativity is extreme and uncompromising. He writes that ‘What matters is the violent impulse to escape that gives this book its title, *The Thirst for Annihilation*’.²⁰⁵

Throughout his work on Bataille, Land often focuses on the abject as a means of elaborating his ‘virulent’ antihumanism. Imagery of infection and disease recur in his writing in terms interchangeable with the stage of active abjection. Artistic and primary processes are described as contagious. Infectious and abject imagery are thematised as subversive in opposition to poststructuralist philosophies which, according to Land, purify potentially threatening thought through humanist compromises. He writes, ‘If we were to follow deconstruction to the letter here it would follow that atheism, antihumanism, and antilogic, far from being *virulent pestilential swamps*, had no force except through their determinate relation to their enemies, which had thus always already bilateralized them into docility’.²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 9.

²⁰⁴ Nick Land, *Thirst*, p.8.

²⁰⁵ Land, *Thirst*, p.15.

²⁰⁶ Land, *Thirst*, p.19.

The human is de-contaminated and unthreatening, far from being ‘virulent’. While the human is a source of purity and domestication in Landian discourse, it is also, somewhat paradoxically, something to be shielded from as potentially infectious. For example, humanity is typically described as a ‘disease’,²⁰⁷ and in other texts as cancerous.²⁰⁸ There is thus a ‘good’ contamination and a ‘bad’ contamination in Land’s schema. His ‘virulent antihumanism’ simply exchanges the word ‘human’ for anything repellent from his perspective. In a pursuit for ‘escape’ from the human which discards any considerations of the tensions between the human and the non-human he ends up re-inscribing moralizing values, even though his text claims an ‘absence of all moralizing’, and celebrates the ‘contamination’ of the abject and the anti-human.²⁰⁹

Land’s Epistemology: The Fetish for Primary Processes

The philosopher Ray Brassier has critiqued Nick Land from an epistemological perspective.²¹⁰ Brassier’s concern is that Land becomes increasingly consumed by the question of intensity at the expense of any epistemological authority: the focus on the sole question ‘does this intensify?’ in relation to any thought process renders the distinction between truth and falsity irrelevant for Land. As Land writes in his introduction, ‘Who cares what “anyone” thinks, knows, or theorizes about Bataille? The only thing to try and touch is the intense shock-wave that still reaches us along with the textual embers’.²¹¹ However in his early work on Bataille I argue that Land’s materialism is often concerned with a surprisingly simplistic conception of truth which tells us a lot about the reception of the Bataillean abject

²⁰⁷ Land, *Thirst*, p.78.

²⁰⁸ ‘The socius cancerizes a head, cephalic concentration, rationalizing itself into nuclear capital’, Nick Land *Fanged Noumena* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2011), p.394.

²⁰⁹ Land, *Thirst*, p.vii.

²¹⁰ See Ray Brassier: transcription from ‘Accelerationism’ conference, Goldsmiths 14 September 2010, <<http://moskvax.wordpress.com/2010/09/30/accelerationism-ray-brassier/>> [Accessed January 10 2015].

²¹¹ Land, *Thirst*, p. xiii.

in postmodernism, and which will illuminate parallel tendencies in writing on the abject in popular music.²¹²

One indication of his simplistic account of truth is the manner in which he deploys psychoanalytical vocabulary. Bataille's matter is described as 'that which must be repressed as the condition of articulation, whereby immanent continuity is vivisected in transcendence'.²¹³ Land finds in writers like Bataille and Henry Miller the liberation of writing 'from the pedantic bourgeois delicacies that cage literature in the prison of the ego'.²¹⁴ There is a simplistic truth-falsity perspective implied in his view of both psychoanalysis and abjection. For Land, the truth is found in the chaos of the unconscious to which the ego and the compromises of civilization are simply lies. He writes that 'The unconscious does not coo sweet lyrics or unroll immaculate and measured prose, it howls and raves like the shackled and tortured beast that our civilization has made of it'. The unconscious is written about as if it is an isolatable raw fragment of chaotic truth. Rather than depicting the unconscious as a site which indicates the complex antagonisms and gaps in the conflicted relationship within and between self and world, Land depicts the unconscious and the id as if they embody a substantial harsh truth, as *things*, or primal intensities which can be simplistically unearthed in their presence and fused with. The truth is usually simplistically depicted as being 'beneath' the veneer of civilization. 'Truth is madness' he baldly states, in an explicit equation of truth and the real with the primary psychological processes of the id.²¹⁵ This fetish of primary psychological processes similarly parallels a problematic perception that the real can be isolated from all excess signification characteristic of postmodernism. In both psychological and epistemological terms, the id and the real are problematically depicted as isolatable fragments of truth-presence in Land's writing.

²¹² This is a conception of truth which might seem in tension with Land's later theory of hyperstition involving the generation of truths through fiction and myth-making.

²¹³ Land, *Thirst*, p.122.

²¹⁴ Land, *Thirst*, p.124.

²¹⁵ Land, *Thirst*, p.124.

Land's writing has had a close relationship to popular music writing and his theory has been influential on many within the 'renegade tradition' such as Reynolds and Kodwo Eshun,²¹⁶ as well as within academia on Bataille scholars working on black metal theory.²¹⁷ Land's perspective is aligned with Reynolds and the 'renegade tradition' in the mutual interest in cultural movements which become enveloped in a dark nihilistic aura. The 'darkside' turn in mid nineties UK Jungle music was of particular interest here as it highlighted a cultural transition from the utopian yearning of early 'hardcore' dance music to a distinctly dystopian 'darkside'.²¹⁸ Land also shares with the 'renegade tradition' which emerged from post-punk an aesthetic and political embrace of alienation, as something to be accentuated and intensified rather than ameliorated. The attraction towards these ideas in musical subcultures was neatly summarized by his statement that 'impending human extinction becomes accessible as a dancefloor'.²¹⁹ Land celebrates music which accentuates a sense of imminent posthuman dystopia.

