

Translator's Introduction

The Hatred of Poetry

The poetic genius is not a verbal gift . . . it is the divination of ruins.

—Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*

The reputation of Georges Bataille (1897–1962) rests most firmly on his extraordinary works of fiction, including *Story of the Eye*, *Blue of Noon*, and *Madame Edwarda*; his essays on general economy, *The Accursed Share* and *Eroticism*; and his all-but-unclassifiable volumes of philosophical autobiography, *Inner Experience*, *Guilty*, and *On Nietzsche*. To say that Bataille's poetry is less well known than these other works is to understate the matter.¹ This may be due in part to its relative scarcity. Though poetry figures in four of his major works, all of Bataille's poetry can be collected in one relatively slim volume.² Bataille's poetry never stood apart within his literary output: only 113 copies of his major poetic work, *Archangelic* (1944), were printed during his lifetime and those were distributed only to "friends" of the journal *Messages*, which published the book. Nevertheless poetry and the problem of poetic language played a crucial role in the development of Bataille's thought and writing. The publisher's

advertising band wrapped around the first edition of Bataille's first book, *Inner Experience* (1943), proclaimed that book to be "Beyond Poetry" even though the book itself included several poems, most notably a concluding section consisting entirely of poems, written, as Bataille says, "with necessity—in accordance with my life."³ Paradoxically, Bataille's turn to poetry coincided not only with the beginning of his career as a writer of books but also with a stance or outlook that is situated in some way beyond poetry.

Like much else in Bataille's thought and life, his poetry and his thought about poetry evidence the challenge signaled by the title of another of Bataille's books that includes poetry, *The Hatred of Poetry* (1947), a volume better known in English by the title Bataille gave it for its second edition, *The Impossible* (1962). Bataille explained both of these titles in the preface to that second edition: "It seemed to me that true poetry was reached only by hatred. Poetry had no powerful meaning except in the violence of revolt. But poetry attains this violence only by evoking the impossible."⁴ In notes for that preface, he wrote: "*The Impossible* is still, is above all entirely complete violence and unlivable tragedy. It is that which exceeds the conventions of literary poetry."⁵ Along similar lines, in *Method of Meditation*, a text written alongside the poetry of *The Impossible*, Bataille describes poetry and "poetic effusion" as a "sovereign behavior" alongside other ecstatic behaviors, intoxication, eroticism, laughter, and sacrifice, among others.⁶ Poetry, in other words, and in Bataille's view, is a privileged mode of writing and of experience, a sovereign mode, a means of violence and revolt, but it is also rare, both within Bataille's oeuvre and otherwise. And if the word *poetry* as he uses it refers to a mode of writing that "exceeds the conventions of literary poetry," not all poetry meets this standard, or, more strongly put, is in fact poetry in this strict sense. Poetry, for Bataille and in short, is not merely beautiful language or finely wrought phrases. But if poetic language is neither everyday speech nor simply beautiful language,

what exactly is it? And if it is as significant as Bataille suggests it is, why did it suffer such neglect in his life as a writer? When and why did he begin writing poetry and when and why did he stop?



Bataille turned to poetry quite late in his career and then still only for a relatively brief period of time. The first poems by Bataille that can be reliably dated appear as part of *Inner Experience*, a book he began writing in the fall of 1941, when he was already forty-four years old. In his youth and while still caught up in a fervent, if short-lived, Christian faith, Bataille wrote some poems in free verse on religious topics, one on the wartime destruction of the cathedral in Reims, the city where he spent most of his youth, and another on an imagined religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem.⁷ Nevertheless, and not without significance, Bataille seems to have lost his faith in poetry alongside his faith in God during the early 1920s. Thereafter, despite his ongoing literary ambitions, poetry disappeared from his work for over twenty years. And yet, across those same twenty years, Bataille wrote a few of the most extraordinary literary texts of his century—*Story of the Eye* (1927), *Blue of Noon* (1935), and *Madame Edwarda* (1941)—as well as restlessly pushing the formal boundaries and philosophical resources of the critical essay, particularly in the fields of aesthetics and politics, in pieces published in the journals *Documents*, *La Critique Sociale*, and *Acéphale*.⁸ Bataille's literary muse was, in other words, and somewhat obviously, otherwise engaged during those years. Nevertheless the absence of poetry during this period is notable not least because Bataille did eventually begin writing poems. Following the fall of 1941, and then more consistently over the next three years, Bataille wrote the majority of his poetry as well as perhaps his most searching reflections on poetry and poetic language. Why did this happen? Why only then, at that time?

