

# Georges Bataille: The Status of Literature

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*"Perhaps what I managed to do was reshuffle the cards."*

Georges Bataille near the end of his life.

The writings of Georges Bataille did not attract wide and certainly not international attention during his life time, as did those of other important French thinkers of his generation. Even in France where he was known, his influence was limited to a small intellectual circle. Today, the situation has changed but in many respects remains strangely the same. Bataille certainly has an ever growing readership. The French publishing house Gallimard is bringing out his complete works, of which nine volumes have already appeared, and he is now considered by many commentators, among whom some of the most prominent and authoritative, to be a leading representative of modern French thought. And yet all this attention, which would be enough to assure the reputation of another writer, has not managed to give Georges Bataille the recognition one might suppose to be his due.

The pattern is essentially the same in the English speaking world. Bataille's name is not widely circulated and one might suppose that he had not been extensively translated. It is true that a number of the more theoretical and philosophical works are not available in English, but as far back as 1955 his *Manet and his Lascaux, or the birth of Art*, were available, to be followed by *Death and Sensuality; A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* in 1962 and a selection of his fiction, including *The Story of the Eye*, *Blue at Noon* and *My Mother*. But these have not had the impact that one might have expected. Bataille remains somehow in the shadows. No matter what attention he receives, an air of reserve surrounds his name.

If I have begun in this way by drawing attention to the uneven fortune of Bataille's career, I should make it clear that I do not do so to prompt a begrudging readership to a more generous acceptance of his merits. Indeed, my intention is perhaps quite the opposite. Bataille's writings necessarily encounter public reserve due to their content and an appreciation of this is crucial to a full understanding of their importance. While Bataille may find a welcome in the intimate thoughts of his reader, he must never expect to be upheld by social discourse. There is something in Bataille that the social consensus cannot forgive.

So much by way of preface. It would be too ambitious to attempt an account here of Bataille's thought. Undoubtedly, as I advance, I shall be led to refer in broad outline to his general theory but that is not the purpose of my address. I want to approach Bataille from the perspective of the title of my paper - 'The Status of Literature' - and I would now like to explain what I understand by such a title. In fact, I already gave an indication when, in listing Bataille's published books, I mentioned that his work falls into a number of different categories: fiction, philosophy, criticism, among others. To be more precise, his work divides

equally between, on the one hand, a practice of literature, predominantly in the novel form but also in poetry, and on the other, a broad reflection drawing on many widely divergent areas of intellectual activity: the history of religions, economics, ethnology, criticism of art and literature, philosophy, psycho-analysis etc. It is a sufficiently curious and exceptional position to merit our attention, but it gains in significance when we realize that it is a position shared in varying degrees by many of those figures in modern literature and philosophy who most compel our interest. I am thinking of Lautréamont, with the complex *Maldoror/Poésies*, Mallarmé, on the basis of his reading of Hegel, Nietzsche, Artaud, Breton with his explicit interest in Freud, and also Bataille's most influential contemporary, Sartre, with his combined activities of philosopher, critic and novelist.

When we consider this impressive list of names, we begin to realize that this division of interest between different disciplines is not a matter of cursory note but is rather symptomatic of a profound shift in modern culture. In the context of this dilemma, or problematic, I would suggest that Bataille occupies a pre-eminent position in this pantheon from a number of different points of view. First of all, it is becoming increasingly obvious with the passage of time that Bataille's choice of references and the preoccupations which stem from them are the ones of enduring interest for an understanding of our contemporary cultural situation; and secondly, no-one has investigated the terms of this dilemma to the same degree, or from as many different aspects, even to the extent of dissolving the distinction between disciplines and making space for an interchange of modes, where literature both becomes the vehicle for reflection and bursts through the fabric of philosophical thought to reassert the form of subjective experience. Bataille's work is exemplary and, quite apart from its own inherent interest, offers us a whole range of insights of a more general kind: into the intellectual, artistic and cultural history of his period and into the development of modern literature and its criticism, in other words into the state or 'status' of literature today.

