The Beast at Heaven's Gate

Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression

Edited by
Andrew Hussey

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From Recuperation to Simulacrum:
Klossowski's Readings of Bataille

Ian James

'Toute vie profonde', writes Bataille, 'est lourde d'impossible'.[1] But how can one read the impossible in Bataille's work? In the context of academic work such as this commentary it is perhaps inevitably far more bound up with the possible – inescapably limited by what is unfavourably characterised in *Méthode de méditation* as: 'le souci de professeur (carrière, honneur, argent)'. A long way then from Bataille's key moments of affirmation 'rire, vertige, nausée', and 'perte de soi jusqu'à la mort'. Here, Bataille's writing necessarily becomes an object of knowledge, to be added to the sum of knowledge. His affirmation of 'non-savoir' is recuperated back into 'savoir'. In commentary we perhaps necessarily distance ourselves from and fail to engage with Bataille's paradoxical project: 'le projet d'échapper au projet'.[2]

Beginning, then, with this sense of an inevitable distance from Bataille, what follows will be far more about some of the different ways his work has come to be read than about the detail of his texts themselves. Readings of Bataille, I will argue, can fall into two categories: *possible* and *impossible*; or, more properly speaking, those which read the possible in his writing and those which seek to read the impossible. Such a categorisation may seem overly reductive but it arises, in fact, from the movement of Bataille's thought itself. At the same time reading either the possible or the impossible determines two very different responses to the key question of transgression in Bataille's work.

These two modes of reading are most originally exemplified in the essays written by Bataille's friend and collaborator on *Acéphale*, the writer, philosophical essayist and painter Pierre Klossowski. Klossowski's association with Bataille dates back to 1934 and continued throughout the years after the Second World War. Although they collaborated on a number of projects in the 1930s (e.g. *Acéphale* and the *Le Collège de sociologie*) Klossowski adopted an

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[1] *ŒC*, V, p.74.
[2] *ŒC*, V, p.73.

idiosyncratic Christian stance in the years immediately preceding the War, a stance which he maintained until just after the publication of his first full length work in 1947, the seminal *Sade mon prochain*. Klossowski's writing as a whole is extremely close to that of Bataille in numerous ways, but his Christian phase marked a crucial break from the latter's strictly a-theological position. Klossowski's first, highly critical essay on Bataille, 'Le corps du néant', was originally given at a conference at a Dominican monastery in 1941 and then published as an appendix to *Sade mon prochain*. His second key essay 'A propos du simulacre dans la communication de Georges Bataille' appeared in the 'Hommage' edition of *Critique* in 1963. Each essay offers a complex yet very different account of transgression in Georges Bataille's writing. In so doing they also offer models for the possible and impossible readings I wish to outline here.

Klossowski's commentaries on Sade and Bataille in the 1947 edition of *Sade mon prochain* perform the rather surprising feat of interpreting both as essentially Christian writers. His arguments, philosophically complex and perhaps not quite as bizarre as they might at first seem, run as follows: Sade and Bataille, in the very moment they seek to negate the concepts of Christian belief and morality, remain inescapably held within their orbit. Klossowski's reading relies heavily on a structure of negation close to that of the Hegelian dialectic outlined by Kojève his *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*. When an element is negated in its contingent form, say when the Sadean libertine slays his victim, it is at the same time necessarily preserved at a higher level. The libertine, for instance, in slaying his victim negates God's moral law, and with this denies God himself; but in this negation, Klossowski argues, God is preserved as a universal category. Sadean sacrilege incorporates an instance of dialectical *Aufhebung*, in Kojève's terminology a 'suppression conservante'.[3] Dialectical suppression always implies a kind of closure whereby what is negated is also always affirmed. 'La Négation dialectique', writes Kojève

> est la négation d'une Identité, c'est-à-dire, de quelque chose de spécifique, qui correspond à une 'idée' éternelle ou à une 'nature' fixe et

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[3]   Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, (Paris: Gallimard 1979), p.21.

