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Bataille, Literature, Happiness, & Evil

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This article examines Bataille's philosophy of art apropos of his express writings on literature. The aim is to see what program Bataille can offer for an aesthetics in terms of future writings of artistic works including "the novel," which Bataille also wrote himself. First it discusses Bataille's 1949 article "Happiness, Eroticism, and Literature," which posits literature as a quest for happiness, and compares this with his 1957 *Literature and Evil* which posits it, rather, as a quest for "Evil." Then it explores Bataille's writings on poetry, which invoke it as a way to smash through the rut prose literature falls into, in order to attain a more *immediate* experience. Finally, it turns to the need for separation Bataille posits between the poetic and rational that must also be a path between the two – and argues that a clarity of consciousness of these two distinct but related realms would constitute Bataille's directive for future novels: to help us *think* within the real of their *experience*.

Introduction

It is in his 1949 article, "Happiness, Eroticism, and Literature," where Bataille begins the analysis of literature by reducing it to a "quest for happiness" reduced, Freudianly, to "sexual pleasure." But what was meant as a piece for the journal *Critique* he began editing after the war, in this

case reviewing the sensualist work of surrealist writer Malcom de Chazal, soon produces some of the most profoundly nuanced thinking Bataille has had to offer on the deepest processes of creative writing – where happiness can seem like the very thing furthest removed.¹ This article will examine Bataille's philosophy of art apropos of his express writings on literature. The aim will be to see what program Bataille can offer for an aesthetics in terms of future writings of creative works such as “the novel,” which Bataille, famously, also wrote himself. First I discuss how his “Happiness, Eroticism, and Literature” posits literature as a paradoxical quest for happiness, and ground this with Nietzsche's critique of Kant's contrary notion of “disinterest” as characterising the aesthetic sphere. Bataille's 1957 *Literature and Evil* will also be considered in this context, positing as it does rather a quest for a kind of “Evil” in literature, which I will argue is the mark of an under-analysed relation between law and desire that fails to make space for periodically affirming the return of certain repressed or tabooed desires – and thereby consigns Dionysus to the Devil. Then I discuss Bataille's writings on poetry, which suggest the latter as a way to smash through the rut that prose literature falls into, in order to offer us a more *immediate* experience – despite its *absence* of the ability to any longer form the unifying social myths for community. Finally, I turn to the paradoxical need for separation Bataille posits between the poetic and rational that must also be a path between the two, which I suggest are equivalent, in Lacanian terms, to the intimately related yet still distinct imaginary and symbolic modes of registering the often heterogenous *real*. I argue that a clarity of consciousness and affirmation of these distinct yet connected realms constitute Bataille's aim for future writings and novels: to foster our ability to *think* within our raw, tumultuous *experience* of that which remains *real* in them.

1. Literature's Quest for Happiness connected to The Erotic

This section considers the paradoxical “quest for happiness” Bataille discerns in literature in his 1949 *Critique* article, in order to eventually evaluate it apropos of the quest for “Evil” he later posits in his 1957 collection of essays *Literature and Evil*, early versions of which were also first published in *Critique*.² Nietzsche's criticism of Kant's seemingly

contrary notion of “disinterest” as constituting the properly *aesthetic* experience will also be brought to bear here – not least because Nietzsche is the major philosophical reference of Bataille and also at one point equates aesthetics with happiness, while subjecting Kant to a famous critique.

Nietzsche’s critique of Kant’s aesthetic disinterest occurs in Essay Three of his *Genealogy of Morals*, which sets out to deconstruct the *ascetic* ideal of self-denial inherited of our various Judeo/Christian-Platonic traditions of the West.³ Here he dismisses the Kantian idea that “one can even view undraped female statues ‘without interest’” as bearing all the “naivety of a country Vicar” – despite any partly admirable pretensions to objectivity in the “spectator” in emphasising only those “predicates of beauty” which “establish the honour of knowledge: impersonality and universality” (GM, III:6). Nietzsche contrasts this not only with the story of Pygmalion, the sculptor who literally fell in love with his own sculpture, so besotted was he, but also to the novelist Stendhal – who makes for Nietzsche the far more accurate “sensual” and “happily constituted” appeal to aesthetic beauty as “the promise of happiness” (GM, III:6). And it is just this promise, endorsed by Nietzsche as the *real* of aesthetics “in the realm of the beautiful” from “refined first-hand experience” of it as a “great *personal* fact” – and an “abundance of vivid authentic experiences, desires, surprises, and delights” (GM, III:6) – that Bataille likely had in mind when beginning his own analysis of literature with a perceived quest for happiness. Although soon enough he comes across an essential paradox involved that extends our analysis *beyond* personal interest in what I will suggest is actually a *hyper*-interested Nietzschean way – involving as it does the “eroticism” that Bataille will define in *Literature and Evil* as “the approval of life up until death” (LE, 10).

This *paradox* of happiness, which Bataille follows Nietzsche in seeing literature as a kind of promise of or quest for, occurs for Bataille because it can refer to the happiness of “both acquisition and expenditure,” which are different in kind and why our “representations vary in accordance with our frame of mind” (WS, 189). For the first sense of happiness is where “happiness is *always* confounded with the resources which make it possible” (WS, 189), because “before we can be happy we must find the means to be so,” Bataille notes, which means “the

thought of happiness thereby urges us to work to attain it" (WS, 188). This gives the happiness of security in the steady accumulation of means, wealth, and comfort, depending on the rational pursuit of determinate goals and interests in the sphere of work. The results of this work give what Bataille will note is the longer "duration" of happiness (WS, 190) – in a space governed by the taboos we place on certain of our animal desires and instincts pertaining mainly to sex and death. But by doing so for Bataille, "to recall its material data" (WS, 188), there is also a sense where "we introduce a distance between ourselves and happiness" (WS, 188) – meaning that happiness is not complete unless there is a second, contrary movement for a happiness of transgressing such taboos. This is Bataille's second sense of happiness which is that of the *expenditure* of accumulated resources, from the *discharge* of power, wealth, and pent-up animal drive. It is the most intense happiness of the most transient "instant" (WS, 190), Bataille notes, and although it yields a most personal of satisfactions, it can risk going too far, beyond self-interest in the most "interested" of ways. Such are the movements of happiness that Bataille posits as the essentially violent conflict of literature, reflecting "these violent contrary movements within us" (WS, 187).