It might be taken from what I have said that it is a mistake to read Bataille from either the exclusive outlook of philosophy or literature. We cannot enclose Bataille inside the general category of reason, on the one hand, or "fiction", on the other, and any attempt to do so should be looked upon with skepticism. Bataille is by definition an anomaly and we will only do his writings justice if we keep this always in mind. His work contains two parallel literary and philosophical tendencies which draw together and interpenetrate so that his fictional writings are, so to speak, informed by a mode of reflection, and his theoretical speculations concretize themselves in literary form. Together the two wings of his project combine in what can only be called a process of 'thought'. Of course, I am aware that the philosopher considers the domain of thought to be his special prerogative, but in the case of Bataille a distinction must be made. True to form Bataille's own position on this question is paradoxical. Two of his major references are to Hegel and Nietzsche, and he spoke of feeling closer to German than to French culture. At the same time, he always insisted that he had a fundamental distaste for philosophy.

If we turn to the texts themselves we see immediately that they contain, whatever the paradox, a valid distinction between thought and philosophy. While the texts bear the visible imprint of an explicit philosophy, not only do they not constitute themselves as philosophy but,

and here I think is the justification for refusing to consider them as philosophical texts in the generally accepted sense, they are not susceptible to a philosophical critique. Bataille does not refute a philosophical point of view and replace it with another. Instead, his thought is essentially anarchic and destructive. Bataille invokes the negation of philosophy. That is, rather than seeking to oppose a philosophical system, Bataille contents himself with pointing out the order of negative proposition which logically flows from it. Of course, he takes the notion of the negation directly from Hegel, but in the Hegelian system the negation is incorporated inside the process of philosophical reflection and absorbed by the positive. Bataille insists on the principle of negation itself, by arguing that any positive system must discard or reject certain elements as being incompatible with its position and, therefore, unassimilable. In other words, Bataille places the negation outside the realm of rational thought. This is not the same as denying the validity of the positive system, in fact, it is quite the reverse, because if the positive system is evacuated, then the negation, which is its logical implication, collapses also. They are mutually dependant, reciprocal, complimentary. Bataille's proposition, therefore, is not susceptible to a philosophical critique because such a critique, couched as it is in positive thought, would assume that if Bataille is right, he (Bataille) will discard the system. Quite the opposite is the case, for Bataille is only right as long as he maintains the terms of the system. In the same way, Bataille arrives at his formulations via the steps of a logically impeccable argument, belonging to the system, and his conclusions in no way imply that he should discard that logic. Once again, his conclusions are only relevant inside the terms of the logical argument itself. The reasoned language of the argument cannot be used to criticize Bataille's position, since he obviously raises no opposition to the argument, while his position provides an implicit critique of this language. Or perhaps we should change our terms. Bataille's position provides less a critique of reasoned language as it points up its limits, and the limits of all philosophical speculation.

Bataille situates us on the frontiers of philosophy, at the point where reason confronts what it has rejected as incompatible with itself, the negation of reason. Bataille felt that Hegel had reached such a confrontation with the 'void', and that the construction of his system was a retreat from its brink in an effort to stave off madness. For the twentieth century, Bataille felt there was no refuge in any philosophical system and he saw, of course, that the great prophet of this predicament was Nietzsche. For Bataille, Nietzsche's famous statement that 'God is dead' was decisive and he set himself the task of drawing its full implications. In his book, entitled quite simply *On Nietzsche*, he wrote "the wrenching question of this book is... if we can no longer speak in the name of any great machine, how can we set about action, how can we expect to act and what are we to do?" Bataille is making the point that if we remove the presence of a Superior and Absolute Authority, then we plunge our being and its values into crisis. It may be wondered why I am going over this ground. The Nietzschean problematic has been endlessly remarked and as a philosophy student, who as one might anticipate had not read Bataille, once said to me when he heard that Bataille had written a book on Nietzsche, "Oh heavens, they all wrote on Nietzsche . What else did he write?" And indeed, Bataille, having journeyed to the outer limits of Philosophy and acknowledging that "We cannot take our stand on nothing (...) only on ourselves", follows the line of inquiry, along with everybody

else, to the gates of Science. However, we must remember that Bataille is determined to situate himself firmly inside the terms of his culture in order to draw out the implications of what escapes its explanation – the negation. Following out this project to the letter, he arrives at very different conclusions from the other major thinkers of his time.