stable. Or la détermination spécifique du nié (identique) détermine et spécifie tant la négation elle-même que son résultat (total).[4]

To deny the existence of God in an act of sacrilege, or transgression necessarily affirms that existence: 'le "*meurtre* de Dieu"', Klossowski writes,

a son motif dans le dégout qu'inspire le fait d'être un tel devant Dieu. Pour pouvoir se supporter, il faut '*tuer*' celui dont la présence oblige à être toujours présent

there is no Death of God, he argues, without God.[5]

So Bataille's project of an a-theological, a-cephalic Church of the Sacred is always necessarily mediated through an experience of the Christian Church, that which, precisely, the Sacred seeks to deny: 'l'Eglise de la mort de Dieu ne peut emprunter son existence blasphématoire qu'à l'Eglise de la Résurrection'.[6] To put this another way, a transgression of the Law is always ultimately an affirmation of the primacy and prior institution of the Law, and thus, for Klossowski, an affirmation of Divine presence. According to this argument both Sadeian sacrilege and the Bataillian Sacred bear witness to what one might call an authentic experience of the negative, where the absence of God and promotion of evil always refer to and depend upon, as it were by antithesis, their opposites. And since neither Sade nor Bataille can come to terms with this unshakeable dependence upon moral categories or Divine Presence, since neither can affirm God explicitly in order to seek the way of absolution, both sustain themselves in a state of insurmountable nostalgia for the lost authenticity they deny. Bataille's attempt to affirm those elements of existence which escape the servile determinations of society, morality and of thought itself, necessarily fails and, despite himself, he inevitably affirms the opposite. The circle of the dialectic, ultimately theological in essence, always closes on itself preserving and recuperating within its circumference all that seeks to exceed it. The sacred, therefore, is an impossibility, and Bataille's privileged moments of transgression always necessarily remain within the orbit of what they seek to go beyond. They sustain themselves within the possible: within the realm of thought, Selfhood, and moral responsibility; they never exceed that

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[4] *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, p.477.
[5] Pierre Klossowski, *Sade mon prochain*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p.178.
[6] *Sade mon prochain*, p.181.

which makes everything possible, i.e. from Klossowski's theological perspective, God himself.

Now this interpretation might, to those favourable to Bataille, seem rather insufficient, and indeed Bataille himself gave a rather dismissive evaluation of Klossowski's reading of Sade in his review of *Sade mon prochain* republished in *La Littérature et le mal*, describing his friend's arguments as 'un peu construite' and 'en un sens très hégélien, mais sans la rigueur de Hegel'.[7] Yet, idiosyncratic though it might appear, Klossowski's Hegelian/Christian position sets the terms for other readings which seek to highlight Bataille's fundamental dependence on the categories he seeks to exceed. The basic principle is always one of recuperation – however much Bataille might seek to carry out 'le projet d'échapper au projet', he always necessarily relies upon the project, upon the notions and concepts which make the project possible in the first instance. Discursive language carries within itself an inherent positivity which recuperates all attempts at transgressing its limits. Bataille might seek to sacrifice his own self, but always remains himself, his sacrifice of self only has meaning from the perspective of a stable self-same self, which necessarily remains intact. This argument, whose main contention is the untenable status of the concept of general economy and the impossibility of transgression, asserts Bataille's inevitable failure. There is always a risk to Bataille's thought; the risk that 'non-sens' and 'non-savoir' remain subordinate to both 'sens' and 'savoir'; what Derrida in his essay of *L'Ecriture et la différence* describes as the

> Risque, à faire sens, de donner raison. A la raison. A la philosophie. A Hegel qui a toujours raison dès qu'on ouvre la bouche pour articuler le sens.[8]

This risk is always run, the possible reading would have it, but always from the outset the game is already lost.