The 'Passion for the Real' in Academic and Popular Readings

This taste for the 'darkside' in music along with Land's reading of Bataille warrants close comparison with Bohn and Keenan's account of abjection. Both iterations of the Bataillean abject exhibit what Alain Badiou describes as a 'passion du réel'.²²⁰ This is a tendency to obsess over 'unmasking' the 'fake' semblance to reveal the truth content simply 'beneath' the surface. The passion du réel is a particularly pronounced tendency in postmodernism when a cultural surfeit of signification generates a desire for the 'real'. Hal Foster has described this in similar terms as the primary orientation of abject art, to rediscover the real. Abject art, he

²¹⁶ Kodwo Eshun was an associate member of the Cybernetic Research Culture Unity at Warwick, a research group established by Nick Land and Sadie Plant. Simon Reynolds wrote an article in which he explored the controversies surrounding Land and the group's unorthodox relationship to academia. See Simon Reynolds 'Renegade Academia: The Cybernetic Culture Research Unit' (unpublished feature for *Lingua Franca*, 1999), accessed via < <http://energyflashbysimonreynolds.blogspot.fr/2009/11/renegade-academia-cybernetic-culture.html> > [Accessed 1 July 2015].

²¹⁷ See discussion of Scott Wilson below.

²¹⁸ See for example, Simon Reynolds, 'Slipping into the Darkness', *The Wire*, 148 (1996), 33-39 and p. 62

²¹⁹ Land, 'No Future', in *Fanged Noumena*, p.398.

²²⁰ See Alain Badiou, *Le siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2005).

writes, 'rejects illusionism, indeed any sublimation of the object-gaze, in an attempt to evoke the real as such'.²²¹ My research has shown that in Bataille's reception this tendency has had a specific and complex development in popular culture readings that have illuminating parallels with academic perspectives. As we saw in our analysis of historicism in the previous chapter, readings that celebrate the abject and those that are explicitly historicist would appear to have nothing in common, but are actually closely bound by this desire for the real, a will for a sometimes simplistic conception of authenticity. Land is unsurprisingly scornful of historicism throughout his Bataille book for example. However, both Land and the historicists converge on a desire for an authentic 'real' that can be isolated 'beyond' or 'beneath' the contradictions of language and/or 'outside' a cultural mainstream. The embrace of alienation and darkness in the writing of Land, Keenan and Bohn appears to hold the notion of authenticity in contempt but they all reinscribe perspectives of authenticity in their account of truth. The parodic relationship between day and night is smoothed over such that 'night' has a spatio-temporal consistency in which Noise as a genre can be neatly separated from pop music and becomes endowed with a sense of presence. It is not just that night is described as *the* transgressive space of noise music that is problematic, it is the ontological consistency and faith placed in it. The perspective common to these varied writings on abjection exhibits not only a 'passion du réel', but the perspective of the 'non-duped', an over-confident belief in having 'solved' a critical dilemma which others remain blind to. By confronting abjection, these texts implicitly argue, and venturing into night, a fundamental truth which others cannot see has been unearthed. This self-assured belief that one has isolated a fragment of the real not only generates a moralism of its own but suggests the belief that one has escaped ideology, as if ideology only affects those under daylight while the cover of night provides a magical 'outside', some space of purity. The non-duped of

²²¹ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (London: M.I.T. Press, 1996), p.52.

nocturnal abjection see with an uncharacteristic clarity: doubt is dispensed with in their narratives. The darkness and opacity in which these perspectives are submerged does not lead to a healthy degree of self-reflexive questioning but an unlikely sense of certainty that they can see in the dark. These perspective all thematise marginal cultural spaces under nocturnal imagery. The critical purchase and libidinal pull of thematising night, I argue, should be in its sense of uncertainty. As aesthetic theory submerged in darkness and opacity should enhance critical suspicion about reality. Darkness should surely defamiliarize one's surroundings, but these narratives, or discursive experiments, reinforce a sense of certainty and authority, as if night has a consistent truth-quality.

This trajectory of Bataillean abjection in both popular music writing and the margins of academia can be further illuminated in relation to a more recent convergence of the academic and the popular. Bataille, and in particular the reading of his work by Land outlined here, has also had a notable impact upon a relatively new type of music writing, black metal theory. Scott Wilson, co-editor of *The Bataille Reader*, explains in his *Melancology: Black Metal Theory and Ecology* (2015) that black metal theory does not write 'on' the music but 'seeks inspiration from black metal, and writes alongside and in conjunction with it'.²²² Wilson draws on the possibility of 'radical atheism' out of an engagement with the work of Bataille, Land and contemporary philosopher Quentin Meillasoux. Within black metal 'darkness shows the way along an atheological horizon that marks the limit of absolute evil [...] a mastery of nothing'. With reference to the work of Meillasoux he argues that dominant forms of atheism reproduce a form of Godly belief, displaced onto scientific reason. Secular atheism, he argues, produces a God that even God himself if He existed would fail to believe in and in fact 'could only rage against since it reduces His sovereignty to a servile construct of the limits of human rationality'. This opens up the idea that a radical atheism should entail

²²² Scott Wilson, *Melancology: Black Metal Theory and Ecology* (Winchester: Zero, 2015), p.6.

not only passive disbelief, but an intense and active hatred of God. As Wilson writes, ‘A radical, paradoxically divine atheism that loathes God and thereby embraces Satanism opens itself to such a world of transcendent imagination that Meillasoux argues secular atheism precludes’.²²³

Wilson then turns to Nick Land who ‘maintains that this kind of satanic blasphemy is precisely what atheism must sustain if it is not to subsist in miserable banality’. Quoting from Land’s book on Bataille, he continues:

For Land, the fact that ‘God has wrought such loathsomeness without even having existed only exacerbates the hatred pitched against him. An atheism that does not hunger for God’s blood is an inanity’. Proving himself a direct contemporary of black metal and a black metal theorist *avant la lettre*, Land goes on, ‘anyone who does not exult at the thought of driving nails through the limbs of the Nazarene is something less than an atheist; merely a disappointed slave’.²²⁴

However, Land’s reading of Bataille raises some deeply problematic contradictions in his claims to radical atheism. The theological convictions sustaining Land’s reading of Bataille make it surprising that Wilson should identify it as a source of radical atheism. Land’s materialism reminds the reader of the contingency of the present and the anti-essentialist conception of Bataille’s materialism, but this is paradoxically accompanied by an aggressive confidence in the presence and authority of the alternative narratives he imposes as well as an essentialising tendency to equate primary processes (the non-linguistic conception of the real, and alignment with the id) with ‘truth’. In a co-authored text, for example, he writes ‘There is no doubt anywhere that matters: simply facts. Debate is idiot distraction, humanity is fucked, real machines never closed-up inside an architecture’.²²⁵ Similarly, in an article where he reads Nietzsche through Bataille he says that ‘There is no truth that is not war against theology [...] It cannot be attachment to some alternative conviction that cuts here, but only

²²³ Wilson, *Melancology*, p.9.