Before turning to the specific circumstances of Bataille's own turn toward poetry, we can make some more broadly contextual observations regarding his friends and influences and the literary milieu in which he began writing poetry. In France between the wars, among the members of the aesthetic avant-garde, promiscuous formal experimentation was more common than it may be today. Bataille's closest friends and clearest intellectual interlocutors all wrote in a wide, indeed almost kaleidoscopically shifting variety of forms and genres: prose and poetry, novels and autobiography, criticism, reviews, philosophical or theoretical speculation, cultural critique and analysis. While some figures, like Paul Éluard, were undoubtedly known for one form of expression, in his case poetry, others, like Antonin Artaud or Henri Michaux, made significant contributions to culture in multiple distinct forms and indeed media, across the literary and visual arts. In each of these cases, restricting our appreciation of their works to one form or genre would profoundly limit our understanding of that work both as a whole and in part. Closer to Bataille, Michel Leiris, one of Bataille's close friends from the mid-1920s until the end of his life, wrote significant bodies of both poetry and prose, including his many volumes of anthropology and autobiography, most notably *Phantom Africa* (1934) and the four volume series *The Rules of the Game* (1948–76). Though renowned for his prose, Leiris continued to write and publish poetry throughout his life. Reflecting on the relationship between Bataille's writing practices and his inner circle of friends, we should also remember that at the time of her death, Bataille's lover, Colette Peignot, more commonly known by her middle name, Laure, left behind a small but powerful collection of poetry and prose writings, which Bataille and Michel Leiris printed privately in two small editions for limited circulation thereafter.⁹ These publications, in 1939 and 1942, coincide, generally speaking, with Bataille's own turn toward poetry and are reflected, and in fact quoted, in his work.

Writing in a multitude of forms was of course not unique to the members of Bataille's generation and circle. The foremost

influence on Bataille's thought and work was another writer who wrote in many genres and forms, Friedrich Nietzsche. As Bataille put it in *On Nietzsche*: "With few exceptions, my company on earth is that of Nietzsche. . . . My life in Nietzsche's company is a community; my book is this community."¹⁰ To our current point, and despite recent attempts to confine his works to the philosophy section of libraries, Nietzsche too wrote in a variety of forms. He wrote essays and aphorisms, intended for both professional and popular readerships, but also music and poetry, as well as what we might call philosophical poetry, for want of a better term for that work which stands altogether apart, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85). Georges Bataille began *Inner Experience* by situating it alongside Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (1882) as a book wherein profundity and passion go hand in hand.¹¹ Nietzsche's *Gay Science* is of course also a book that begins with a "Prelude in Rhymes" and ends with an appendix of poems, the "Songs of Prince Vogelfrei." Nietzsche also included poems in several of his other works, as well as publishing his poems separately.¹² Bataille found many things in Nietzsche; one of those things was a stylistic precedent for including poetry in a volume of philosophical prose.

But again Nietzsche was not the only influence on Bataille whose writing combined multiple forms and registers. The major works of the great Carmelite mystic, St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, *The Spiritual Canticle*, and *The Living Flame of Love*, are structured as theological poems followed by detailed commentaries on those poems. St. John was an essential reference for Bataille, particularly in *Inner Experience*, where, speaking of methods of meditation, he admits: "I have followed his [St. John's meditational] method of hardening right to the end."¹³ Far more even than Nietzsche, and far more than would be appropriate for us to demonstrate here, the works of St. John of the Cross influenced the language, form, and content of Bataille's poetry. The sensually visceral but spiritual landscape of St. John of the Cross—the dark night, the desperate spiritual isolation and ascent, the torturous burning

and urgent longing of a lover for a beloved, the darkness and the light—are essential to Bataille’s poetic language, purpose, and effect, though of course with a different final goal and ultimate meaning.