Such a reading, what I'm calling here a 'reading of the possible', is perhaps most often adopted by those critics and commentators who are, on one level or another, clearly ill at ease with some of the political or sexual political aspects of Bataille's work. Commentators such as Jürgen Habermas or Carolyn J. Dean both express deep concern about the notion of heterogeneous forces in Bataille.

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[7] *ŒC*, IX, p.247.
[8] *L'Ecriture et la différence*, (1967), pp.369-370.

Habermas, for instance, suggests in his analysis of Bataille's 1930s political writing that the spontaneous expression of heterogeneous forces may not be too different from 'the fascist canalising' of those forces. Carolyn Dean argues in her book *The Self and its Pleasures* that Bataille's championing of the heterogeneous leads him to promote a sadistic mode of sexual desire.[9] In both cases these critics argue that the heterogeneous is recuperated in key ways into the realm of action, expression or history. Susan Suleiman, whose sexual political reading I wish to focus on here, analyses Bataille use of the term 'virilité'. In her essay 'Bataille in the Street' she examines his use of this term

> with and against the history of the 1930s in order to suggest that 'his continuing use of the word [virility] locked him into values and into a sexual politics that can only be described as conformist, in his time and ours.[10]

Arguments, such as Susan Suleiman's, tend to see transgression in Bataille's texts essentially in terms of an *ethical* transgression, that is an attempt to exceed what Habermas calls the 'foundations of an ethical rationalisation, which […] made possible the capitalist system'. Put another way transgression centres on the breaking of moral taboos most often through the championing and representation of sexual excess. Suleiman's argument, I would contend, reads the possible in Bataille and has the principle of recuperation as an essential element of its structure, thus following the model of Klossowski's analysis.

By construing transgression in ethical terms the sexual political approach implicitly disputes the primordial status given in Bataille's work to *eroticism*; the status of the erotic as, if you like, a privileged relation to alterity or heterogeneity. The sexual taboo is, from within this perspective, far more a social and historical convention which takes many forms but has no universal, anthropological status. On this basis, the sexual political reading judges the transgression of what are essentially social conventions to be a key element of the conventions themselves, an element which works to reinforce rather than to exceed

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[9] Carolyn J. Dean, *the Self and its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

[10] Susan Suleiman, 'Bataille in the Street' in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, (London: Routledge, 1995), p.26.

conventionality. Bataille's thought is thus firmly recuperated into the determinations of history and those of a male social order. Commenting on the opening of *Madame Edwarda* Susan Suleiman remarks rather caustically:

> Despite his persistent anguish and obsession with 'undoing' […], the narrator of *Mme Edwarda* is a potent male; soon after this opening passage he will enter a brothel and 'go upstairs' like any other John.[11]

Within the terms of this approach Bataille's inner experience can never *really* involve a loss of self. As Suleiman puts it 'the hero of inner experience *actively engages himself* in "la déchirure". He is dominant and virile'. The experience of loss of self is therefore impossible because, in the first instance, it can only be experienced from the perspective of the self that wills or chooses loss of self. Thus volition remains primary and the hero of inner experience, as Suleiman calls him, can be recuperated within the social and historical determinations of an identifiable male subjectivity. As in Klossowski's reading, any negation of limits is inevitably an affirmation of those limits, the dialectical circle closes, recuperating all that attempts to exceed it. Bataille, despite himself, remains himself, he remains immersed within his own social and cultural possibilities, within the sphere of the possible. Like Klossowski's early commentary, the sexual political reading reads and affirms this sphere of the possible.