Bataille takes his point of departure from Nietzsche's assertion that 'God is dead', provoking a crisis of reason and being and the resultant transition from philosophy to science, but then he goes on to remark on how these two modes of knowledge, philosophy and science, are in fact fatally related. For what is science, he argues, but "the achievement by a clear consciousness of the order of the real (that is to say of the world of objects)", concluding "Science is tightly bound to the autonomy of things. And it is nothing more than the autonomy of the consciousness of things." In other words, he does not exchange a philosophical preoccupation with being for a scientific preoccupation with things, which is nothing more than a kind of minimum definition of being (being reduced to the order of things). His strategy is quite different. Bataille wrote these often quoted words of Hegel "He (Hegel) did not know to what extent he was right", a reference, of course, to Hegel's incorporation of the negation inside the process of reason, coupled with his refusal to recognize that the principle of negation opens the way to what lies beyond the order of reason. Bataille then uses Science, by borrowing the material turned up by the Social Sciences (Economics: energy, production, consumption; Ethnology: taboo, sacrifice; Psychoanalysis: sexuality), to point out the limits of reason, and Philosophy (in the form of the principle of negation) to uncover the failure of Science to provide an adequate definition of Man. Bataille situates himself on the borders, once again, of Science, like he had previously done of Philosophy, using one to show the limitations of the other and offering a corrosive critique of both.

It should be clear from Bataille's insistence on the crisis of being, springing from Nietzsche's lapidary assertion that 'God is dead', that when he argues that we must take our stand on ourselves, the identity of this 'ourselves' remains suspended for him. Briefly, what does Bataille discover on the borders of Philosophy and Science to constitute the elements of his 'thought'? In *L'Histoire de l'érotisme*, he exchanges the Levi-Straussian dichotomy of Nature/Culture for the more concrete formulation of the passage from animal to Man. The animal is characterized by 'immanence' and 'immediacy' lived in a state of 'continuity', while Man is divided from this condition by the construction of a 'discontinuous' world based on work and language. It is to this world that Man's defining characteristics of consciousness, being and reason belong. Man uses the technique of 'transcendence', denied the animal, to mediate between these two states of the 'continuous' and 'discontinuous', and he represents his memory (perhaps his nostalgia?) for the continuous world in the person of a Supreme Being. The Supreme Being of God, then, is the creation of Man's own discontinuous being and in turn acts as its guarantor. The Supreme Being reflects Man's discontinuous nature while at the same time preserving the divine quality of immanence belonging to the realm of continuity. Religions, of course, place this Supreme Being at the pinnacle of their systems and around it erect the twin defenses of the Law and Morality. According to Bataille "the Law defines the necessary relations of each thing (or each thing-individual) with every other and guarantees them by the sanction of an exterior violence". As for morality, "Morality...guarantees the same relations

by the sanction of an interior violence inside the individual". We have, therefore, a logical chain connecting the Supreme Being with Morality and being on the human scale. In *On Nietzsche* he specifically insists on the link between Morality and being: "The Good offers itself in the first place as the good of a being. Evil takes the form of a prejudice against obviously some kind of being." We find, then, Bataille here and in another book, *Théorie de la religion*, developing the notion that the divine order of continuity is opposed to morality and by extension to the institutional religions. "Morality articulates the rules which spring universally from the nature of the profane world...It is, therefore, opposed to the scale of value belonging to the order of intimacy." "It (morality) implies the sanction of the divine order. In admitting the functional force of the divine on the real, Man in practice subordinated the divine to the real. He gradually reduced the violence of the divine to the sanction of the real order in the form of morality, on the condition that the real order adapted itself precisely via morality to the universal order of reason." Bataille concludes: "They (reason and morality)...rationalize and moralize that divinity in the same movement that morality and reason are accorded the status of the divine."