When it comes to life, Bataille had already discerned before turning to discuss literature that this conflict of happiness is because "for man the sexual act is animality," where "man in a normal state" often "condemns it" – for potentially it "consumes our reserves" to such an extent that it "frightens us because it enraptures us and it enraptures us all the more profoundly because it frightens us" (WS, 186-7). Lacan's *Seminar VII* articulation of the "*jouissance* [enjoyment] of transgression" as the "original state" or *least* "indirect" form of drive satisfaction – going *beyond* our usual pleasure principles delimited by the reality principle by transgressing the moral taboos that usually constrain us – speaks to this frightful enrapturing as well. As does Lacan's later *Seminar XVII* depiction of *jouissance* as that which "begins with a tickle and ends in a blaze of petrol."⁴ And it is with these insights in mind that Bataille can express that while "sexual pleasure is by its very nature happiness," "one of resolution and gushing forth," it "nevertheless has the sense of unhappiness" (WS, 186) – since *direct* sexual happiness is what we must shed in order to work to gain the means to acquire it, consigning it to the absence of

night. This is such for Bataille that “either we betray our truth of the night during the day,” where we are under the sway of taboo and fixated neurotically on the happiness of security and accumulation, “or we hypocritically aspire simply to denounce the conventions of the day” (WS, 187) – where instead we enter the perverse space of transgression and the deepest form of satisfaction so powerful in its sovereignty that we may never wish to return, and believe this is all too possible.

Bataille laments how the two conflicting happinesses of accumulation and expenditure both seem to confine us “within the conditions of falsehood” and are specially “found in literature, to which they give the disguised face of truth” (WS, 187). And by noting this truth as disguised, Bataille is pointing to our varying degrees of unconsciousness about the two forms of happiness – a lack of clarity which plays out in different types of literature negatively in various ways. Here we find literature simulating, stimulating, staging, and intensifying their conflict even while masking it – such that Bataille will remark that the “quest for happiness that causes us to write or read seems in truth to have the contrary meaning of unhappiness” (WS, 187). He points to how tragedy, for instance, often “brings terror rather than pleasure,” and how even the “joy of comedy” is “equivocal,” involving laughing at “misfortune” (WS, 187) – while the novel also “requires vicissitudes which produce anguish” because actually “the depiction of happiness,” pure and simple, “is boring” (WS, 187). This is such for Bataille that literature even portrays a “vocation for unhappiness,” which means “if the writer evokes pleasure he does so with dark overtones suggesting something distressing” (WS, 187).

We get a sense for what Bataille’s *directive* for literature would be when he sets his critical gaze to it through this happiness-unhappiness dynamic he is offering. Here he laments the “recent literature” that also “covets happiness too much,” to the point of “poetic insipidity,” with a recent anthology of it giving “the feeling of defeat” (WS, 187). He contrasts this with *classical*/tragedy where actually “the unhappiness serves as a stimulant, a failure which reveals the power to confront it” (WS, 188) – such as in Sophocles’ *Antigone* where Lacan traces Antigone’s “beauty effect” (SVII, 281) as the *lure* for us to face and affirm our tragic, transgressive, incestuous truth. But now instead we get “this feeble display of failure or shameful pleasures,” such that at any point “if the

body triumphs, language,” Bataille laments, “has the power only to acknowledge a movement of retreat” (WS, 187). This retreat is where “recent literature” for Bataille, “as it portrays sexual pleasure, tends more strangely to betray happiness and to misunderstand the poetic sense of unhappiness” – leading it to neurotically “deny joy without having affirmed it” (WS, 188). And the end result is thus an unsatisfying “tribute to unhappiness – which balances a desire for the happiness it really is” (WS, 188), resulting overall in “the rhetoric of unhappiness,” where, Bataille concludes, “literature becomes weary and cannot really discover its initial pure blaze” (WS, 192).

So much for the initial quest for happiness literature had promised, at least from the initial vantage point that Bataille seemed to share with Nietzsche and Stendhal at the price of Kant. But what Bataille is diagnosing here with this loss of literature’s *initial pure blaze* is our loss of the ability to properly experience, understand, and thereby genuinely depict what he calls the “felicitous animality” of happiness that comes from transgression. This is because we remain fixated instead at the petrified level of an *all-too* human taboo, governing the space of work and acquisition by morality and reason, by means-ends calculations concerning further growth in acquisitions in the future. And we can see the fixation to this realm playing out in literature as what Bataille calls the “absence of incisive movements of anguish,” or the “reduction of ‘privileged moments’” (WS, 188) – where one can no longer experience the sovereignty of what Lacan directly calls “*jouissance* of transgression” (SVII, 195), or later in his *Seminar XXIII* on the writer James Joyce the “*jouissance* of the real.”⁵

This loss of *incisive moments* is due to what we can note with Lacan’s *Seminar X* is the anxiety acting as a “signal” or “fault-line” of the oncoming real and causing us to retreat, due to the potential masochism involved *beyond* the pleasure principle: where “masochism” is what Lacan later noted in *Seminar XXIII* can be “the main share of the *jouissance* endured by the real” (SXXIII, 63).⁶ So what we get instead, due to this retreat before our deepest desire, which would reach the real, is what Bataille notes is the “predominance of everyday life” (WS, 188): which harkens to Nietzsche’s critique of Socrates’ Euripides for causing the condescension of Greek Tragedy from its “bold traits” to the “civic mediocrity” of the herd.⁷

– where taboos of moral-rationalism lord it over desire and reign too supreme across all times, even in our best artistic spaces meant for release. This is where Bataille will lament that “happiness is confounded with the resources which make it possible” (WS, 189), which in a humanity now utterly “devoted to the world of things and reason” – in a way so “stubborn” it very much recalls our lost or latent “animality” (WS, 190) –eventually, when the repressed drive returns condensed in a symptom or displaced in an acting out, “consigns our most intimate moments to something monstrous, something shameful” (WS, 190).