For St. John of the Cross and for Nietzsche, as for Bataille, the multiplication of forms and registers, in prose and poetry, served distinct necessities, evidenced distinct intentions and audiences as well as distinct orientations toward and ideas about the nature and purpose of writing. “Why write?” in cases such as these needs a supplemental precision: “Poetry? Prose? An essay? An aphorism?” In each case the answer is different. This difference becomes most apparent when the forms are mixed, pushed up against one another, or arranged or assembled in juxtaposition, alongside one another, in stark contrast.

Beyond these contemporaries and influences, Bataille consistently references the work of only a select few other poets, particularly in his books from the war years, when he was himself writing the majority of his poetry: William Blake, Emily Brontë, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, le Comte de Lautréamont, Arthur Rimbaud, the French dramatist Jean Racine, and, often disparagingly, the surrealist poets, including André Breton. Later on, two of his contemporaries, Jacques Prévert and René Char, would be added to the list of poets and poetry that compelled Bataille’s interest.¹⁴ If we expand the list to include a few other names Bataille links in a positive way with the mechanisms of poetic language, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, we have something like a kind of pantheon of poetry and literature for Bataille.¹⁵ This list is significant for the specific names it includes as well as for its brevity.

Bataille’s poets in particular are all accursed, *maudite*, poets associated with moral transgression and the notion of evil. In 1957, Bataille gathered some of his writings on Brontë, Baudelaire, Blake, Proust, and Kafka in his book of literary essays under the title, *Literature and Evil*.¹⁶ His thoughts on the others more often appeared as stray remarks: “Poe and Baudelaire on

the level of the impossible: I love them and burn with the same fire.”¹⁷ “Humility before Lautréamont or Rimbaud: a new form of unhappy consciousness, it has its pedants like the old kind.”¹⁸ “Lautréamont’s *Poésies*, are they not literature ‘pleading guilty?’¹⁹ “Lautréamont as bible of [*innocence?*] in reality this bible is once again ancient tragedy, poetry made by everyone.”²⁰ But, whether in extended essays or stray remarks, the purpose and thrust of the association remained consistent: “Emily Brontë, of all women, seems to have been the object of a privileged curse. . . . Keeping her moral purity intact, she had a profound experience of the abyss of Evil.”²¹ “Blake managed, in phrases of a peremptory simplicity, to reduce humanity to poetry and poetry to Evil.”²²

These notions and associations were not original. Blake himself famously associated evil with energy and life: “the active[,] springing from Energy”; energy, for Blake, is “eternal delight.”²³ Blake said of Milton: “The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it.”²⁴ Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil* begin with a poem, “To the Reader,” which counts among its admissions, the fact that the Devil pulls the poet’s strings: “Each day we descend a step toward Hell, / Without horror, through the stinking darkness.” Rimbaud’s major work, *A Season in Hell*, sets out, at the end of its introduction, with an ambivalent cry: “But, dear Satan, I beg of you, a less irritated gaze! And while awaiting those few delayed infamies, for you who love in a writer the absence of descriptive or instructive abilities, I will tear out these few hideous pages from my notebook of the damned.” One of the sections of *A Season in Hell* is entitled *The Impossible*.

Bataille’s affinity for these accursed poets is almost overdetermined. The author of *Guilty* claimed: “Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should admit itself so.”²⁵ Such claims brought him in line with the accursed poets but also with a sensibility about art and literature that was common enough following the fin de siècle aesthetic movements of symbolism