²²⁴ Wilson, *Melancology*, pp. 9-10.

²²⁵ CCRU, ‘Swarmmachines’, in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. by Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), p.326.

relentless refusal of what has been told.’²²⁶ In this instance truth is a relentless and pure negativity of all existing narratives of western history, of all theology. The hyperbolic assertion of truth as relentless anti-theology is accompanied by a paradoxical belief in primary processes and intensities *as* truth, dispensing with any equivocation or doubt. In his conviction of negating ‘all theology’ his writing suggests a belief that his own perspective has escaped, or lies ‘outside’, all theological narratives. This is comparable to the basic lessons of ideology in which those who claim to be opposed to ‘ideology’ merely reveal a highly orthodox internalisation of the ideological status quo. Land scorns the irrational religious convictions of others but fails to consider the possibility that his narrative comes with a hidden theology of its own, as for him there can be ‘no doubt’. Truth lies in pure negation of all narratives but this is simultaneously accompanied by an affirmation of one of the dominant narratives of western history, the uprooting and abstracting forces of capitalism which his philosophy celebrates. The failure to think through subtle contradictions and complexities in a hyperbolic affirmation of ‘escape’ gives rise to many theoretical contradictions which usually involve theoretical positioning ‘outside’ and separate from other perspectives. Land fails to think through the manner in which negativity is contaminated by its object of negation.²²⁷ The failure to think through such problems of relationality means that his negativity is often accompanied by an inverse tendency towards affirmation.

This claim to ‘exteriority’ is further accentuated and problematized by Land’s relation to academia. *The Thirst for Annihilation* contains many scornful remarks on the university and Bataille’s text is depicted as entirely alien to academics attempting to appropriate it. *Sur Nietzsche*, for example, is praised for its fragmentary intense writing style which ‘protracts the disintegrative virulence of Nietzsche’s writings with an exuberance quite alien to the

²²⁶ Land, ‘Shamanic Nietzsche’, *Fanged Noumena*, p.206.

²²⁷ On the relationality of negativity and the problems therein, see Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative : A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

pedants of the academy'.²²⁸ Similarly, he writes that 'Pessimism, or the philosophy of desire, has a marked allergy to academic encompassment. Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud all wrote the vast bulk of their works from a space inaccessible to the sweaty clutches of state pedagogy, as of course does Bataille'.²²⁹ Like Michael Richardson in the previous chapter, Land's reflection on his own compromised position as an academic is minimal.²³⁰ Nor does he offer much reference to the fact that his own book on Bataille has been published by a reputable academic publisher. His hyperbolic negations are repeatedly compromised by contradictory affirmations which are never worked through. A negation of theology and theism comes with a hidden theological conviction of its own while its anti-academic position is similarly highly compromised.

This is most illuminating for our purposes in the constitution of an intellectual and cultural space as if it is possible to write, or see, from the 'outside'. This is the claim to exteriority that compromises much of the discourse on Bataillean abjection throughout both academic and popular writing. Where Land has a tendency to equate truth with primary intensities that lie 'beneath' the veneer of civilization, underpinned by an illusion of self-presence, this is the same self-presence and moralizing superiority that emerges from much writing on music as with Keenan and Bohn's nocturnal abjection separated from, and 'outside', the popular music sphere of day. Similarly, Simon Reynolds encapsulates this in his description of abjection: 'to confront abjection is to apprehend the ultimate raw truth of human existence'.²³¹ We can find this 'passion for the real' similarly in Barney Hoskyns's 'Bad Seed' review discussed above when he writes that 'Mick Harvey's drums virtually dispose with cymbals, approaching rhythm with a sense of chance and brutality. His is a

²²⁸ Land, *Thirst*, p.111.

²²⁹ Land, *Thirst*, p.7.

²³⁰ Land does write in the preface 'Not that this book makes any special pleading for itself, it has scratched about for needles in the most destitute gutters of the Earth, cold-turkey crawling on its knees, and begging the academy to pimp it ever deeper into abuse.' Land, *Thirst*, p. ii.

²³¹ Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *Sex Revolts*, p.70.

REAL as opposed to programmed beat.’ This perspective in which live instrumentation is fetishized as more ‘REAL’ than electronic music betrays a simplistic and outmoded concept of authenticity. In another Birthday Party articles written during the same era Hoskyns writes that ‘A CONCERT BY the Birthday Party [...] can break and dissolve the semantic frame which supports this language. In it you can forget for maybe an hour all the other names and categories that flood forward in the name of Pop to imprison your emotions’.²³² Pop is regularly described as the realm of simulacra and falsity where the abject pop of The Birthday Party is where one can find the ‘raw truth of human existence’. Bataille’s theory is here developed as part of a belief in access to an ‘outside’, a pure, or ‘raw’ truth which I argue is deeply problematic but has been countered by what I argue are more interesting readings which sustain a sense of doubt about such access to truth.

Alternative Readings of Bataille by Simon Reynolds: Deconstructing the ‘Darkside’

I have traced a number of readings of the Bataillean abject that culminate with often nihilist and borderline-reactionary fetishisations of marginality and the ‘real’. I now wish to trace an alternate trajectory of popular readings of Bataille by returning to some key moments in Simon Reynolds’s writing. Returning to some overlooked moments in Reynolds’s writing will allow us to further problematize the readings of Bataille in music writing we have traced thus far. As noted at the beginning of the chapter, the authors of *Rock Criticism from the Beginning* mention that the proto-poststructuralist view of the avant-garde stemming from Bataille influenced Reynolds, in contrast to the politicised Marxism of the situationists. However, my research shows that Reynolds’s turn from a politicised notion of ‘subversion’ to an anti-political idea of ‘self-subversion’ was framed by specific readings of Bataille. In a 1987 review of the Butthole Surfers included in *Blissed Out* (1990), Reynolds writes that their music reminds him of Bataille and his:

²³² Barney Hoskyns, ‘Sometimes Pleasure Heads Must Burn - A Manhattan Melodrama starring the Birthday Party’, *NME* 17 October 1981, accessed via < <http://www.rocksbacpages.com/Library/Article/sometimes-pleasure-heads-must-burn---a-manhattan-melodrama-starring-the-birthday-party> > [Accessed January 25 2015].

pre-war secret cult Acéphale, whose goal was to get rid of the head – starting with the moral guardian in one’s own head, the super-ego, then moving on to all the other “heads” [...] This was to be achieved through fascination with base material [...] through an obsessional interest in ritual and religiosity, a pagan celebration of the moment rather than investment in a scheme of forward planning.²³³

As Reynolds writes elsewhere in the same book, ‘The starting point is self-subversion and self-loss, overthrowing the power structure in your own head.’²³⁴ The significance of these quotes is their direct references whereas so many other readings of Bataille have been secondary, mediated through Kristeva, Barthes and other theorists. Reynolds’s significant primary reading of Bataille, and references to Acéphale and self-negation, as well as his vocabulary when discussing subversion and self-subversion show how Bataille had a crucial impact upon how he negotiated the relationship between music and the anti-political. It was not just Bataille’s influence *through* post-structuralism that influenced Reynolds’s major shifts in thinking the political but original readings of Bataille too.