2. Literature as the Condescension of Desire into Evil

In the previous section we arrived at the loss of the primal, animal sense of happiness important to humankind in life and literature, a loss which figurately consigns Dionysos – the Greek god of sexual ecstasy, intoxication, and transgression – to the Judeo-Christian Devil. Now we turn to Bataille’s 1957 *Literature and Evil* to examine further this process, where the happiness initially promised of literature seems to condescend to a demand for Evil.

The very final work Bataille published in his oeuvre, the 1961 *Tears of Eros*, gives the key to this literary demand for Evil – by documenting eroticism’s loss and distortion across the history of painting, particularly in the Christian era. Here Bataille notes the annulment of any adequate positive space for the erotic return of prohibited libidinal impulses, meaning they could only reappear “distorted,” “piously cursed,” in monstrous representations of self-immolation, sadistic crime, the Devil, and the fires of Hell.⁸ And this is precisely what to keep in mind when approaching Bataille’s earlier 1957 *Literature and Evil* collection, which focusses on novels such as Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* and William Blake’s poem *Heaven and Hell* – at the birth of the modern world and the romantic reactions to its excess where, Nietzsche notes, the abnegations of Christianity are preserved in the same old ascetic ideal only streamlined of its religious “exteriors, its guise and masquerade” (GM, III:25), into a purer, more rationalised form.

This hyper-rational modern world thereby consigns the erotic to the irrational, the origins of which are in the Christian reduction of eroticism to

Evil. And in between is Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, which Bataille calls "surely the most beautiful and most profoundly violent love story," and "one of the greatest books ever written" (LE, 9). Here Bataille notes that "there is no character in romantic literature who comes across more convincingly or more simply than Heathcliff" – in the "basic state" of "the child in revolt against the world of Good" and the "adult world" and "committed, in his revolt, to the side of Evil" (LE, 13). This commitment is such that "there is no law which Heathcliff does not enjoy breaking" (LE, 13), and Bataille cites the 1955 study of Jacques Blondel to compare Heathcliff's speech to the executioners in de Sade's *Justine* – where the act of "destruction" is valorised to yield a "divine," "sensual," "ecstasy" like no other and at the very least, Heathcliff would add, to "treat" oneself to "an evening's amusement" (LE, 13-4).⁹

Despite these monstrous emissions, or perhaps even because of their elemental excess, Bataille finds that "*Wuthering Heights* has a certain affinity with Greek tragedy" – for "the subject of the novel is the tragic violation of law," where the author "agreed with the law," but the "emotional impact" of the play is actually "communicating the sympathy" that was felt "for the transgressor" (LE, 14). Bataille explains this sympathy in terms of the *lure* one feels for "forbidden" fruits—where "the ban beautifies that to which it prevents access," which serves to "magnify it," and is "no less an invitation at the same time as it is an obstacle" (LE, 15). And we can find Lacan two years later in his *Ethics Seminar* similarly noting the eternal "attraction of transgression," which, among "religious circles," only a "comic optimism" could ever hope to fully suppress (SVII, 2). In any case it is the *excessive* violence of the transgressor – whether it be incest, parricide, or self-enucleation in the case of tragedy, or the necrophilia and sadistic, vengeful torture of *Wuthering Heights* – which suggests a corresponding excess of taboo that thereby both requires, and causes, an equal opposite force to allow for the drive's sublimated release. And this explains why in his 1958 Television interview on *Literature and Evil*, Bataille perhaps cryptically refers to both the force of taboo *and* the violence of transgression as "two opposite kinds of Evil."¹⁰

These two forms of evil are in actual fact related to the two forms of happiness we earlier discussed, where the happiness of social security coming from taboo, moral law, and accumulation sees the happiness of

transgression and expenditure as Evil: *and vice versa* – where the happiness of transgression looks upon the violent imposition of taboo back to stop it as the real and actual Evil. Both sides of this equation are, of course, coequal for Bataille: transgression for release, and taboo to give us something in reserve to later release – and part of the essential conflict of life that is paraded with various levels of clarity, or lack thereof, in our various kinds of literature. By adding *more* consciousness or clarity about our conflictual inter-relation, however, Bataille would like to lessen the “evil” wretchedness that each side of the relation, and thus our whole contradictory totality itself, may otherwise take. And we can see this in his turn to the poetry of William Blake, who much like ourselves to this day, Bataille notes, could not quite “solve this contradiction” where “by affirming Evil Blake was affirming liberty,” even though “the liberty of Evil is also the negation of liberty” (LE, 78) – but nevertheless he still managed “to restore life to original energy” (LE, 80).

Bataille begins his Blake chapter in *Literature and Evil* with the pronouncement, “If I had to name those English writers who moved me most, they would be John Ford, Emily Brontë, and William Blake” – for “in the excessive violence of their work, Evil attains a form of purity” (LE, 65). In Blake’s case this was to “reduce humanity to poetry and poetry to Evil” (LE, 65), but this is no longer the evil of slow, sadistic torture and murder of other traditions founded on the suppression of the fullness of libido: Rather, Bataille notes, “He wrote an apology for sexual freedom and, rumour had it, wanted to force his wife to live with his mistress” (LE, 67). Furthermore for Bataille, although “Blake was in no way a philosopher,” he “pronounced the essential with a vigour and a precision that might make a philosopher envious” (LE, 75) – with “visionary writings” that also offered “no opposition to the clarity which psychoanalysis would like to introduce,” despite the often “dreamlike incoherence” (LE, 73). Bataille cites for example the 1793 *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where, Blake writes, almost anticipating with exactitude Bataille’s own position: “Good is the passive that obeys reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy,” but “Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy” (LE, 75). And the message for Bataille of Blake’s conclusion, here: that “Energy is eternal delight” – is that

“instead of turning away from Evil, man should look it boldly in the face” (LE, 75).

