

André Masson
SOME NOTES ON THE UNUSUAL
GEORGES BATAILLE

Georges Bataille appeared on the French literary scene at about the same time as the Surrealist movement was emerging and from the first he presented a contradiction. Unlike the Surrealists he claimed no affinity with "strangeness," but he always remained far more of a stranger - and certainly more of an outsider - than they, for after an initial rejection, the Surrealists were accepted: they became a "success" both socially and intellectually. Bataille on the other hand always remained apart and so perhaps the homage Breton paid to him when he died is all the more significant.

Bataille was admired while he was alive, but somehow secretly and distantly: 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 Surrealists.

I shall never forget the extraordinary day in 1925 when Michel Leiris brought him to my studio. As a movement Dada was dying; I asked him what he thought of it. "Not idiotic enough," he replied: an answer which made its point as the Zen initiate sends his arrow to the centre of the target with his eyes closed. Pronounced by Georges Bataille as an obituary of the movement which preceded Surrealism, "Not idiotic enough" becomes a definitive statement. As for Surrealism itself, calling as it did on all the dark forces of the unconscious, Bataille

was later to say, though not in so many words, "Not dark enough."

I will try to summarise Bataille's thought so as to situate him in the context of the post-1914 war period. (He was born in 1897 and died in 1962). To see man as the hapless victim of his human condition is to see only that artificial aspect of him where he is not differentiated from his social context; and unless he is so set apart he is "inauthentic." In his secret depths man is both innocent and criminal - at once an irrational being and a badly domesticated rational animal. And so transgression - which can go as far as crime - is the distinctive privilege of the human species: human because "pure" animals are essentially innocent. But, in its depths, this authentic side of the human being is always hidden, and it would be intellectual cheating to pretend that those great springs of feeling, welling up from the very deepest part of ourselves, somehow enable us to reach an understanding with this situation by making art, poetry or politics serve as a go-between or interpreter. But this imposture (the so-called understanding) is in itself full of detours through which violence, abjection and horror find legal outlets. In our own time, hardly one of the least cruel in history, we have witnessed all this. Since a depreciatory or vindictive view of this apparently irremediable situation is unworthy of a philosopher, the only palliative lies in laughter. But naturally not in the laughter of everyday life, but in the redeeming laughter which is the fruit of a long, difficult and perilous asceticism.

It is easy to see how this way of thinking would be more or less openly repudiated by the various currents of opinion dividing the French intelligentsia after the first world war: neither the optimism of the Surrealists with their promised land of "the marvellous" nor the new historical belief in "the withering away of the State," nor middle-or upper-class conformism, whose ideal has remained that of man frozen in an infinite hypocrisy, could accept them. Another of Bataille's ideas - and perhaps his most difficult and profound - was the identification of eroticism and death. I am not really qualified to set out this startling vision: I can only ask the reader to try and read his many books, for this idea is so central to his thought that it can be found throughout his work. His whole work is steeped in the colours of purple and black and it was only ironically that he called one of his novels "The Blue of the Sky." It was this aspect of his

thought that made André Breton say: "Of all our generation Bataille is the closest to Sade." His originality also blazed out in his penetrating perception of the nature of the orgiastic instinct, through which he came to reconsider the notion of the "Sacred." The method by which he examined these subjects was instinctive, never scholastic. One of his first outbursts on the subject was a short but important essay on *The Idea of Expenditure* which, once read, is hard to forget.

A philosophy of excess - of expenditure - was the proper vehicle for a reconsideration of de Sade, for only a very superficial reader of the Divine Marquis would fail to perceive behind the most lustful scenes of *Justine*, *Juliette*, *Les 120 Journées* and *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir* a "ceremony" which is at the same time a means of re-absorbing the overflow of vital energy and the need of re-expending it. From another angle, death, that aspect of ourselves on which we can shed no light, is embedded in de Sade's vision.