I have perhaps over-condensed the argument with these quotations and notably I passed quickly over the striking formulation that the divine is equated with violence. Bataille has overturned the popular association of divinity with moral good. For Bataille, the dead God of Nietzsche's statement is that Divinity which is measured by human morality and since a Divinity, in the guise of a Supreme Being, is irremediably associated with human beings, its disappearance can only be experienced as a threat of violence to human identity from the outside. It is the force of this "outside" that Bataille wants to bring home to us, not out of a desire to needlessly trouble our equanimity, but because he feels that we can no longer ignore it. Clearly the discontinuous world is designed to exclude those elements which threaten to disrupt its stability, but when its defenses—the defenses of Law and Morality, dependent as they are on an Absolute Authority - begin to weaken, then we can expect the 'outside' to make its return with a vengeance. Bataille enumerates these elements as being equated with the principal religious prohibitions regarding sex, obscenity and death. He says that the privileged agents of communication with the 'outside' are laughter and eroticism, because they do not subscribe to the production and use values of the discontinuous world and tend towards dissolving reason. Bataille writes that "The extreme and unconditional aspiration of Man was expressed for the first time by Nietzsche, independently of a moral goal and of the service of a God." Bataille's program, then, is to "plunge God (transcendence) into derision (immediacy, immanence)." He states that "We must ruin transcendence with laughter" and that "This state of immanence is the essence of impiety". And again, "There is nothing at which I laugh more divinely than at God." Perhaps enough has been said to explain the public reserve surrounding Bataille's work, which I mentioned at the beginning. The social world can only have an aversion for Bataille's thought. For the social beings that we are in part and that some would have us in full, Bataille is, perhaps in the literal sense, obscene.

Bataille shifts our attention from the moral order of good and bad to the earlier order of the sacred and profane, clearly distinguishing these two dualities. The sacred cannot be adored as the principle of a good which binds the community in harmony, but rather is

dreaded as the frail screen protecting the community from external disruption. What is at stake is the real world in which we move and distinguish ourselves, those same selves that Bataille, following Nietzsche, says must learn self-reliance. Again, Bataille writes of intimacy: "The world of intimacy opposes the real as the measureless opposes measure, madness reason, drunkenness lucidity." Man is fascinated by his memories of this intimacy and in religious practice he tries to reconcile it with the conditions of the real. Bataille further writes: "In his strange myths and cruel rites Man is primarily searching for a lost intimacy. Religion is this long effort and anguished quest. Always it is a matter of tearing free from the order of the real, from the poverty of things, so as to attain the order of the divine." And yet, once achieved, this order of the divine heralds the dissolution and death of Man. This is the agony of philosophy, as Bataille points out, forced to cross the boundaries of its reason, to encounter its other negative self, and in the process to be prised free of the real world of morality and so undergo the dissolution of the mechanism of the subject and object on which its very sense is based. And it is in this sense that we must understand Bataille's insistence on ourselves, as a tearing away from the real, which dissolves the dichotomy of subject and object. In the same context (*La part maudite*) Bataille has this to say about the relationship of subject to object. "There is only measure in the object, reason in the identity of the object with itself, lucidity in the distinct knowledge of objects. The world of the subject is the night: this moving, infinitely suspect night which, in the sleep of reason, engenders monsters."

However, here I suggest that we must over-turn Bataille's thought in a manner which I hope would meet with his approval, since it is the inevitable fate of Bataille's thought to be ever turned against itself. Bataille has moved us out of the real world by insisting on an experience which he equates with the divine, but what are these monsters moving in the night of the subject if not the Real itself, encountered at ground level across the threshold of reason? And is this not the minimum condition of Reason that it should always refer somewhere to the phantom of the Real at its origin, whether in the form of a positive reflection guaranteeing the world of difference or in the form of an external, negative menace to that world? In this case, we can view the movement of Bataille's thought from a first stage where the reason belonging to the order of the real world draws back, allowing us to glimpse the void beneath, to a second, where Reason finds itself confronted with its negative image in the shape of a Real which threatens to destroy it inside the real world.