Blake's refusal to look away from what Judeo/Christian-Platonic metaphysics often crudely mislabelled 'evil' in the moralistic sense was because, Bataille notes, “in Blake's life the joy of the senses was a touchstone” – such that “sensuality set him against the primacy of reason” and he “condemned the moral law in the name of sensuality” (LE, 75). This condemnation is evident in a line of Blake's, which could have fitted perfectly in Nietzsche's 1888 *The Anti-Christ* a century later, which reads: “As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys” – which Bataille reads *resolutely* as calling for “sensual happiness, for the exuberance of the body” (LE, 75). Nietzsche, of course, had similarly noted, in his sustained genealogical critique of Judeo-Christianity, that where the priest appears to formalise life's affairs it is always “to denaturalise them,” which curses their natural, animal, biological instincts while pretending instead to “sanctify them.”¹¹

The term “Evil” for Bataille still does valuable work in the world of Blake, however, for it serves to affirm a difference from “that subterfuge which denies true sensuality by seeing it solely as health” – and is rather “on the side of Energy, which is Evil, which restores it to its deepest significance” (LE, 75). And this significance is evidenced for Bataille in Blake's anti-transcendentalising of marriage and love, when he writes: “In a wife I would desire / What in whores is always found – The lineaments of Gratified desire” (LE, 76). The findings since of psychoanalysis, and Lacan's debunking of the “Woman with a capital *W* indicating the universal” as an eternal purity, of which “there's no such thing,” because “she is not-whole” – should help to demonstrate that one should not at all assume that Blake has only professed a “masculine,” “active” desire here.¹² Rather, along with Bataille's own work, Blake is giving expression to what Lacan calls the “no sexual relation” (SXVII, 116), the *absence* of any pre-given *rapport* between the sexes “in copulation” linked to the Good, as if it were “nature's intentions that this form a whole, a sphere” (SXVII, 33). For the animal impulses of sex will always subsist and appear shockingly perverse from the lofty vantage of the Good, which demonises difference due to an inflationary structure that is little more than a dream.¹³

Bataille, nevertheless, concludes his treatment of Blake problematising his comments on the Terror of the French Revolution – referring to the “fearful symmetry” (LE, 77) in Blake’s *The Tyger* which, in the poem *Europe*, as the “furious terrors flew around” in the “vineyards of red France,” “couch upon the prey & suck the ruddy tide” (LE, 79). Bataille finds that Blake here has “exalted the blind release of brute force” as a “divine form of excess,” as “portions of eternity too great for the eye of man” (LE, 78) – which in revolutions is too opposed to the “dictates of Reason,” Bataille notes, and “does not lead to any coherent attitude” but “poetic disorder” (LE, 79).¹⁴ So Bataille is without finding *total* resolution in Blake, as inspirational as he was, of the question of violence contained in Evil, adding complexity to the “insoluble contradiction” (LE, 78) between “happiness” of taboo and “happiness (or ‘evil’)” of transgression that by thinking literature we are discussing. A resolution, then, might be sought in Bataille’s turn to the poetic works of his dissident surrealist colleagues of interwar Paris.

3. Poetry reopens Sovereignty from the rut of Literature

This section will see in what sense for Bataille the more recent poetry of his surrealist contemporaries restores a more *positive* sense of immediacy with the real of our drives, and thereby leads to their more lucid co-relation with the rational world of discourse which, Bataille contends, prose literature leaves us alienated within. We examine his discussions of Jacques Prévert and René Char – to look further into this irreducible conflict of law and transgression.

By going further into poetic immediacy, we are also in a sense following the premise of Lacan’s *Ethics* which suggests going “more deeply” into “the real,” instead of into “the ideal” or “unreal” as per the manner of “superficial opinion” (SVII, 11). For by better understanding the real first, the ideals we later construct in response are more likely to be better informed, secured, rooted, and thereby eschew the unconscious “guilt” and “catastrophes” of “neurosis and its consequences” where, Lacan observes, “desire keeps coming back” and “demands insistently that the debt be paid” (SVII, 319). And part of what Lacan’s *Ethics* also provides is a focused reading of the *Antigone* work of the *poet* Sophocles,

to help illuminate a truer picture of the *real* of desire¹⁵ – just as Bataille’s aim in his own examination of poetic immediacy is now to further illuminate desire therein. But Bataille’s ultimate aim in this is to later find a more ideal delineation between times for taboo or moral-rational law, and spaces for transgression with the return of repressed desire – to enable a knowing conduit, a clear path, and lucid relation between the two realms, which more *thoughtful* literature can contribute to.

Beginning with Bataille’s 1946 *Critique* article, “From the Stone Age to Jacques Prévert,” we can see that by invoking the stone age, Bataille’s sense is that “the poetic effect brought about by Prévert’s texts take us back from our time” to the early “stammerings of humanity” (WS, 147). This is key for Bataille’s attempt to recover the archaic know-how of *pre*-Christian-Platonic cultures in regulating separate times for the sacred and the profane: where the sacred moment was that of transgression and profane time marked return to taboos. The sacred and profane dynamic is what corresponds to transgression and taboo when viewed through early religion’s lens – which Bataille developed with his College of Sociology cofounder Roger Callois in the 1930s, following the anthropology of Marcel Mauss.¹⁶ It shows how the sacred once involved transgression that both deified and went deeper into our repressed animality, as opposed to the later Christian-Platonic dualism: with roots in the Judaic and Orphic-Pythagorean traditions respectively – which instead has the sacred trying to further purify, transcend, escape further away. And it is expressly the *role of poetry* in early religion that is here Bataille’s focus in discussing Prévert – “who is not part of the literary scene,” “writes for the cinema,” and “prefers films to books because he is attracted by what is immediate” (WS, 140) – to see how this enables a return of the real of our pent-up animality instead.