As we have seen, this antipolitical starting point can be taken as a transgression of the pre-existing terms of debate and political antagonism an attempt to rupture a dialectic between existing left orthodoxies through a superficially nihilist gesture which then becomes re-politicised. Even Land’s relentless pessimism, for example, is repoliticised as a state of ‘unconditional revolt’ and is sometimes aligned, in his early writings, with some semblance of an emancipatory project. This is suggested in one early example when he writes that ‘Marx’s famous appeal to the working class in the *Communist Manifesto* that they have “nothing to lose but their chains” is open to both a speculative and a pessimistic interpretation, and it is perhaps the latter that unleashes its most uncompromising force.’²³⁵ However, ultimately Land’s project leads in an aggressively nihilist and resolutely antipolitical direction, culminating in an ongoing tendency to celebrate the irrelevance of human agency in the face of imminent techno-capitalist singularity.

²³³ Reynolds, *Blissed Out*, (Loc 1052).

²³⁴ Reynolds, *Blissed Out* (Loc 932).

²³⁵ Land, *Thirst*, p.10.

Reynolds's writing, in contrast, became more tempered and increasingly cautious regarding the Dionysian and the antipolitical. The convergence of these tendencies provide a locus for repoliticisation in his writing on rave music which had a huge popular culture impact in the UK in the nineties. Bataille is only directly mentioned on two occasions in his book on the subject, *Energy Flash*. In the first instance Reynolds writes 'From burn-baby-burn to burn-out, hardcore rave's psychic economy fits Bataille's model of sacrificial violence and expenditure-without-return. The goal is to get wasted.'²³⁶ This echoes the antipolitical perspective of Reynolds's earlier writing in *Blissed Out*. However later in the book there is a distinctly political extrapolation of Bataille when Reynolds compares the entire movement of UK rave culture on a social level to the accursed share. Reynolds writes that rave emerged at the end of a period in which 'the idea of collectivity had undergone a violently imposed erosion',²³⁷ referring to the effects of Thatcherism. He says that rave was in many respects a response to this, an answer to social needs and could thus be read as a 'popular disorder' or a 'constructive riot'. Reynolds then agrees with one writer's reference to the scene as a 'sacrificial cult of base materialism':

The terms are from Georges Bataille, who believed there was this innate, aristocratic drive in human beings towards extravagance, a will to expenditure-without-return. In other words, the opposite of the Protestant bourgeois ethics of prudence, thrift, investment for the future. Bataille and others like the Situationists would see this potlatch spirit as anti-capitalist in the sense that the Gift or the totally Gratuitous Act break with relations of exchange. One of the most striking things about rave is how wasteful it is [...] In rave, there's a literally ecstatic aspect to this expenditure without return [...] Raving is totally unproductive activity, it's about wasting your time, your energy, your youth – all the things that bourgeois society believes should be productively invested in activities that produce some kind of return: career, family, politics, education, social or charity work [...] That's the glory of rave. It's about orgiastic festivity, splendour for its own sake. Who's to say these fleeting intensities aren't as valid a pursuit as building something that 'lasts'?²³⁸

One of the most interesting aspects of this passage is that Reynolds's use of Bataille does not focus on the Dionysian to the same extent, despite the explicitly Dionysian aspects to rave

²³⁶ Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, p.337.

²³⁷ Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, p.672.

²³⁸ Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, p.673.

culture. Where in *Blissed Out*, Reynolds's use of Bataille was largely focused on 'self-subversion' over and above any subversive wider social context, here the emphasis is reversed. Bataille is 'anti-capitalist' and the first thing he says about the 'potlatch spirit' is not the ecstasy of self-loss therein but the wider social context where there is the potential to 'break with relations of exchange'. He is using Bataille to focus primarily on subversion rather than self-subversion in what seems like a reversal of his earlier position. The rejection of 'politics' is a rejection of a bourgeois notion of politics and attempts to validate the antipolitical, investing it with its own political value, albeit a transgressive one. Here Reynolds is in close proximity to a cultural studies notion of 'subversion' which he situated the 'renegade tradition' in opposition to. More interestingly again, the passage couples Bataille with the Situationists. As noted above, Lindberg et al identified a split between two notions of the Avant-garde, between the Situationists and the less politicised itinerary of Bataille and poststructuralism, with Reynolds following the latter influence. That is reversed here and we can see also see that surprising application of Bataille by Reynolds from an earlier text when he reviewed *The Accursed Share* for *Village Voice* in 1993.²³⁹ Commenting on the second volume of *The Accursed Share*, Reynolds writes about love and eroticism in terms quite different from his use of Bataille within abject and Dionysian rock: 'Love's real object isn't the beloved but what the Situationists called the "lost totality" and what Bataille calls "a lost intimacy": an end to alienation, union with the universe'.²⁴⁰ Bataille's consonance with the abjects had been based on the idea of embracing and utilizing alienation, with Reynolds emphasising that it is not a question 'of wholeness of being, but of holes'. Here Bataille is associated with the opposite perspective. With less emphasis on Bataille's consciousness of the impossibility of totality and community, Reynolds instead draws

²³⁹ This review was unpublished at the time but was then made available on his blog.

²⁴⁰ Simon Reynolds, 'Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Volume II and Volume III unpublished review for *Village Voice*, 1993', published 18 November 2007, accessed via <<http://reynoldsretro.blogspot.fr/2007/11/georges-bataille-accursed-share-volume.html>> [Accessed online January 25, 2015].

attention to his desire for such realisations of community. Rather than choosing one version of the avant-garde as Lindberg et al. write then, Reynolds's relationship to the avant-garde and to the 'theory wars' has been much more ambivalent, and hence his use of Bataille, reading him through apparently opposed intellectual traditions (the S.I and poststructuralism, history and theory) at different times.