and decadence. Indeed, Bataille was part of a generation whose members brought avant-garde tendencies together in aesthetic, social, and political forms. Standing apart from society, rejecting norms of individual and social behavior, and seeking new political structures for communal life went hand in hand with a search for new aesthetic models for expression and experience. *Literature and Evil* begins with just such an admission: “I belong to a turbulent generation. . . . In the years after the Great War, there was a feeling which was about to overflow. Literature was stifling within its limitations and seemed pregnant with revolution.”²⁶ The other members of that generation shared a sense of its genealogy and of the place of the accursed poets within that genealogy. Antonin Artaud—to name only one particularly turbulent member of that turbulent generation—often wrote of the impact of a nearly identical pantheon of figures on his own work: Baudelaire, Poe, Nerval, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, but also Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Coleridge, and Hölderlin, among others.²⁷ Bataille too considered Nietzsche the “philosopher of evil.”²⁸ From our distance it’s almost too easy to perceive these figures as merely among the greatest innovators and most fecund writers of their times. But it’s important to remember that they form a distinct countertradition, a tradition formed by writing through modes and mores in more or less direct opposition to the dominant literary and cultural traditions of their day. Nevertheless, by aligning himself with the legacy of the accursed poets, Bataille found himself in good company among the members of his own generation. One mark of Bataille’s methods and purpose can be found in the extent to which he integrated the aesthetic, social, and political inheritance of these writers. He also explicitly eschewed originality and continued along the path these writers blazed. However anachronistically it may sound to our disenchanted ears, he confessed, in the accursed vein: “I believe that Evil—an acute form of Evil—which it expresses, has a sovereign value for us.”²⁹ Or again, in *On Nietzsche*: “I make nothing less than *evil* the object of an extreme moral search.”³⁰

Most of Bataille's remarks about poetry and poets appear in his writings from the war years or later. Prior to the war, Bataille did not reference poetry regularly in his writing. He wrote primarily about visual forms in *Documents* and primarily about social thought in *La Critique Sociale*. Even when the reviews he wrote for *La Critique Sociale* did consider works of literature, they did so with a clear eye on the social implications of the work in question.³¹ In the late 1930s, as Bataille's concerns moved more resolutely beyond visual culture and beyond the political, into the realm of religion and the sacred, he wrote respectfully of poetry "since Rimbaud" (Baudelaire and Gérard de Nerval are also mentioned in the notes) but nevertheless relegated "verbal invention" to the level of vanity and failure, mere "art." Bataille's search had pushed him well beyond the search for the beautiful and the true, whether in visual, verbal, or philosophical form, toward the region of a "privileged instant" that he identified with the experience of the sacred. In his essay, "The Sacred," written in November of 1938, as Laure lay dying, Bataille put forward the following assertion: "Whoever creates, whoever paints or writes, can no longer concede any limitations on painting or writing; *alone*, he suddenly has at his disposal all possible human convulsions, and he cannot flee from this heritage of divine power—which belongs to him. Nor can he try to know if this heritage will *consume* and *destroy* the one it *consecrates*. But he refuses now to surrender 'what possesses him' to the standards of salesmen, to which art has conformed."³² Needless to say, the validation of the market held no meaning for Bataille during that period of his life, a period we may summarize under the heading of headlessness, Acéphale, in which experience alone was key. And yet, in that moment, and in the quotation above, we can also perceive a recognition on Bataille's part that modern art, including poetry, at least since Rimbaud, inherited a quest for an experience, however failed, of "fundamental importance for all life."³³

Perhaps the first apotheosis of this search recorded in Bataille's published work appears in his 1939 program piece, "The Practice of Joy before Death." The piece begins with a couplet from Nietzsche—from the section of rhymes that open *The Gay Science*—and concludes with a series of six written meditations.³⁴ Bataille admits that the meditations "cannot alone constitute an initiation into the *exercise* of a mysticism of 'joy before death.'" He goes on to specify that "these writings represent, moreover, less exercises strictly speaking than simple descriptions of a contemplative state or of an ecstatic contemplation. These descriptions would not even be acceptable if they were not given for what they are, in other words, as free. Only the very first text could be proposed as an exercise."³⁵

This is the first text:

I abandon myself to peace, to the point of
annihilation.

The noises of the struggle are lost in death, as rivers
are lost in the sea, as stars burst in the night.
The strength of the struggle is fulfilled in the silence
of all action.