This is the perspective in which I read *L'expérience intérieure*. In that book Bataille offers this critique of contemporary philosophy. "For some time, the only living philosophy, that of the German school, has tended to argue that ultimate knowledge is the extension of interior experience. But this phenomenology gives knowledge the value of an end arrived at by experience. It is a lame alliance." No doubt, but Bataille then reverses the process. He opposes knowledge as based on "narrow definitions" arguing that "he who knows already cannot go beyond the horizon of knowledge". Bataille strives to place himself in a situation of 'disorientation, of non-sense,' based on "un-knowledge". The key to this state is experience. But what is this experience of, if not the unknown? He writes "What is this condition of being naked before the unknown confrontation with the Real?" Then he goes on to talk about "DENUDED UN-KNOWLEDGE" in these words "If the proposition that un-knowledge denudes,

is to possess an exclusive sense, it is that UN-KNOWLEDGE COMMUNICATES ECSTASY. Un-knowledge is first of all ANGUISH. In anguish appears the nudity which produces ecstasy.” Again, is not this naked anguish and ecstasy an experience of the Real which shatters Man’s reason, attached as that reason is to the order of the Symbolic? As one might expect, Bataille refuses any symbolic authority. Such would seem to me to be the very definition of the Real. Again the outcome of interior experience is “fusion of the subject and object”, and elsewhere “there is no equivalence between subject and object, but only ‘a gaping breach’ between them, and in this breach the subject and the object are dissolved.” Once again, what is this breach if not the Real which threatens to dissolve Man’s symbolic identity?

I should make my position clear here. My remarks should not be taken as a criticism of Bataille’s thought as such. Remember that Bataille has undertaken to explore the limits of reason by drawing its negative implications. It seems to me that in this he has succeeded admirably. Bataille is not trying to construct a philosophical system. Bataille’s thought has the virtue of a demonstration. At the end of this search we find that the negative implications of Reason are that it must always encounter the Real, both as its necessary hypothesis and as the experience of its outer limits in the extremes that Bataille elsewhere investigated, in the realm of the ‘supplice’ or agony. Bataille gives this definition of experience: “experience throws into question or puts to the test, in fever and anguish, what a man knows of the fact of being.” (we could replace the word ‘experience’ here with ‘the Real’ and ‘being’ with ‘Reason’). The statement would then read: the Real throws into question or puts to the test, in fever and anguish, what a man knows of the fact of Reason. And we should notice that the closer we focus on the experience of reason, what we might call the Real, the more we are obliged to take refuge in the vision of Reason itself. In this, as I have remarked earlier, Bataille’s argument is impeccable. In other words, contemplation of the domain of experience beyond the threshold of reason necessarily implies the posture of reason. Is there any other way of surviving the test as Bataille frames it?

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In this connection, the pages that Bataille devoted to his acquaintanceship with Antonin Artaud in *Le Surrealisme au jour le jour*, and in which he recounts what I would be tempted to call Artaud’s ‘dirty trick’ are most revealing. Bataille begins, “Up to a certain point, I soon made the acquaintance of Antonin Artaud.” I give this simple statement as a quotation in order to draw attention to how Bataille, at the outset, alludes to a certain reserve in his relations with Artaud. Then follows the recollection of a number of encounters out of sequence. “At night fall, ten years later, I came upon him suddenly at the corner of the rue Madame and the rue Vaugirard. He shook my hand energetically. It was the time when I was politically active. He said to me out of the blue: ‘I understand you are doing good work. Believe me: we should organize a fascism Mexican style’. He continued on his way without insisting. His words left me with an unpleasant feeling, but only half: he frightened me, but not without having communicated a strange impression of agreement.” The next anecdote deals with Artaud’s trick itself: “A few years earlier, I had heard him give a lecture at the Sorbonne (but I did not go to see him at the end). He was speaking about the art of the theatre and, in the semi-reverie in which I was listening to him, I saw him suddenly stand up. I had understood what he