There seems to be a historical shift in Reynolds's writing away from the unfettered Dionysianism of his early writings towards a more politicised socially-conscious form of writing which changes how he uses Bataille. His suspicion of the potentially depoliticising effects of embracing the 'intoxication' of theory is expressed in his 1991 *Observer* review of Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism*. Reynolds concludes that 'Oscillating between the intoxication of the latest postmodern theories and the sobriety of the Marxist tradition, Jameson confirms my belief that the most lucid and productive analyses of postmodernism have come from those who are hostile or at least deeply ambivalent about its implications.'²⁴¹ However Reynolds has written more recently that the appeal of theory is precisely its power to intoxicate, and situated his appreciation of Bataille within the intoxications of theory. It is clear then that his reading of Bataille oscillates between antagonistic intellectual trends within postmodernism. While we have noted that any reading of Bataille which 'oscillates' between two opposed versions of Bataille misses the point and should instead affirm the contradictions simultaneously in a methodological excess, it is somewhat unrealistic and unhelpful to 'correct' popular readings for failing to meet such rigorous methodological demands. Rather, Reynolds's use of Bataille gives us some unexpected readings which challenge the dominant route of reception. There is little evidence of a simplistic and nostalgic desire to return to a Bataille 'before' theory as certain academic readings fall

²⁴¹ Simon Reynolds, 'Fredric Jameson: Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, The Observer, 1991', accessed via < <http://reynoldsretro.blogspot.fr/2008/06/fredric-jameson-postmodernism-or.html> > [Accessed online January 25, 2015].

into.²⁴² But there is a use of Bataille which affirms the ongoing adventure and mutability of the text, such that it is sometimes displaced from the canon of French theory and poststructuralism which defined its initial reception, and placed in a more directly politicised trajectory of thought alongside the Situationists. In Reynolds's use, Bataille speaks to entirely conflicting intellectual agendas at different times, and this is not a critical shortcoming but an indicator of the many possibilities inscribed in Bataille's text.

The encouraging mutability and ongoing relevance of Bataille's text is evident aesthetically as well as politically in Reynolds's writing. In another strikingly uncharacteristic application of his theory, Reynolds devotes almost an entire paragraph to Bataille in his *Village Voice* review of Morrissey's 1991 album 'Kill Uncle'. On the track 'I'm the End of the Family Line' Morrissey proclaims himself to be 'an outrage against human nature' For Reynolds, Morrissey has unwittingly resonated with some important ideas of Bataille here.

The passage, worth quoting at length:

Morrissey announces himself as an outrage against Nature, a monster who refuses to reproduce. Morrissey has unwittingly put his finger on something here. It was Bataille who pointed out the intimate connection between sterility and bliss. He believed in an essential human drive toward waste, the frittering away of energy and resources, as expressed through perverse sexuality, sacrifice, and other forms of 'expenditure without return.' And then there's the idea that abstinence can actually engender a perpetual state of sexual excitement, a continual pent-up polymorphous buzz. Or as Morrissey once put it: 'All those things like love, sex, sharing a life with somebody, are actually quite vague. Being only with your self can be much more intense.'²⁴³

Absence in Bataille's writing provides an accession to intensity and ecstasy. Many texts, such as *Le Coupable*, depict meditation on the impossibility and denial of satisfying his desire as conversely leading to an ecstatic experience. Abstinence becomes conversely associated with excess. Bataille's counter-intuitive theories on absence and abstinence, as well as his conception of man as 'negating the given', help Reynolds elaborate an interpretation of Morrissey's lyrical preoccupation with sterility and opposition to nature. Morrissey sings of

²⁴² See discussion of Andrew Hussey and Michael Richardson in the preceding chapter.

²⁴³ Simon Reynolds, 'Morrissey: *Kill Uncle* (Sire)', *Village Voice*, 2 April 1991, accessed via <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/morrissey-kill-uncle-sire>> [Accessed November 1, 2014].

fifteen generations ‘All honouring nature (...) until I arrive’ and he sings with glee and defiance of being the last of his family line. For Reynolds though, the presence of these Bataillean ideas manifest themselves in an ultimately reactionary manner in Morrissey. The singer he says cannot recognize that ‘to reproduce is to accept death, and thus conquer it’, and hence ends up in a state of hyper-narcissism, feeling too good for this world.

This is an unusual example of using Bataille in music writing for aesthetic reasons. Morrissey writes tightly constructed pop songs, often with quite conventional form, unlike the conscious breakdown of form in the noise music celebrated by Bohn, Keenan and the ‘Subjects’. While Bataille’s writing has clearly held more importance and resonance for writers concerned with groups like The Birthday Party and Throbbing Gristle, a confinement to a purely dark, nihilist aesthetic across time would perhaps result in a confined territorialisation of Bataille’s text and its cultural impact. The assertion of male subjectivity common to ‘the Subjects’ in contrast to the effete, effeminacy of some of Morrissey’s music also points to vacillating tendencies in how Bataille is read. The significance of Reynolds’s counter-intuitive readings of Bataille with Morrissey, and with rave culture, is that it extends a confrontation between Bataillean theory and counter-cultural writing stemming from post-punk that simultaneously disrupts and challenges any certain ideas we might have of which aesthetic space Bataille’s text might *belong* to. Reynolds gives us a Bataille which speaks to the effete and the androgynous to counter the dominant machismo and dark aesthetic with which he has been associated.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁴ In a similar spirit of slightly more unconventional readings of Bataille through popular culture, Paul Hegarty’s ‘Lady Gaga and the Drop : Eroticism High and Low’ is worth consulting. In the sense that Lady Gaga is a highly successful mainstream female performer, her work may superficially appear to be unBataillean. However, Hegarty argues that the parodic and perverse cosmology outlined in ‘The Solar Anus’ and the destabilisation of high and low poles of value in ‘The Big Toe’ can help us understand the complex destabilization and restructuration of spaces and bodies in the music videos of Lady Gaga. See Hegarty, ‘Lady Gaga and the Drop : Eroticism High and Low’ in *Lady Gaga and Popular Music : Performing Gender, Fashion and Culture*, ed by Martin Iddon and Melanie L. Marshall (New York : Routledge, 2014), pp. 82-93.