Georges Bataille started a Seminar which he was not afraid to call "The College of Sacred Sociology" and these gatherings were attended by many prominent figures of the Third Republic: by all those who could not be satisfied with the frivolous and yet so strangely profound Paris of the time or by the modish formulae of the period. Inevitably such meetings could not survive the war.

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Alas, both deceptive and bare
The sky like a prison wall
Bows its weight on my head

Hölderlin's crushing lines and the word "head," so heavy in meaning: how well they explain the creation of *Acephale* which is without precedent in the intellectual history of France. In April 1936 Bataille came to join me in Spain and asked me to draw Acepheus as I saw him, giving me complete freedom.

I thought about the idol, imagined him, and set him on paper.

He was headless, as was proper (his decapitated head in the form of a skull had taken refuge where his genitals should be), his body upright, his legs firmly planted apart in the earth, arms outstretched;

in his right fist a flaming heart, in his left a daggershaped flower. His body is studded with stars but the entrails show through: the centre of the body is a labyrinth constructed like a palace. (There was question at one moment of making a plaster cast with Giacometti's help for the Surrealist exhibition at the Galerie Maeght celebrating the return of the Surrealists from exile.) Three numbers of the magazine appeared in 1936 and 1937, each with a separate theme: (i) Sacred Conspiracies (ii) Dionysios (iii) Nietzsche and the Fascists. The first number, with my idol on the cover, had articles by Bataille, Pierre Klossovski and myself. More people wrote for other numbers, amongst them, Roger Caillois, Jules Monnerot, Jean Wahl. The aim of *Acephale* was to "Unmask the Religious behind the Political" - a true aggression against those who call themselves religious and those who practice politics.

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I open Bataille's *Method of Meditation* at random. These are the subjects he proposes as aids to the discipline of meditation: "Drunkenness" "Erotic Effusion" "The Fascination of Sacrifice." (By the latter he means, of course, a rite, but also any image within which the destruction of a threatened hero is accomplished, or which represents some fundamental menace.) In other books I find:

Cœur avide de lueurs
Ventre avare de caresses
Le soleil faux les yeux faux
Mots pourpres de la peste
La terre aime les corps froids

Combien il était théâtral, tenant le cierge de cire, d'aller voir dans l'obscurité revenue le mort gisant entre les fleurs, l'odeur du seringua mêlée à celle de lessive de la mort.

Chance is hard to endure; it is common to destroy it and to founder. Chance wants to be impersonal (or else it is vanity, the caged bird), elusive, melancholy, it slips away into the night, like a song... .

Liberty is nothing if it does not mean living at the limit where all understanding fails.

I have undressed so many girls in brothels : I was drunk and was happy only on condition that I was indefensible.

I can imagine no form of spiritual, if not impersonal, life dependent on chance and never on a tension of the will.

Amid anguish : anguish as far as one can see. Everything is tiring; too many obstacles tire me. Others rebel against anguish. They laugh and sing. They are innocent and I am guilty. But what am I in their eyes? An intellectual, cynical, tortured, ill at ease. How can I endure being so heavy, odious, neglected? I accept, amazed at the excess.

Hypocrite ! To write, to be sincere and naked - no one can. I don't wish to.

Violent, too violent movements. I refuse to control myself But I cannot be relaxed with myself. Not knowing who I am, I stop at nothing. I have the audacity of a derelict. At any moment the heart opens, the blood flows, and slowly, beneath the grimace, death enters.

Only the "sovereign" being knows ecstasy. If ecstasy is not granted by God! The revelation linked to my experience is that of a man in his own eyes. It supposes lewdness, spitefulness, which the brake of morality does not stop; happy friendship for him who is simply spiteful, lewd. Man is his own law, if he strips himself bare in front of himself. The mystic before God had the aspect

of a subject. Who strips himself bare before himself has the aspect of a sovereign.

*Sainthood requires the complicity of the being with lewdness, cruelty and mockery.
To the lewd, cruel and mocking man, the saint brings friendship, the laughter of connivance.
The friendship of the saint is a confidence that knows itself betrayed.
It is the friendship man has for himself, knowing he will die, that he will be able to get drunk
on death.*

Sovereignty is revolt, it is not the exercise of power. Authentic sovereignty refuses.