I enter into peace as I enter into a dark unknown.
I fall in this dark unknown.
I myself become this dark unknown.³⁶

Setting aside this text for a moment, we can observe that Bataille's point in the lines quoted above is to distinguish the experiential aspects of his practice of meditation from both the oral and written forms of that practice. The oral and written forms or modes of the practice cannot take the place of the experience itself. On this point in *Inner Experience*, he also notes that the "written tradition is hardly more than an introduction to the oral one."³⁷ The priority, then, is on the experience itself

rather than on any spoken or written text, religious, literary, or otherwise, that might be related to it. Nevertheless, the oral and written forms accompany the experience that results from meditation in two ways: in some cases as exercises and in others as descriptions or evocations. Exercises serve to *provoke* experience. Descriptions merely reflect it. The relationship between these two modes—exercises and descriptions—is both complex and subtle. Descriptions can be a helpful crutch for the practitioner in the process of meditation. They can provide structure for the process itself, leading the practitioner ever deeper, in distinct steps, into the experience. One highly developed form of this kind of structured meditation appears in Zen Buddhism, which uses *koans*, or “public documents” presented as brief stories or dialogues on specific themes or problems, as a means of directing students through specific stages of meditational practice.³⁸

Beyond these two formal modes, the meditations themselves, particularly the first one, quoted above, are also narrative or quasi-narrative in structure. Each statement contains elements of action alongside the descriptive elements: details about the journey of the individual slipping into joy before death, or what Bataille will later call inner experience. I *enter* into . . . I *fall* into . . . I *become* this dark unknown.

Stepping back slightly, we can recall that in the Christian methods of meditation that Bataille adapted into his own method of meditation, those of Ignatius de Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* and of Saint John of the Cross in particular, the relationship between the narrative descriptions of the agony of Christ, imagined dramatic mimicry, and the practice of meditation are crucial.³⁹ The narrative description of Christ’s suffering forms the basis of Loyola’s dramatic mimicry, the imagined identification of the Christian with Christ. In *Inner Experience*, Bataille specifies, in language consistent with the meditation quoted above: “According to Saint John of the Cross, we must imitate in God (Jesus) the fall, the agony, the moment of ‘nonknowledge’ of the *lama sabachthani*; drunk to the lees, Christianity is the absence

of salvation, the despair of God.⁴⁰ He is even more specific about the dramatic process required by the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius de Loyola:

To dramatize is what the devout people who follow the *Exercises* of Saint Ignatius do (but not them alone). If one were to imagine the place, the characters of the drama and the drama itself: the torture to which Christ is led. The disciple of Saint Ignatius offers himself a theatrical representation. He is in a peaceful room: he is asked to have the feelings he would have on Calvary. He is told that despite the peacefulness of his room, he *should* have these feelings. One desires that he should get out of himself, deliberately dramatizing this human life, of which one knows in advance that it is likely to be a half-anxious, half-dozing futility. But not yet having had a properly inner life, before having shattered discourse within him, he is asked to project the point about which I have spoken, similar to him—but even more similar to that which he wants to be—in the person of Jesus agonizing. The projection of the point, in Christianity, is attempted before the mind has its inner movements at its disposal, before it has become free of discourse. It is only the rough projection, which one attempts, starting from it, to attain non-discursive experience.⁴¹

In these spiritual exercises, language is used against itself, not for its own sake but toward the provocation of an experience. The words themselves form a screen that either falls away or is torn apart through meditation. The dramatic structure provided by the agony of Jesus also functions as a vehicle for the practice of meditation in such a way that it opens up, in fact cleaves into the ontological dilemma of human being. Rather than serving as

an illustration of a stable idea within a systematic theology, in this mode, the peak of the dramatic narrative, crucifixion, opens onto a physically palpable space of dizzying ecstasy. Mystical meditation, in several Christian traditions, is thus profoundly distinct from systematic theology in its processes and goals even though the two modes of practice are built upon and focused on the same dramatic narrative. Systematic theology is rooted in the production of knowledge, while mysticism is rooted in lived human experience. As Jacques Lacan later observed, discussing mystic speech in Seminar XX, the “essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it [jouissance], but know nothing about it.”⁴² Mystic speech isn’t rooted in or even intended as a search for knowledge; it’s speech that does not know or rather that knows nothing. It’s speech about nothing, nothing that can be clarified with speech. Maurice Blanchot touches on the same problem when describing the distinct form of literary language that is his true country in the introduction to his first collection of critical essays, *Faux pas* (1943):