Bataille invokes how “powerful emotion has always been expressed poetically,” how it could never be “expressed absolutely” or “translated into words” except if it were “by means of poetry,” where “every emotion was sung out” – even calling *purely* literary poetry, which Greek tragedy originally never was, “a sort of mutilated song” (WS, 137). This speaks to Nietzsche’s thesis of the “birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music,” the full title of his first work.¹⁷ For Bataille suggests that “what cannot be sung is outside the domain of poetry,” referring to its

“antipodes” of such things as “business affairs” (WS, 138) – where clear, deterministic language and behaviour is required. It is in this linguistic sense that poetry, with its endlessly potent metaphors, is, for Bataille, “literature which is no longer literary,” which “escapes from the rut in which literature is genuinely entrapped” as it “undercuts the desire in us to reduce things to the dimensions of reason” (WS, 138). But this is only if we are “touched by a sovereign emotion,” Bataille notes, which takes “the actuality of men outside the self” – where here in ecstasy the “overwhelming power of poetry” is to “communicate the condition of the poet” (WS, 138). It is thus for Bataille that “poetry gives expression to what exceeds the possibilities of common language” and “uses words to overturn the order of words” – as the “cry of what, within us, cannot be reduced; what, within us, is stronger than us” (WS, 138). And in this irreducibility he can also be seen as intimating what in Lacan is the “intimate exteriority or ‘extimacy’ that is the Thing” – which is the drive *in the real* made visible, as Lacan also notes, on the “cave walls” of “prehistoric art” (SVII, 139).¹⁸

Bataille speaks further to this primal poetic state of immediacy in his later 1953 *Critique* article “René Char and the Force of Poetry” (WS, 129-34). And in speaking now of force, Bataille begins with a contrast between “confined existence” and “sovereign existence” (WS, 129) – with the *force* of poetry belonging to the latter. This is what he defines as “not in the service of any enterprise, not even of its own egoistic interest” (WS, 129). But the difference between this disinterest and, say, Kant’s notion of “aesthetic disinterest,” is that there is nothing transcendental about Bataille’s sovereignty. It goes deeper *into* the subject’s drives, rather than cathect metonymically to the cognitive functions of understanding, inflating as they do in Kant’s aesthetics to grasp the imagination which “takes the lead” in creative “free-play.”¹⁹ This itself remains an imaginary aesthetics while still under the sway of “denaturalising,” altruistic, immortal souls in the Christian heaven, categorically centred on the Good, which is sheer escapism from the optic of the much more Nietzschean and Dionysian Bataille.²⁰ For Bataille’s aesthetic sovereignty corresponds to the earlier *Pre-Christian-Platonic* force of the sacred, involving religiously sanctioned transgression both aesthetic *and* erotic in kind, returning repressed bodilyness as “poetic and divine though animal”

(E, 153). And we can see the difference in the fable Lacan finds in Kant, where Kant believes “the gallows” set up outside the chambers of a woman of erotic appeal would be a “sufficient deterrent” (SVII, 108): For “our philosopher from Königsberg was a nice person,” Lacan notes, and unaware of what Freud would call the “overvaluation of the object” or “object sublimation” *in* the realm of the senses (SVII, 109).²¹

The alienation of humanity in an “anti-natural” state by Kant and the Christian tradition would drive Nietzsche to despair of the “whole labour of the ancient world *in vain*” (AC, 25, 59).²² But “Solitary tears are not wasted,” the cry from Char rings out, whom Bataille now cites referring to how “the task of poetry, through its eye and on the tongue of its palate, is to cause this alienation to vanish by revealing how ridiculous it is” (WS, 130). Char writes of how “we still manage to rise up up up,” “exploding with our execrations as much as with our loins” – the “instant when beauty,” made to wait by the necessities of *confined* existence, “rises from common things,” “connects everything,” “inflames all” (WS, 130). “Nothing tempers this plenitude,” Bataille notes, and in invoking the “exuberance” of this beauty in the plenitude of its sovereignty, we have reference not only to Blake but to the “abundance” of natural instinct Nietzsche held to constitute the genuine aesthetic state – over-against the depersonalised lack of Kant’s – *bestowing* to things from libidinalised fullness.²³ This also speaks to the aesthetic process of *sublimation* Lacan articulates in Freud, which involves satisfaction of the drive without so much perversion or repression through a higher valuation of an earthly object in signifying proximity to the Freudian Thing.²⁴ Lacan playfully defines sublimation, then, as “raising an object” “to the dignity of the Thing” (SVII, 112). But the difference between Lacan’s Freudian Thing, which he often calls *das Ding*, and Kant’s thing-in-itself (*das Ding an sich*), which it is a play on too, is, as Russell Grigg notes, that the Thing is “the real” normally excluded from ordinary symbolic representations that can still return to interrupt them, “intruding into the subject’s experience in a way that finds him or her devoid of any means of protection,” *forcing* through the speaking body that ineluctably we all are.²⁵

Here Bataille turns his treatment of Char’s force into what could be considered a Lacanian ontology, invoking the poetic as an opening to the *impossible* – which is one of the terms Lacan uses to describe the *real*

himself, as both impossible to integrate and “the pre-historic Other that is impossible to forget” (SVII, 71). But Bataille notes the feeling of “insipidity” attending “the possible” our existence depends on, reminding us of our existence beyond its confined normal limits: For if we always “limited ourselves to what is possible,” he explains, then we “remain enclosed, moribund,” in “banishment from the totality of being” where we are instead “exceeding the limits of the possible and going to the point of death” (WS, 131). This invokes Bataille’s formulation of the erotic as “assenting to life to the point of death,” which he not only makes in his 1957 *Literature and Evil* chapter on Brontë but also in his definitive *Eroticism* work of the same year. And for Bataille, whether it is as literature or life, it is “our whims, and this taste for the impossible,” that “alone signify that we can never concede the separation of the individual fixed in the feeble limits of the possible” (WS, 131).