In contrast, Klossowski's later reading in 'A propos du simulacre dans la communication de Georges Bataille' has an entirely different emphasis. The publication of his first novel in 1950 *La vocation suspendue* marks a key turning away from his earlier Christian stance, and with this his thinking undergoes subtle yet decisive shifts. In the 1963 piece the fundamental and problematic contradiction of Bataille's thought, the impossibility of the sacred, remains the linchpin of Klossowski's analysis. However his emphasis is now not on the *recuperation* of the impossible into the possible but rather on the movement of simulation within Bataille's writing, or on the *simulacrum*. If Bataille seeks to affirm 'non-savoir' but is inevitably caught up within the dialectical circle of positive meaning, then perhaps he should simply fall silent. But Klossowski writes:

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[11]   'Bataille in the Street', p.26.

parce que le langage (notionnel) rend contradictoire l'étude et la
recherche du moment souverain, inaccessible par son surgissement, là
même où s'impose le silence, s'impose du même coup le simulacre.[12]

The movement of the simulacrum begins, if you like, exactly at the
point where the arguments centred around recuperation end.
Klossowski's key contention in his later commentary is that the
notional, discursive, or conceptual value of Bataille's work, its profit,
so to speak, constitutes its inevitable residue, that which we have most
obvious access to, but also its least important moment. Only when this
residue is construed not as notion or concept, but rather as simulacrum
does Bataille's work have any force or transgressive potential. All the
points of affirmation in Bataille's thought are not affirmed by being
conceptualised, rather as moments of excess they are *simulated*:

> [Bataille] mime fidèlement la part de l'incommunicable. Le simulacre
> c'est tout ce que nous savons d'une expérience; la notion n'en est que le
> déchet appelant d'autres déchets.[13]

In a sense the simulacrum does not conceptualise or communicate
anything to anyone, it marks the absence from discursive thought and
all conscious experience of a sovereign existence:

> Le simulacre constitue le signe d'un état instantanée et ne peut établir
> l'échange entre un esprit et un autre ni permettre le passage d'une
> pensée dans une autre.

As simulacrum, Klossowski holds, Bataille's writing does not
theorise general economy or affirm excess in positive terms, in such a
way that it might then be recuperated in the closing circle of the
dialectic. It is this absence of positive terms which is crucial. The
simulacrum marks excess as excessive, by affirming itself as the
simulation rather than the re-presentation of an always already absent
instant.

For Klossowski, this formulation is of key importance if one is
clearly to assess the transgressive potential of Bataille's writing and
that of his erotic fiction in particular. The so-called 'erotic' fiction
does not transgress by presenting us with images of sexual perversion

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[12] Pierre Klossowski, 'A propos du simulacre dans la communication de
Georges Bataille', in *Critique*, (Paris: 1963), pp.742-750.
[13] 'A propos du simulacre dans la communication de Georges Bataille',
pp.742-750.

or moral turpitude. Such images are perhaps indeed, as Susan
Suleiman argues, its least transgressive, most conventional moments.
The transgression proper to the erotic text and indeed any other work
by Bataille must be located in its affirmation of an impossible
movement beyond itself, an impossibility affirmed by the simulacrum
in its very structure. The transgressive potential of Bataille's fiction
could perhaps be better located not in the depiction of erotic acts as
such, but rather in the intensely parodic aspects of his writing. Take
perhaps the narrator of *Histoire de l'oeil* as he cycles through the night
fully naked. He has a full erection, and the naked Simone tries
desperately to catch sight of the 'absurde raideur du membre viril', as
she too cycles along, masturbating herself on the saddle. It is difficult
to see in this moment the virile gesture of the penis-weapon, and all
too easy to find the whole affair derisory and ridiculous. And this
indeed is the importance of the simulacrum in a reading which focuses
on the impossible in Bataille. The possible, that which can be thought,
experienced or represented, is always perhaps the most derisory, a
'déchet', a heightened and parodic moment of ridicule.