The writer finds himself in the increasingly ludicrous condition of having nothing to write, of having no means with which to write it, and of being constrained by the utter necessity of always writing it. Having nothing to express must be taken in the most literal way. Whatever he would like to say, it is nothing. The world, things, knowledge are to him only landmarks across the void. And he himself is already reduced to nothing. Nothingness is his material. . . . [T]he “I have nothing to say” of the writer, like that of the accused, encloses the whole secret of his solitary condition.⁴³

Mystic speech nevertheless can serve meditational purposes and, by extension, political and social ones as well. By standing apart from the hierarchal, indeed patriarchal speech

of rationalistic and systematic theology, mystic speech provides an alternative form of political and social speech, rooted in the passions, affects, and the body. Just as mystical experience transcends political and social hierarchy—anyone can be visited by a mystical experience or vocation, the lowest peasant, the highest king, male or female—mystic speech too transcends political and social hierarchies: training in rhetoric is not required. It might even be detrimental to it. Moreover, while systematic theology may be harnessed for political purposes, to explain and thus reify, for example, power relations, mystic speech always returns to the affects and experience of the individual mystic. It may be cited but it cannot be entirely co-opted or otherwise put to use. Its meaning cannot be either summarized or consumed by its evidentiary or other uses but instead always remains tied to individual experience. It is always in some ways both before and beyond the political and the social. It is *before* these spheres because it does not meet their criteria; it is neither accomplished nor sophisticated. It is beyond them because it reveals their limits by exceeding them, by saying something that they cannot say, speaking in a way that they cannot speak.⁴⁴

In addition to St. Ignatius de Loyola and St. John of the Cross, Bataille quotes St. Teresa of Ávila, Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, St. Catherine of Siena, and, perhaps most fervently, Angela of Foligno, in writings across many years, particularly beginning at the end of the 1930s. As a young man, after the First World War, the book on his bedside table had been Remy de Gourmont's *Le Latin Mystique* (1892), an anthology of one thousand years of ecclesiastic poetry in Latin, including mystic verse. Years later, writing during the first days of the Second World War, Bataille begins *Guilty* with the admission that he finds reading impossible; although, as he says, Angela of Foligno's *Book of Visions*, "grips me to the point of trembling."⁴⁵ As noted above regarding St. John of the Cross, as much as Bataille writes in the tradition of the accursed poets, he also writes in that of the great mystics, sharing their

language, their metaphors, and their strategies if not necessarily their ultimate faith.

But are the meditations from “The Practice of Joy before Death” actually poems? Aside from the first one, quoted above, I have not included them in the present volume. They strike me as among the final steps Bataille took on the road to poetry rather than as purely and distinctly poetic speech. The burden they face is more insistently linked to the meditational practice of joy before death than to their own formal necessities. And, however interesting they may be to us, Bataille himself set them aside or simply moved beyond them as both his methods of meditational practice and strategies of writing developed over the next few years. As he said in *Inner Experience*, speaking specifically of the political and religious communities he attempted to forge in the late 1930s, but also in some ways to his resolutely social focus, including the focus of his writing: “The war put an end to my ‘activity’ and my life became all the less separated from the object of its search.”⁴⁶ This is not to say that Bataille simply turned away from politics at the beginning of the war. *Guilty* begins with a related paradox: “The date I begin writing (5 September 1939) is not a coincidence. I begin because of the events, but not to speak of them.”⁴⁷ The events in question were the events that signaled the beginning of World War II.



The first writings by Bataille that can be both identified as poems and reliably dated appear in the “Torture” section of *Inner Experience*, which he wrote two years later during the fall and winter of 1941. Additional poems appear elsewhere in that book, including in the fifth and final section, which, though brief, consists entirely of poetry. He completed the manuscript of *Inner Experience* over the summer of 1942 but he did not stop writing or stop writing poems. Quite the contrary in fact, Bataille wrote perhaps the most substantial number of his poems

during the fall of 1942. On medical leave from his job at the Bibliothèque nationale, he was living in the relative isolation of Panilleuse, a small village in Normandy. There he wrote portions of *Guilty*, *The Little One*, *The Dead Man*, *The Accursed Share*, and *The Oresteia*, as well as other unfinished works, notes, drafts, and sketches, including many of the poems in this volume. The body of poetry Bataille wrote that fall formed a kind of crucible and archive of his work, particularly his work as a poet, over the next few years. Over those years, through 1945 and beyond, Bataille would return to the archive of verse written during the fall of 1942 to find poems that he would then rework and, more importantly rearrange or reassemble, in new combinations and for new contexts of publication.