Bataille then affirms Char’s reference to the “fear, irony, and anguish” elicited by the “presence of the poet who bears the poem” as “not mistaken,” for it is only the “pure happiness” at risk here that corresponds to Bataille’s first happiness of confined taboo-governed self-interest – which on its own, Char adds, is merely “happiness screened from the eyes and its own nature” (WS, 131-2). This is where Bataille again in proto-Lacanian terms refers to “the impossible” as “what we lack,” but also as that “by which we restore” by transgressing the limits invoking “death,” “obscenity,” and a “totality” that “causes us to tremble,” is “completely other,” and “gives us a sacred shiver” (WS, 132). And Bataille’s distinct emphasis on *not* retreating before this sacred shiver, by vehicle of the poetic in literature, is from his conviction that “today humanity sees its right to exceed the possible in a sovereign way denied” – but through his poetry he finds that “Char’s morality” is the “calm exuberance” that “reminds sovereign man that nothing can prevail against him” (WS, 132).

Bataille had earlier finished his Prévert article with similar sentiments, having sojourned through early religion’s use of poetry to invoke the sacred and the logic of sacrifice – sacrificing words and things alike from their normal use-value, committing them to desire’s flame. As opposed to today, Bataille laments, where “present day society is vulgar and constructed from man’s flight from himself” – where he “hides behind a set design” such that “poetry that evokes this society” “is also the

negation of it" (WS, 153). Society is obviously not something to *completely* negate, but without separate yet coordinated times for workaday taboos and sublimated spaces for subsequent transgression, we will never escape this difference between the two forms of happiness involved emerging as a devastating conflict. To further allay this conflict, then, we will conclude by augmenting Bataille's preferred aesthetics of literature – which puts it on the side of transgression in relation to the taboos it violates – with Lacan's *tripartite* episteme of the real, symbolic, and imaginary, read as constituting in their entirety what Bataille invokes as the "totality of being" (WS, 130).

Conclusion: Separation and Connection of Two Realms in The Real.

This article set out to examine Bataille's treatment of literature, including the novel, and soon came upon his fundamental position in aesthetics which not only discerns the key tendencies in literature, but also offers a distinct program to clarify and improve them. What began, then, with a discerned quest for "happiness" in literature soon took on a dual structure ensconcing us in "evil" – that is, in the periodic *transgression* of our fundamental taboos as necessary to happiness as the taboos themselves – of which poetic literature in particular affording insight.

In Lacanian terms, Bataille's articulation of this taboo-transgression co-relation in literature, including the greater clarity of consciousness about it he calls for, is the work of the Lacanian register of the *symbolic*: of clear, conceptual use of words which are rational, knowledge based, and where Bataille as philosopher, scholar, reviewer of scholarly works and editor of a journal normally exists – as do we ourselves – in the space governed by every day, workaday, moral taboos. But immediately Bataille comes across a contrary need for transgression of these taboos: for taboos create a distance from the *real* of our animal-bodily drives registered in terms of enjoyment, and the demand for the latter is a debt that also, periodically, needs to be repaid. What this article has demonstrated, then, is that this debt to the real is repaid in the *imaginary* register – creatively through the transgressive works of arts such as literature – opening up subjective possibilities in the *real* usually excluded for being *impossible*.²⁶

There are a number of postwar articles in *Critique*, and elsewhere, where Bataille gives us further perceptive formulations of this dual necessity between *taboo* (the symbolic relation to the real) and *transgression* (the return of repressed real *in* the imaginary) – equating roughly to our separate times for work and play, politics and art, or reason and the unconscious respectively. Bataille writes, for instance, of “Marx’s doctrine” as “the only effective application of intelligence to practical facts as a whole” insofar as it brings “the sort of clear-cut decision that a science brings into a particular domain” (WS, 156). But he also quotes the surrealist Jean Maquet declaring that “after the experience of the past twenty years, it would today be a radical-socialist stupidity to refuse to save a place for a Pascal or a Rimbaud,” a “Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky or Chestov” (WS, 128). This is because again, for Bataille, “no one can neglect this problem” concerning these two different but equiprimordial modes of being: For “it is a question of mankind’s harmony with itself, of poetry’s harmony with what is useful, and the harmony of the passions with material needs” (WS, 157).²⁷

In thinking this harmony, we have found Bataille concerned with “the necessities of the path, the bridge, between the two domains” – where, as he puts it, we take “account of material needs” but also give “the passions, which only poetry generally welcomes, a place and necessity in the ordering of the industrial world” and formulate “a project of productive organisation in which poetry would not be immediately expelled, as it usually is” (WS, 157). This expressly invokes Nietzsche’s critique of Plato’s *barring* of poets from the ideal *Republic* – as the metaphysical origins of our failure to get the balance right in the various traditions ensuing in the West (GM, III:25).²⁸ I suggest that to get this balance right is a matter of the right distance-*and*-nearness between the two domains, appended to how the processes of sublimation underpinning these two key aspects of civilisation amount to a different optimum of distance-nearness to the Freudian Thing – as articulated by Lacan’s focus on its unconscious signifying aspects by distinguishing “the *Trieb* [drive]” from “the *Instinkt* [instinct]” (SVII, 90, 112). Science and rationality could almost “foreclose” the Thing with its critical symbolic distance, while art in the imaginary should be “encircling” closer (SVII, 129-31, 141). And we sense the delicate balances involved when Bataille

is critical not just of Sartre's attempt to make literature serve a predefined political commitment, which takes it *too far* from the Thing and means renunciation, but also of an "art for art's sake" movement that zeros in *too close* – which in the case of surrealism could lead to what Bataille saw as an "empty liberty," "monotonous" and "powerless" (WS, 180).²⁹