Closing Reflections on Marginality

The importance of French theory and Bataille in popular music since post-punk has been particularly important in the constitution of cultural space and marginal positioning. If we return to the opposition between the 'Subjects' as 'Outsiders' and New Pop as a subversive 'entryist' strategy of working from within, a useful contrast can be drawn between a Kristevan and a Derridean legacy of Bataille. Derrida, and French Theory more broadly, provided sustenance for many attempting to rethink the terms of dissent 'from within'. Scritti Politti was emblematic in this regard as the group came from an experimental post-punk background but changed their approach to a much smoother mainstream pop sound. This change was heavily informed by their leader Green Gartside's disillusionment with Marxism and an engagement with theory. In *Rip It Up and Start Again*, Reynolds describes his position as follows:

Dissatisfied with the self-conscious 'quirkiness and idiosyncrasy' of early Scritti, Green was determined to extricate his trapped pop sensibility from the thorny tangles of the Scritti sound. He hadn't totally abandoned the idea of subversion, but his notions of how that might work became more oblique and subtle: a process of unsettling and undoing (deconstruction, the French theorists called it) that took place inside the very language of pop. Instead of searching for some alternative zone of authentic purity and truth that supposedly existed outside the conventional forms, it might be more productive to work within those structures. Rather than avoiding the love song altogether, it might be possible to locate and accentuate the internal contradictions and tautologies that already limited the 'lover's discourse', as Barthes put it.²⁴⁵

Dionysian and abject rock, with its contrasting rejection of the mainstream similarly renegotiates its conception of marginality and while it seeks an alternative cultural space, it claims to be under no illusion about its position of 'opposition'. Chris Bohn, for example, in his *New Statesman* article on abject pop depicts it as a more sophisticated response to musical dissent than those forms of unthreatening 'opposition' offered by traditional left wing pop music. In writing on the abject Simon Reynolds also praised the 'otherness' offered by alternative music scenes while resisting simplistic notions of oppositionality. He described

²⁴⁵ Reynolds, *Rip it Up*, pp.362-3.

the chasm between the underground and overground that emerged from New Pop and the objects reaction against it as being based ‘not so much on the resurrection of “anti-pop”, but a culture of margins; a disdainful gaze upon the terrain we once occupied, a satellite relationship to a pop centre now barred to us’. Persistently framed as an outsider, or an ‘éternel marginale’ it was natural that Bataille’s influence was more pronounced in a cultural milieu which weaponized its marginality.²⁴⁶ Where Derrida and the canon of French theory were more important for thinking through issues of complicity and ‘entryism’ exemplified by Green’s *Scritti Politti*, Bataille, and in particular a Kristevan Bataille centred on abjection held more importance for a cultural milieu of outsiders.

In this respect, we can conclude by briefly pointing towards one more significant parallel between Bataille’s place within music journalism and within more academic readings. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson read Bataille, similarly, as a thinker positing a more violent negativity and more alluring sense of marginality than the other thinkers associated with French theory. And like Reynolds and Hoskyns, Botting and Wilson identify close resonances between Bataille and Nick Cave, particularly his group The Birthday Party. In their article ‘Pow Pow Pow: Hamlet, Bataille and Marxism Now’, they compare the evocations of Hamlet in Bataille with The Birthday Party song ‘Hamlet (POW POW POW)’. For Nick Cave, as for Bataille, ‘Hamlet’s absolute negativity – his love, laughter; rage, anguish and despair – does not return him to closed (Hegelian) systems.’²⁴⁷ Botting and Wilson find that Derrida and Lacan’s readings of Hamlet, in contrast, are somewhat too restrictive and end up reinscribing the symbolic economies and systems that Bataille’s work aims at shattering. A Bataillean reading of Hamlet, they argue, ‘would stress the abjection

²⁴⁶ For an alternative reading of Bataille which further problematizes the idea of a distinct relationship between a social or cultural ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, see Sue Golding, ‘Solar Clitoris’, *Parallax*, 4 (1997), 119-135.

²⁴⁷ Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, ‘Pow Pow Pow : Hamlet, Bataille and Marxism Now’, *Parallax*, 4 (1997), p. 123.

that is the correlate of the sovereignty Hamlet reaches at the point of death'.²⁴⁸ For Botting and Wilson, Bataille stands apart from deconstruction and psychoanalysis for the extent of his 'radical negativity'. Here we can see further parallels between popular and academic readings of Bataille, with Botting and Wilson giving a more theoretically nuanced account of the exceptional attraction towards Bataillean abjection shown by many journalists in the 'renegade tradition' who refuse the compromises of 'entryism'. This chapter has attempted to chart the appeal of Bataille for a number of music journalists drawn to such Bataillean negativity and marginality, elaborated by Botting and Wilson. Many of Simon Reynolds's readings of Bataille can also be situated within this reading orientation. However, this chapter has also shown a more surprising and sometimes progressive reading of Bataille by Reynolds, when our expectations of Bataille's position in a cultural 'outside' become disrupted and when he is read alongside surprising aesthetic styles, as with Morrissey, or more surprising political orientations, as with the anti-nihilist, socially progressive reading of rave music. At times a celebrant of alienation, at others a thinker yearning for a 'lost totality', the reader is not quite sure where Bataille *belongs*, and that equivocation and uncertainty, the reluctance to settle on any one territorialized reading of his place in popular culture should be affirmed.

²⁴⁸ Botting and Wilson, *Parallax*, 4, p.128.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the reception of Bataille's work across a number of contrasting intellectual scenes. Through consolidating and analysing a number of key scenes of reception, through looking at unexamined translations, through original research on Bataille's prominence in music journalism, and through comparative readings of existing scholarship, I have argued that Bataille's reception has shown his thought can animate various conflicting intellectual spaces and hence his thought does not 'belong' to any one particular intellectual space. At the same time this argument does not entail a facile relativism and I have simultaneously argued for readings of Bataille which sustain the antagonism and internal conflict of his text. Within each scene of reception, I split apart contrasting trajectories of reading. In chapter one I identified a tension between libertarianism and restraint in Bataille's text and theory. I argued that libertarian readings of Bataille can deflate the antagonism and tension of his text and can lead to potentially depoliticising conclusions. This culminated in an examination of Bataille's poetry where readings based on unbridled Dionysian self-loss entail a fusion with death and hence lose any sense of politicised antagonism against the world. In this chapter I thus established that my reading of Bataille is informed by a resistance to unbridled intoxication and instead aligns itself with readings which are sensitive to its irresolvable antagonisms and tensions.