The poems included in *The Oresteia* represent only the most dramatic example of this process. Written alongside the other works that fall, Bataille published three sections of the work independently in journals in 1943 and 1945. He reedited those sections for inclusion in *The Oresteia* when he published it as a separate volume in 1945 and again when he brought it together with *A Story of Rats* and *Dianus* for publication as *The Hatred of Poetry* in 1947. He reworked them again, though less substantially, when he republished *The Hatred of Poetry* under a new title, *The Impossible*, in 1962. The three sections initially published on their own in journals appeared in those venues as independent but contiguous entities. For inclusion in *The Oresteia*, Bataille broke each section apart into a number of shorter poems, giving each smaller section its own page. Several sections of two of these three works were also eliminated or relocated elsewhere in the final version of the work.⁴⁸

Bataille also used poems written during the fall of 1942 in a work that remained unpublished, *The Tomb of Louis XXX*, and gathered others into several separate folders within the archive he organized—as a good librarian—of his own manuscripts. Because Bataille revisited and reworked these poems so frequently over the subsequent years, it is extremely difficult to

date the works accurately, let alone arrange them chronologically in order of their composition.

Bataille also continued writing poems throughout this period. Additional poems appear in the manuscripts and notes for *Guilty*, completed in spring and summer of 1943. During the late summer and fall of that year, however, Bataille wrote his most sustained body of verse, from which he published a section that fall, and then later, the following year, as a complete work under the title *Archangelic*. Additional poems figure in the manuscripts for *On Nietzsche*, written during the spring of 1944. But following the liberation of Paris in August 1944 and the end of the war the next spring, poetry again receded for several years as a privileged form of writing for Bataille. He would not return to writing poetry until 1954, when he wrote a relatively large number of poems and selected a few of them for publication in *Botteghe oscure* under the collective title, *Undifferentiated Being Is Nothing*. He wrote his final poems three years later, in 1957, the year that saw the publication, through three different publishers, of three distinct and distinctly significant major works, his novel *Blue of Noon*, his sociological study *Eroticism*, and his collection of literary criticism, *Literature and Evil*. Perhaps poetry reappeared at that moment as a reflection and extension of this range of writings.

This series of dates can be summarized with the observation that Bataille wrote poetry in more or less contained periods, even in bursts of creative activity, and indeed that he wrote the majority of his poetry from 1942 to 1945, which is to say not only during the war but, more importantly, during the period of the Nazi occupation of France. The seeds of that writing may have been planted in the context of and influences upon his work prior to the war, as well as in the models and practices of meditation he developed in the late 1930s, but they did not sprout until the period of the war itself, and indeed more specifically that of the Nazi occupation. Moreover, since Bataille's recourse to verse substantially receded with the end of the war,

we can link that mode of literary production rather more directly to that specific period of his life as well as to the horizon of meaning bounded by those conditions. Linking this observation back to the role of the accursed poet, we can also say that it is one thing for literature to plead guilty and yet another for it to do so under conditions of enemy occupation.

But Bataille was hardly alone in this endeavor. A few months after the end of the occupation, in October 1944, the provisional government hosted a gala celebration, attended by Charles de Gaulle, then acting president of the republic, to celebrate the “Poets of the Resistance.” In his opening statement, François Mauriac observed: “There have never been so many poets as during these dark years.”⁴⁹ In many cases, the dense metaphors, allusions, and abstractions of poetic language permitted poems to pass under the red pen of the censors without remark. Whether such oversights testify to a love of poetry, a failure of comprehension, or cultural chagrin is hard to say. They also testify to the challenge faced by poets in crafting consequential verse. If the censors fail to notice the inherent threat posed by the words on the page, perhaps those words have missed their mark.