What Bataille wants is a kind of affirmation of this empty liberty by the intelligence that experiences it, which gets us close as possible to the Thing with enough knowledge of it to not get burnt. And we can see this when he commends the painter André Masson who, like "Rimbaud or Blake" before him, "did not dissociate poetic vision from intelligence" – which made his work "distanced from pure surrealism" as "the thought it expresses is no longer, as in automatic writing, disengaged with the world," but is "integrated with it and invades it" (WS, 181). Masson's work, then, for Bataille, has "a quality of totality" that is "limited neither by discursive thought nor by the automatism of the dream," which is why Bataille condemned the critic who said of it, "We do not want thought painting" (WS, 178). I have shown in this article that Bataille would have similar rebukes for those critics who would say the same about literature and properly wholistic attempts to *think* the novel.

Getting this distance-nearness relation right is of course never easy, and Bataille laments how forever "the antagonism between poetry and consciousness (the latter connected to reason) is at the heart of our lives," where "consciousness experiences what really slips away" – such as with "sexual pleasure," which is "given to man only in the night," "in our intimate returns to the pink depths of life" (WS, 125). But consciousness can still be more connected than not by the intelligent author, as we might see evidenced in Bataille's description of the copulations of *Madame Edwarda* in his own novel, with Bataille himself actually seeing "Chazal as the first writer to achieve the equivalence of sexual pleasure and language" (WS, 126). Bataille quotes Chazal writing about sexual pleasure as "the grey hound race of desire," as "time assassinated for a moment and rendered invisible with touch," as that which "enables us to taste through the other's palate" (WS, 195) – while in his own more darkly toned *Madame Edwarda*, Bataille writes of her *jouissance* with the driver in the backseat of a taxi, during which Bataille supported her quivering body from the nape of her neck as "that stream of luxury," that "glorified

her being unceasingly,” made her “more naked” and “her lewdness ever more intimate.”³⁰ In Lacanian terms, what matters is only that we fasten the real, symbolic and imaginary in a conscientious way with our own singularly enhanced levels of knowledge and experience of *jouissance* – with different emphases in place during the times for work, reason, and taboo, and during the times for artistic, erotic play and transgression.

Having come, then, by way of conclusion, to literature and the novel being a place for the transgressive release of normally prohibited drives, acts, thoughts, and behaviours connected to our intimate animality – we should commend Bataille for having shed his light on this process, which will hopefully, on the basis of this work, shine ever more radiantly in future works, and in our reappraisals of those gone past. An enhanced clarity of the distance and nearness of the poetic-literary with the rational-prosaic and productive, and the two different but equally necessary forms of happiness involved, is what we have seen here is more than possible – in a way that relieves us of the burden of deeming impossible more of the *real* than we otherwise could, while relegating it to “evil.” If there is to be something of a politics of the novel, let it be, then, as a hyper-ethics – as an ethics which is also an erotics enhancing the consciousness and enjoyment demonstrated in the depths of the real-orientated thinking here.

“These studies are the result of my attempts to extract the essence of literature.”

– Bataille, “Preface,” *Literature and Evil* (1957).

¹ Michael Richardson notes that the editorial rationale of *Critique* was to produce scholarly book reviews that produced a distinct argument extending on it. Bataille, “Happiness, Eroticism, and Literature,” in *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, trans. Richardson (London: Verso, 2006), 186-7; henceforth (WS). Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London: Routledge, 1994), 60.

² Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. A. Hamilton (London: Penguin, 2012). Henceforth (LE).

³ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989). Henceforth GM.

⁴ Lacan, *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. D. Porter (New York: Norton, 1991), 194-5, 200; and *Seminar XVII, The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. R. Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007), 72. Henceforth (SVII) and (SXVII).

⁵ Lacan, *Seminar XXIII, The Sinthome*, trans. A. Price (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016), 63. Henceforth (SXXIII).

⁶ Dominique Hecq notes that the writings of James Joyce Lacan investigates are less a traditional symptom and more a way of letting anxiety organise the writing such that it “harmonises with castration.” Castration refers to the separation from the material real created by moral law, reason, and taboo. Lacan, *Seminar X, Anxiety*, trans. Price (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014), 160, 175, 182. Hecq, “Uncanny Encounters: On Writing, Anxiety and jouissance,” *Anatomy & Poetics* 6 (2005); <http://www.doubledialogues.com/article/uncanny-encounters-on-writing-anxiety-and-jouissance/> {retrieved 25/05/2018}.

⁷ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 11, 80. Henceforth (BT).

⁸ Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. P. Connor (San Francisco: City Lights, 1989), 79, 82-3.

⁹ Blondel, *Emily Brontë: Expérience Spirituelle et Création Poétique* (PUF, 1955).

¹⁰ In his definitive 1957 *Eroticism*, Bataille notes that the “compression” force of taboo “is not subservient to the explosion” of transgression that follows as its “complement” but rather “gives it increased force.” Bataille, “Georges Bataille: Literature and Evil,” interviewer Pierre Dumayet, trans. Vidar Vikingsson.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XCnGuK8CVc> {retrieved 22/2/2018}. Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. M. Dalwood (London: Penguin, 2001), 65; henceforth (E).

¹¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), 26. Henceforth (AC).

¹² Lacan, *Seminar XX, On Feminine Sexuality*, trans. B. Fink (New York: Norton, 1999), 57, 72.

¹³ Alison Horbury deconstructs the feminist literature that falls prey to the universal Woman of the Good, seeing it as an escapist fantasy against the real of the sexual drives *within*, as well as without. Horbury, “What does Feminism Want?” *Continental Thought & Theory: Journal of Intellectual Freedom* 1-3 (2017): 582.