In chapters two and three I identified and examined two reading trajectories in the academic reception, tending to split apart historical and theoretical considerations. I argued that either perspective is necessarily contaminated by the other and showed the contradictions which arise when readers attempt to suppress or disavow the entanglements of both 'history' and 'theory'. In the final chapter I traced the unexamined influence of Bataille upon a number of popular music journalists. These readings focused on the importance of Bataille for an anti-political turn in music writing. However, it showed the ambivalence contained in an anti-

political reading of Bataille's work, which can sometimes be taken to its most nihilist conclusion and other times be used as the locus for a paradoxical re-politicisation.

The readings I have pursued take place in the context of a relatively wide consensus about Bataille's work within contemporary theory: that it is somewhat outdated and no longer holds the same importance for contemporary critical thought, primarily due to its complicity with the excesses of postmodern capitalism. For Slavoj Žižek, Bataille remains stuck in a 'dialectic of the Law and its transgression, of the prohibitive Law as generating the transgressive desire, which forces him to the debilitating perverse conclusion that one has to install prohibitions in order to be able to enjoy their violation – a clearly unworkable pragmatic paradox'.²⁴⁹ Žižek's critical suspicion of Bataille is largely based upon his work's uncomfortable resonances with the excesses of postmodern capitalism. Extending his critiques of the debilitating libidinal economy of Law and transgression in a contemporary context, Žižek writes, paraphrasing a Brechtian dictum, 'What is a poor Bataillean subject engaged in his transgressions of the system compared to the late-capitalist excessive orgy of the system itself?'.²⁵⁰ Giorgio Agamben is also sceptical. He acknowledges the 'achievement' of Jean-Luc Nancy in having shown the ambiguity of 'Bataille's theory of sacrifice and to have strongly affirmed the concept of an "unsacrificeable existence" against every sacrificial temptation', yet for Agamben the concept of the unsacrificeable must also be seen as 'insufficient to grasp the violence at issue in modern biopolitics'.²⁵¹

Even beyond theorists such as Agamben and Žižek, many critics and academics who worked extensively on Bataille in the nineties, including Steven Shaviro, Benjamin Noys and Nick Land, now view his work as having little of critical purchase to offer the present

²⁴⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006), p.56.

²⁵⁰ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press), p.56.

²⁵¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.113. For a reading of Bataille and Agamben which expands upon the differing conceptions of sacrifice and the sacred for both thinkers, see Paul Hegarty, 'Supposing the Impossibility of Silence and Sound, of Voice: Bataille, Agamben and the Holocaust', in *Politics, Metaphysics and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer*, ed. by Andrew Norris, pp. 222-247.

moment. Shaviro's concerns are primarily aesthetic. He says that the 'the most vibrant twentieth century art was all about transgression'. Shaviro continues:

From Stravinsky to the Dadaists, from Bataille to the makers of *Deep Throat*, and from Charlie Parker to Elvis to Guns N'Roses, the aim was always to stun audiences by pushing things further than they had ever been pushed before. Offensiveness was a measure of success. Transgression was simply and axiomatically taken to be subversive. But this is no longer the case today. Neoliberalism has no problem with excess. Far from being subversive, transgression today is entirely normative [...] Every supposedly 'transgressive' act or representation expands the field of capital investment. It opens up new territories to appropriate, and jump-starts new processes from which to extract surplus value.²⁵²

Where Shaviro frames transgressive art as seeking 'to break free from social constraints, and thereby to attain some radical Outside', he posits accelerationist art in contrast as remaining 'entirely immanent, modulating its intensities in place'. Shaviro's attempt to formulate an 'accelerationist aesthetics' takes place within an ongoing debate over the term 'accelerationism'. This was first used by Benjamin Noys as a term of critique in his 2010 book *The Persistence of the Negative*. Noys identified this as a libertarian strain of thought evident in a number of major post-68 texts which responded to Marx's contention that 'the *real barrier* of capitalist production is *capital* itself'.²⁵³ Noys summarizes the accelerationist position as 'arguing that we must crash through this barrier by turning capitalism against itself. They are an exotic variant of *la politique du pire*: if capitalism generates its own forces of dissolution then the necessity is to radicalise capitalism itself: the worse the better'.²⁵⁴ While Noys identified accelerationism as a point of critique, a number of theorists have since claimed it as a political programme. However, Nick Land's nineties texts, collected and published in 2011, stand apart as they largely abandon any pretence towards emancipatory politics and advocate an extreme form of accelerationism. In Deleuze and Guattari's account,

²⁵² Steven Shaviro, 'Accelerationist Aesthetics', *e-flux*, 46 (2013), accessed via < <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/> >

²⁵³ The major texts Noys identifies are Deleuze and Guattari's *L'Anti-œdipe* (1972), Jean-François Lyotard, *L'Économie libidinale* (1974), and Jean Baudrillard, *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* (1976).

²⁵⁴ Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010). P.5.

what capitalism deterritorializes on the one hand, it reterritorializes with the other. The uprooting and alienating forces of abstraction in urban modernity and market capitalism are accompanied by paradoxical recodings of identity through family values and different forms of nationalism. Where Deleuze and Guattari advocated forms of deterritorialization with varying caveats, Land abandoned any caution celebrating the possibilities of unfettered deterritorialization throughout his texts.

For a variety of contemporary theorists who have defended Land's controversial philosophy, his development of an accelerationist philosophy was partially dependent on abandoning any engagement with or fidelity to Bataille. In their introduction to Land's collected writings, Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier highlight the incompatibilities of Land's later work with its early Bataillean phase. While they note that Land has always 'disavowed voluntarism', at the same time 'he seems to nurture the romantic will to "go beyond"':

This could be seen as a relapse back into the juridical-dialectical domain of law-and-transgression associated with Bataille, which appears strictly incompatible with Deleuze-Guattari's coolly functionalist diagrammatics of desire, and whose mechanisms Land dismantled early on [...] In holding fast to the thread of absolute destratification, Land is not reverting to a dubiously voluntaristic paradigm of transgression, but singling out what is at once the most indispensable and ineluctable element in any generalised stratography.²⁵⁵

The reference to a 'juridical-dialectical domain of law-and-transgression' suggests Bataille is here viewed as outdated for similar reasons suggested by Slavoj Žižek, locked into a perverse libidinal economy. The more libertarian perspective of Deleuze and Guattari appears to offer forms of libidinal intensity destratified and further decoded away from a dialectical relationship to the Law. However, the interesting aspect here is that while Bataille becomes increasingly irrelevant for Land in his pursuit of an accelerationist philosophy, he has also become of waning interest for Benjamin Noys for precisely the opposite reason, for his complicity within an accelerationist 'politics of excess'. In *Malign Velocities* (2014), his