*The gods laugh at the reasons that animate them, so profound are they, so inexpressible in
the language of others.*

*The greatest love, the surest, could go together with infinite mockery. Such a love would be
like the wildest music or the rapture of lucidity.*

My rage to love opens onto death as a window opens onto a courtyard.

*I have been treated as "God's widow" the "inconsolable widow. . . ." But I laugh. Since this
word endlessly comes out of my pen, they say my laughter is hollow.
This misunderstanding makes me happy and sad at the same time. My laughter is gay.
I have said that at twenty I was carried on a tide of laughter.... I felt I was dancing with light.
And at the same time I abandoned myself to the joys of a free sensuality.
Seldom has the world laughed so well at he who laughed at it.*

In the end I have more than one face. And I don't know which one is laughing at the other.

The demands of evil are so deep, so bitter, that the peace and lucidity I have for a time, are set against them. Writing, very quickly, I cannot answer such vast demands : writing sets us half-way on the path to goodness.

In the torture of loving I escape myself. And naked, I acced to unreal transparency. Not to suffer, not to love, limits me to my heaviness.

Innocent? guilty? imbecile? but the past, but the irremediable ... and so old, dirt that cannot be washed, which must be lived with.

Always I have recoiled before the expiry of the term of payment: I was frightened of being what I was: LAUGHTER ITSELF.

These few scattered quotations show why poets took him for a philosopher and philosophers for a poet. In truth he was both.

Fernand Fleuret, that great specialist of the literature of the Sealed Section, told me that Georges Bataille's clandestine books were the only ones worthy of being placed on the same shelves as those of our great erotic writers of the 18th century - although he made an exception for Apollinaire's book while recognising that it contained an element of humour verging on parody.

Jean-Paul Sartre appeared like a rising star after the second world war and Bataille's relations with him date from that time. A double friendship prevents me from examining their intellectual relationship too closely, but once more, to situate Bataille in the context of a new horizon in the French intellectual scene, I should simply like to point out that they were drawn to one another by what could almost be called the attraction of repulsion: it was impossible to reconcile

Bataille's irrationalism and sexual mysticism with Sartre's rationalism. Once again, Bataille was out of the "mainstream." He was more at ease with difficult writers like Pierre Klossowski and Maurice Blanchot. Speaking of *L'Expérience Intérieure*, the book which is perhaps most central to Bataille's work and which Sartre discussed so strongly, Blanchot explained its uniqueness in these terms: "This book," he says, "cannot be described. It is tragedy itself speaking. Those who skim its surface could easily see nothing more than a rather turgid scholasticism, but its truth lies in its spiritual burning, its thunderclaps, in the silence, full of vertiginous insights and secret exchanges, which he projects to us. We should not approach it as a work to be summed up and evaluated but to quote Nietzsche, to whom Bataille so frequently refers, we should say as he said of *Zarathustra*: "This is a work completely apart."

Notes : *Acephale* was not the only magazine created or animated by Georges Bataille. The originality of *Documents* which still has a certain undertow of influence was due to him. *Minotaure* owed its title to him and I backed him up in this as against most of our opponents who wanted to call it *The Golden Age* in a spirit of derision; and not only in its title was *Minotaure* indebted to Bataille for it was infused with his spirit, especially in its beginnings. And the same is true of that very different magazine, *Critique*.

Apart from his philosophical works, his novels and his poems he published several monographs: *Manet*, *The Paintings of Lascaux*, *Giles de Rais*, several very famous essays on sociological and literary subjects (notably an essay "Le Passage de l'animal à l'homme" in *Critique* and the literary criticism collected in the volume entitled *La Littérature et le Mal*.) His last work, after the summing-up of his *L'Eroticism*, was *Les Larmes d'Eros*, containing many rare and strange illustrations.

Translated from the French by Sonia Brownell.