¹⁴ Stuart Kendall notes that here Bataille also differed with Simone Weil in the early 1930s, who thought that revolution is moral and rational rather than the “liberation of the instincts” considered “pathological.” Kendall also notes that Weil is the basis of “Lazare, the ugly ‘Christian’ revolutionary,” in Bataille’s political novel *Blue of Noon* (1935). The Bataille of this period, of course, is still quite close to Blake’s position, which he later rejects, without necessarily taking up Weil’s. Kendall, *Georges Bataille* (London: Reaktion, 2007), 103, 119. Bataille, *Blue of Noon*, trans. H. Matthews (London: Marion Boyers, 2006).

¹⁵ Lacan’s analysis shows Antigone’s *desire* in opposition to Creon’s edict of the common good is a critique of the Sovereign Good to become with Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Judeo-Christianity the central problematic of “Western moralism” – which from his first Seminar Lacan links to our unconscious “race towards destruction.” See Tim Themí, *Lacan’s Ethics and Nietzsche’s Critique of Platonism* (Albany: SUNY, 2014), 41-63; and Lacan, *Seminar I, Freud’s Papers on Technique*, trans. J. Forrester (New York: Norton, 1991), 277.

¹⁶ Bataille attributes to Callois the definitive formulation of Mauss's discovery of the taboo-transgression correlation in "the history of religion" (E, 65, 257).

¹⁷ Nietzsche's thesis in BT, 7, 16-7, that tragic poetry emerges from the Dionysian mode of music and ritual, is also suggested in Aristotle's *Poetics*, 1449a10-12.

¹⁸ Bataille's extensive treatment of prehistoric art's depictions of *divine animality* is in his *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, trans. S. Kendall (New York: Zone, 2009).

¹⁹ For Kant's depiction of *aesthetic* experience as "the free-play of imagination and understanding" and "delight in the object" "independent of interest," see his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), I: 9, 6.

²⁰ For Nietzsche's critique of Western moralism for its "denaturalising of natural values" (AC, 25), brought together with Lacan's analysis of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* and of Freud's handling of the Hebraic tradition, see chapters 4 and 5 respectively of Themí, *Lacan's Ethics and Nietzsche's Critique of Platonism*, 65-8, 70-1, 74, 78-9, 82-3, 85, 87-8, 91, 97-105.

²¹ Lacan also discusses this fable in his 1963 "Kant with Sade" article, first published in *Critique* a year after Bataille ceased editing it with his death. Danny Nobus notes that Bataille, who Lacan had known "intellectual convergences" and an "existing 'family relationship'" with, gave a lecture to the *Collège Philosophique* in 1947 which "alluded to Kant's conception of fine art in the *Critique of Judgement* as 'intrinsically purposive,' and thus emblematic of moral action." Lacan, "Kant with Sade," in *Écrits*, trans. Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 645. Nobus, *The Law of Desire: On Lacan's "Kant with Sade,"* (London: Palgrave, 2017), xvii, xxix, xxx.

²² Paul Bishop calls AC 59 "one of the clearest statements of Nietzsche's assertions of classical ideals," noting it includes what in *Will to Power* is called "the joyous, benevolent, Goethean attitude toward sensuality," which Christianity lost. Bishop, "Nietzsche's Anti-Christianity as a Return to (German) Classicism," in *Nietzsche and Antiquity*, ed. Bishop (Rochester: Camden, 2004), 448-52. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), 118.

²³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 370.

²⁴ For analysis of Nietzsche's major aesthetic distinction of abundance and lack in terms of Lacano-Freudian sublimation, see Themí, *Lacan's Ethics and Nietzsche's*, 36-40.

²⁵ Nietzsche, of course, deemed Kant's thing-in-itself a fraudulent construct deliberately placed outside the reach of reason to preserve the fantasy of Christian dogma being "true." Grigg, *Lacan, Language, and Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY, 2008), 8. Cf., Nietzsche, AC 10, and the chapter, "How the 'Real World' at last Became a Myth," in *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), IV.

²⁶ Lacan examines the way that "art – the artisanal – can foil, as it were, what imposes itself as a symptom," "namely, truth," in his Seminar on James Joyce and the "sinthome." The sinthome is the sublimated form of the symptom that, as "the fourth term," optimally knots together the three registers of "the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real" for the artist – in Joyce's case by making and "wanting a name for himself" as an artist as "compensation" for the parental deficiencies inherited through the "Name-of-the-Father,

which is certainly God," Lacan notes, where "one can just as well bypass it, on the condition that one make use of it." Lacan, SXXIII, 14, 27, 55, 77, 116, 147.

²⁷ Patrick ffrench also notes that Bataille's central question of the 1930s played out in his political novel *Blue of Noon* was, "How is it possible to counter the threat of fascism when the latter thrives on an exploitation of the *jouissance* that is foreclosed in the Marxist schema? In other words: if Marxist politics fails because of its neglect of the erotic, is this 'part maudite [accursed share]' always going to be taken up by the spectacle of fascism?" ffrench, "Dirty Life," in *The Beast at Heaven's Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, ed. A. Hussey (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 63.

²⁸ Plato had invoked a quarrel between philosophy and poetry as an ancient antagonism in *The Republic*, Book X 607b. Nietzsche now calls "Plato versus Homer" the "complete, the genuine antagonism" (GM, III:25).

²⁹ Kevin Kennedy notes Bataille's critique of Aestheticism for creating only "dilettantes detached from society," but also that Bataille's 1950 "Letter to René Char on the Incompatibilities of the Writer" should be read against Sartre's "discourse on commitment, or literary engagement." Kennedy, *Towards an Aesthetics of Sovereignty: Georges Bataille's Theory of Art and Literature* (Bethesda: Academia, 2014), 173, 258.

³⁰ Bataille, *Madame Edwarda*, trans. A. Wainhouse (London: Marion Boyars, 2003), 158, 127.