²⁵⁵ Mackay and Brassier, *Fanged Noumena*, p.32.

critique of an accelerationist politics of excess, Noys expands on Bataille in terms which resonate with and expand some of the points raised by Žižek and Shaviro. ‘The impasse of Bataille’s critique is not only that it has been outpaced by a “cloacal” capitalism, a capitalism that thrives on excess and waste. The more damaging problem is that it conceives this excess or waste as the site of a new production, which hardly seems to break with capitalism.’²⁵⁶ Here Noys refers to, and elaborates upon, a critique raised by Jean-Joseph Goux in his article ‘General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism’ (1990). Goux refers to the historical specificity of Bataille’s conception of capitalism, which was partially based on the protestant work ethic described Max Weber, a utilitarian, highly rationalized one. Goux argues that Bataille’s critique of the ‘cramped, profane, narrowly utilitarian and calculating bourgeois mentality’ would find an unlikely accord with the abundance of unproductive expenditure and championing of entrepreneurial risk in postmodern capitalism.²⁵⁷ While some advocates of philosophical and political excess, such as Nick Land, find that Bataille does not go far enough, there is a wide consensus among critics of the politics of excess that Bataille’s thought is fatally complicit with our contemporary postmodern moment.²⁵⁸

In tracing the reception of Bataille’s work in a number of key readings, this thesis has shown, and argued for, the performativity and progressive mutability of Bataille’s work in different contexts. Bataille’s popular reputation is partially as a ‘philosopher of excess’ but I

²⁵⁶ Benjamin Noys, *Malin Velocities* (Winchester: Zero, 2014), p.76.

²⁵⁷ Jean-Joseph Goux, ‘General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism’, *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), p.217.

²⁵⁸ In addition to Goux’s essay, a number of articles from the late eighties and early nineties, published in the *Canadian Journal of Social and Political Theory* and related publications, similarly considered Bataille as a thinker consonant with contemporary postmodernism. In a 1987 article, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker write that we are ‘no longer under the sign of the political economy of accumulation but in the Bataillan scene of the general economy of excess’, ‘Body Digest: Theses on the Disappearing Body in the Hyper-Modern Condition’, *Canadian Journal of Social and Political Theory*, 11(1987), p. ix. In *The Postmodern Scene* (1988), David Cook writes that ‘Georges Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* marks the beginning of the postmodern experiment in France’, David Cook, ‘Camera Negrida: Barthes’ Panic Scene, in *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyperaesthetics*, ed. by Arthur Kroker and David Cook (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p.134. In the introduction to that volume, Kroker again evokes the dichotomy between an old capitalism of accumulation and a new one based on Bataillean excess. This is problematic in the sense that Kroker is a little quick to brush aside the ongoing dynamics of capital accumulation. While it is not the central problematic, this thesis has been informed by the conviction that contemporary capitalism requires the analyses of both Marxian and more ‘postmodern’ theoretical perspectives. Exemplary in this regard, see Jacques Bidet, *Foucault Avec Marx* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2014).

have prioritised readings which show the points of tension with, and resistance to, unbridled excess. In this way, my thesis's examination of the reception of Bataille points towards readings which resist any simple conflation of his thought with a postmodern politics of excess, and points towards Bataille's potential dissonance not only with our present cultural moment, but his dissonance with any cultural and political moment. In this regard, Hannah Arendt's comments on Walter Benjamin's posthumous fame resonate with our parallel considerations:

Posthumous fame is too odd a thing to be blamed upon the blindness of the world nor on the corruption of a literary milieu. Nor can it be said that it is the bitter reward of those who were ahead of their time – as though history were a race track on which some contender's run so swiftly that they simply disappear from the spectator's range of vision.²⁵⁹

The attribution of posthumous fame to being 'ahead of one's time' can be a simplistic and reductive understanding of intellectual history. However, this attribution has often been implied throughout Bataille's reception. If a perception that Bataille was 'ahead of his time' accompanied his reception as a 'proto-post-structuralist', now he is often viewed as being 'ahead of his time' on more negative terms: there is a widespread perception of his work as being a pre-emptive advocate and accomplice of postmodern capitalist excess. Arendt's critique of the notion of being ahead of one's time is particularly pertinent to Bataille because of the 'bicephalic' nature of his work. This means that there is no specific 'time' waiting for Bataille, but suggests that his work is critically dissonant with any temporality. As Derrida noted, 'L'athéologie de Bataille est aussi une a-téléologique et une aneschatologie'.²⁶⁰ If we are to resist reading his work as being irrevocably conflated with post-structuralism, as a simplistically teleological view of intellectual history and a 'once and once only' approach to

²⁵⁹ Hannah Arendt, 'Introduction' in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p.2.

²⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale: un Hégélianisme sans réserve', *L'Arc*, 32 (1967), p.40.

reading might imply, then we should also resist the inverse tendency towards eschatology, the idea that it ‘belongs’ to a more contemporary epoch of postmodern dystopia.

Jean-Luc Nancy has noted that ‘There is no doubt that some have hammed it up compared with what were, in spite of everything, Bataille’s restraint and sobriety.’²⁶¹ Similarly, in his discussion of *L’Expérience intérieure*, Blanchot highlighted the resistance towards unbridled Dionysianism in Bataille. The experience, notes Blanchot ‘loin de la faire disparaître, transforme l’homme tout entier en cette interrogation suppliciant avec laquelle elle le déchire et le divise de toutes manières’.²⁶² In this respect, following the emphasis on restraint and anguish which Nancy and Blanchot point towards in Bataille, I have attempted to follow a similar perspective in underexamined popular culture readings. As we saw in the final chapter in particular, Bataille’s work has been read according to antipolitical forms of self-subversion, but even among a small group of popular music journalists the bifurcations of the text have suggested very different conceptions of the ‘antipolitical’. Even in the work of Simon Reynolds alone, this has given rise to readings which are at times defiantly nihilist, and at times relatively sober and politically conscious. This thesis has thus shown valuable manifestations of the performativity of Bataille’s theory in popular culture. As the first extended examination of Bataille’s relationship to popular music journalism this opens up significant scope for further research. By concluding with a major study of the ‘renegade tradition’, the readings of Bataille encountered here have shown only some of the ways in which his work continues to have an important impact upon how we think about the relationship between theory and popular culture.

²⁶¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Exscription’, *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), p.60.

²⁶² Maurice Blanchot, ‘L’Expérience intérieure’, *Faux pas* (Paris : Gallimard, 1943), p.50

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