was saying. He had undertaken to make us feel the soul of Thyestes realizing that he is consuming his own children. Before an audience of bourgeois (there were hardly any students), he put two hands to his stomach and let out the most inhuman shriek which ever formed in a human throat. That left a feeling of ill ease as if one of our friends had suddenly gone into delirium.” What an irony! Bataille, the theorist of anguish, listening in a semi-reverie, conditioned no doubt by his familiarity with the atmosphere of intellectual debate, and understanding what was being said (the topic after all, Thyestes devouring his children) suddenly being shocked to his feet by the most inhuman shriek. Perhaps Artaud felt that this was not a time to be going off to sleep! Lastly, at a considerably later date, Bataille recollects the arrival of a letter from Artaud: “At the beginning of October, 1943, I received an enigmatic letter, very well informed. This letter reached me in Vézelay, at a moment of my life which was both unhappy and beautiful, and leaves me today with a memory both of anguish and wonder. I saw that the signature belonged to Antonin Artaud, who, as we have seen, I hardly knew. He had written it at Rodez (the mental asylum where he was incarcerated) where he had read the *Expérience intérieure*, published at the beginning of the year. The letter was more than half mad. (...) But if he had written to me, it was because the book had shown him that I should convert, return to God. He felt he ought to warn me...” This quotation exactly captures the fundamentally different but essentially complimentary positions of the two men. The contrast of setting, of Bataille comfortably at home in Vézelay and Artaud in the mad-house, is vivid. Having read the *Expérience intérieure*, Artaud, already at the extreme of his suffering and living directly the experience of Bataille’s book, implores him to return to the faith. Bataille assumes the voice of reason and pronounces Artaud mad. Bataille sums it up with incomparable candor and frankness: “I could have said that I did not like him...and I had the feeling that someone was thrashing or crushing my shadow. My heart was heavy, then I thought no more about it.”

I don’t know if I should draw the conclusions of what seems to me to weigh so heavily in these reminiscences and in the relationship between Bataille and Artaud. Where does Artaud’s inhuman scream come from? It comes from the extremes of experience beyond the boundaries of reason. It comes from the torture of reason and is torn from the throat of a man who was tortured by reason. At the same time, it comes from an experience at the centre of Bataille’s work and one which he was forced to live at the level of reason, because this experience is the experience of reason itself. Artaud always denied or was denied by reason and the price was madness. It is in this that one can talk about the cruelty and the agony of reason. Bataille lived the experience of reason in its own terms (the only possible terms there are, precisely those of reason itself) to its culmination, and that is why I could say earlier that his thought has the value of a demonstration, precisely the demonstration of cultural bankruptcy.

Bataille thinks the extreme of reason encountered in an experience of the divine, but where is this central experience located in his work? Bataille’s work gravitates towards the period of the Second World War and its aftermath, with a distinct acceleration of activity during the war years themselves, and it would appear to me that essentially his work treats nothing less than the real experience of that catastrophe. Bataille’s work is saturated in the



experience of the War and of a world which had delivered itself literally to the destruction of the Real, to destruction of itself in the Real. Secondly, this preoccupation, almost to the point of obsession, with the real, specifically that of the War, leads Bataille to that other practice of language with a privileged relationship to experience, namely literature. When Bataille invokes the Divine in the terms which he does, he plunges himself into the domain of literature and he also makes literature a question of burning importance for the totality of existence. We find this first of all in his literary criticism and also in his writings on art. In art, Bataille's attention was drawn to two crisis points of cultural formation, firstly, with his study of the cave paintings at Lascaux, to the moment of cultural initiation when Man separates himself from Nature through the mutually dependant activities of work and art; and secondly, with his Manet, to the dawning of modernity, which for Bataille was marked by the scandal of Olympia. In literature the decisive figure for Bataille was undoubtedly the Marquis de Sade, of whom he wrote: "It took a revolution- echoing to the noise of the Bastille's gates burst open - to yield us up, dictated by disorder, Sade's secret. Misfortune permitted Sade to live this dream, whose obsession is the soul of philosophy, unity of the subject and the object." It may be the obsession of philosophy, but its key is hidden in literature. We might for that matter ask ourselves, what is the soul of philosophy, if not literature?