In Bataille’s case, the venues in which he published his poetry directly reflect the wartime conditions of its composition, and more than that, his place within a wide group of writers who viewed literary writing, and poetry specifically, as means of political resistance. Bataille’s first published poems appeared within the text of *Inner Experience*, released by Éditions Gallimard in February 1943. But later that same year, he also published two poems, or perhaps rather two groups of poems, in an anthology volume entitled *Domaine Français*. One of these groups of poems, entitled “La Douleur” (Pain) would later be republished under the title “Le Tombeau” (The Tomb) as the first part of *Archangelic*. The other was “Invocation à la chance” (The Invocation of Chance), which would later be published as the first few poems of *The Oresteia*. Taken together these pieces represent selections from Bataille’s two major collections of poetry.

Domaine Français was published in partnership by Éditions Messages, Paris, and Éditions Trois-Collines, Geneva. Jean Lescure edited the collection from Paris but it had to be published in neutral Switzerland due to censorship imposed by the Nazi occupation. Lescure cofounded Éditions Messages in 1937 as a venue intending to explore the range and purpose of poetic writing, particularly at the intersections of poetry, philosophy, and the visual arts, in what turned out to be the final days of peace. After a small initial publication, the first true issue of the journal appeared in 1939. It was devoted to William Blake. The issue included texts by Lescure, Jean Wahl, Herbert Read, and others as well as some translations of Blake's works. A second issue appeared that same year, gathering texts by philosophers and poets Jean Wahl, Gaston Bachelard, Paul Éluard, T. S. Eliot, and others under the heading of poetry and metaphysics. The beginning of the war refocused and deepened Lescure's purposes for the journal. It already had something it stood for—poetry, philosophy, and French civilization—now it also had something to stand against.

The Nazi occupation of France in June 1940 was at once military, political, and cultural. Jewish and Communist writers and artists were, for example, banned from publishing and exhibiting well before they were marked for deportation. The occupiers also demanded that key administrative posts in cultural institutions of all kinds be filled with writers and artists sympathetic to their goals. Perhaps the most famous instance of this involved the editorship of the *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. Founded in 1909 as the nucleus of what became Éditions Gallimard, the *NRF* was the premiere literary and cultural journal in France for thirty years. Publication was suspended for several months at the beginning of the occupation, but in December of 1940, Gaston Gallimard capitulated with the demands of the new regime by replacing the long-time editor of the *NRF*, Jean Paulhan, with a Nazi sympathizer, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle.

Publishing in France, in the *NRF* and otherwise, became a political act. Some writers simply continued to publish: eventu-

ally many of them would be viewed as collaborators with the Nazi regime and face consequences including exile and even execution after the war. Others, like the poet René Char, chose not to publish in France until the occupation had ended. Char took up arms and joined a resistance cell in his native Provence. Still other writers began working for an underground press that slowly took root and began to spread throughout the occupied and Vichy controlled zones of the country. Many pursued several of these strategies simultaneously. Albert Camus, for example, published books with Gallimard during the occupation but he also became the editor of the important underground newspaper *Combat*.

In this context, facing these choices, Jean Lescure reinvented *Éditions Messages* as a vehicle of resistance. It would be quasi-clandestine: the authors would sign their texts with their own names rather than with pseudonyms but the publication dates would frequently be falsified, suggesting that the individual issues of the journal had been printed prior to various edicts imposed by the occupying regime. Eventually, Lescure would also begin to work with printers in Belgium and Switzerland, as he did for *Domaine Français*, as another means of avoiding censorship.

Lescure did not intend to publish political propaganda or censored news. *Messages* was a literary journal first and foremost. Propaganda, he believed, put literature in service to a cause and therefore drained it of its primary, literary value. Put differently, polemic, no matter how vigorous, is almost always ultimately dull and easily dismissed, once one understands the perspective it intends to serve. If *Messages* intended to take a stand *against* the Nazi occupiers, it would have to do so indirectly, or from a perspective beyond or distinct from direct opposition.

Toward this end in *Messages*, Lescure hoped to explore the relationship between poetry and liberty at its most basic level, that of language. “Resistance,” he later wrote, “began with language. . . . We took upon ourselves the charge of making the French language live. We became aware, passionately, of what it