It is Klossowski's achievement in his later commentary to take the
'impossible' in Bataille's writing seriously and give it an all-
embracing status in the term *simulacrum*. Yet a simulacrum is not just
parodic in the traditional sense (that is, a deformation of an original
for satirical or debunking purposes), rather it describes a highly
vertiginous movement. Simulating the impossible, it does not parody
in the sense of distorting a prior moment of plenitude or origin. In its
parodic gesture it affirms, as Bataille puts it in *L'expérience
intérieure*, that 'L'être est "insaisissable", il n'est jamais "saisi" que
par erreur'. The simulacrum, in its broadest sense, asserts the
impossibility of all ontology, sketching in its very structure, the
movement of Being (as heterogeneity and expenditure) insofar as it is
only ever revealed in its absence or withdrawal from all determined
existence. Thought, writing, and self as *simulacra* are without any
foundation in a plenitude of Being. They are opened up into the
abyssal movement of an always already parodied instant. The
simulacrum takes thought and returns it to its impossible foundation,
maintaining it in what Klossowski calls 'un état de vertige
irrémédiable: ni progression, ni retour sur soi, mais à la fois descente

et montée à l'instar d'une spirale sans commencement ni fin'.[14] It is an incessant motion without beginning or end, in which thought mimes the incommunicable. So transgression, as simulacrum, does not then traverse purely ethical boundaries. It enters into an impossible play with the limits of self, of thought and of meaning in order to affirm the impossible as impossible. In so doing the simulacrum founds existence in its very absence of foundation. In this impossible movement the simulacrum, miming that which it is not, always maintains its lack of self-identity, and remains suspended in its difference from itself. It withdraws identity, disputes the primacy of the concept, and refuses the closure of the dialectical circle.

So Klossowski, across his rather lengthy writing career, reads Bataille in two opposing ways and these two modes of reading run to the heart of debates surrounding the meaning or non-meaning of transgression in Bataille's work. Which of these moments, then, the *possible* or the *impossible*, should one choose? This, I would contend, is precisely the question posed to readers of Bataille, and against which we define ourselves, philosophically, and indeed, existentially. Do we wish to affirm thought, self and the self-identity of the concept, perhaps for religious, rational, political, or sexual political reasons? If we do then Bataille's project must evidently be seen as a failure on its own terms, it must be judged always from the perspective of thought, self and concept. Or do we, along with Bataille, wish to affirm the impossible. This one must inevitably do if one argues in favour of the transgressive potential of Bataille's writing. We either take the self as always already intact and returning to itself, as do Bataille's critics, or we affirm it as always already, different from itself, given up to the vertiginous play of the simulacrum which traces the movement of a radical yet ungraspable finitude.

I began by suggesting that, as commentary, this discussion might be inevitably immersed in the possible, within its own contextual possibilities: 'le souci de professeur'. But it is, perhaps, no less rooted in the impossible. It all depends on what I affirm. On one level the aim here is not to choose either way, but rather to argue that reading Bataille always demands that the choice be made, either implicitly or explicitly. One could argue, perhaps, that, as human existence

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[14] 'A propos du simulacre dans la communication de Georges Bataille', p.750.

becomes ever more dominated by the technocratic organisation of social and personal life, an affirmation of the most irrecoverable and refractory elements of existence becomes all the more necessary. Ultimately, according to Bataille, one is always already caught up in both the possible and the impossible, within the movement of dialectical thought and the movement of excess which founds thought in the absence of any foundation. Maurice Blanchot sums this up, noting:

> il faut entendre que la possibilité n'est pas la seule dimension de notre existence et qu'il nous est peut-être donné de 'vivre' chaque événement de nous-même dans un double rapport, une fois comme ce que nous comprenons, saisissons, supportons et maîtrisons […] en le rapportant à quelque bien, quelque valeur […], une autre fois comme ce qui se dérobe à tout emploi et échappe à tout fin, davantage comme ce qui échappe à notre pouvoir même d'en faire l'épreuve, mais à l'epreuve duquel nous ne saurions échapper: oui, comme si l'impossibilité, cela en quoi ne ne pouvons plus pouvoir, nous attendait derrière tout ce que nous vivons, pensons et disons, pour peu que nous ayons été une fois au bout de cette attente.[15]

Despite our inescapable immersion in the possible, if we follow Bataille, we know, impossibly, that 'l'être à la fin nous est donné comme impossible'.

<div align="right">Ian James, Downing College, Cambridge</div>

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[15] Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), pp.307-308.