The proximity of real events seems to oblige Bataille to adopt a literary mode of writing over-determined by philosophical speculation and a philosophical mode over-determined by literary style. The clearest example is to be found in *Sur Nietzsche*. This book, which was written in 1944, presents itself ostensibly as a commentary on Nietzsche, albeit of a highly personalized kind, but soon shifts to a journal of political events and private experiences told from the standpoint of the first person singular. The personal journal is, of course, the literary form of direct experience and as such it determines both the style and content of Bataille's writing. The dominant themes are those of physical love and the menace of agony, ecstasy and death, in which the extremes of experience interchange and merge with each other, told against the background of the war. I give this medley of quotations as examples both of the style and content of Bataille's writing:

«La chance des amants est le mal (le déséquilibre) auquel les contraint l'amour physique. Ils sont condamnés sans fin à ruiner l'harmonie entre eux, à se battre dans la nuit. C'est au prix d'un combat, par les plaies qu'ils se font qu'ils s'unissent. » (The lot of lovers is the evil (disequilibrium) to which physical love constrains them. They are condemned to endlessly destroy the harmony between them, to wrestle in the night. It is at the price of this combat and by the wounds that they inflict on each other that they unite. ) (...)) « L'amour le plus grand, le plus sûr, pourrait s'accorder avec la moquerie infinie. Un tel amour ressemblerait à la plus folle musique, au ravissement d'être lucide. » ( The greatest and surest love could combine with infinite mockery. Such a love would resemble the most reckless music, the ravishment of lucid being. ) (...)) « Dans la mesure où il rend la mort présente- comme la déchirure comique d'un décor- l'amour a le pouvoir d'arracher les nues. Tout est simple ! A travers l'arrachement, je

vois : comme si j'étais le complice de tout le non-sens du monde, le fond vide et libre apparaît. » ( To the extent that it conjurors up death- like the comic shreds of a decor- love has the power to strip bare. Everything is simple ! Through the aperture I see: as if I was the accomplice of all the nonsense in the world, the free and empty abyss appears.)

There is a strong Surrealist quality and we may remember Bataille's state of mind during the period when Artaud's letter arrived in Vézelay, "at a moment of my life which was both unhappy and beautiful, and which leaves me today with a memory both of anguish and wonder". There is also the conflict between a privileged sense of vision and an elusive metaphysical reflection which has the negation of sense for point of convergence, as if sight and the abyss were bound together in the same logical scheme. And this "story of the eye" is quite general in Bataille's fiction, which relies on the paradoxical device of employing conventional description, tinged with surrealism, to reveal and at the same time elaborate his philosophical speculations. A question remains: why does philosophy at its extremity choose to represent itself in narrative description and why does fiction in extremity present a vision of the agony of reason?

Georges Bataille wrote a mode of literature over-determined by a process of thought and a mode of thought over-determined by literary form (a literature based on the first person pronoun and a process of thought demanding fusion of the subject and object). Stretching underneath, we glimpse the real experience of the twentieth century. In *L'expérience intérieure*, Bataille alludes to this preoccupation at the center of all his writings:

«La tranquillite, la bonhomie, la discussion gentille comme si la guerre... et quand je dis la guerre ... Personne deciderment ne voit de face : le soleil, l'œil humain le fuit...le crane de Dieu eclate... et personne n'entend.»  
(Tranquility, companionship, polite discussion as if the war...and when I say the war... decidedly nobody looks things in the face : the human eye flees the sun...the skull of God explodes...and nobody hears.)

Nothing has changed since and for this reason Georges Bataille remains today one of the essential references in modern and contemporary literature and thought.

Paul Rodgers