

Introduction

When Bataille first published *Histoire de l'oeil* in 1928, he did so under the pseudonym of Lord Auch. Clearly, Bataille knew that he risked scandal and outrage in publishing this erotic tale and therefore chose, as a librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale, to adopt a fictitious name as author. After years of collaboration in various journals, Bataille published his first philosophical work, *Inner Experience*, in 1945. Reaction to this work was also mixed, and prominent intellectuals of the time responded to this text in both detailed and dismissive fashion. While much has been made of Bataille's influence upon the work of celebrated poststructuralist and postmodern theorists, less attention has been paid to these early responses to Bataille's work.¹

The first part of this introduction will therefore examine these early responses to Bataille's fiction and philosophical work, for he risked dismissal and incomprehension on the part of his critics, writing as they were from the Surrealist and Existentialist perspectives that informed their work. I will begin, then, with the notorious and rather predictable reactions of Breton, Sartre, and Marcel to certain of Bataille's texts, texts that troubled and provoked them enough to include passages and chapters on Bataille in their own manifestos and critical and philosophical texts. My examination of these three early responses will then lead to a discussion of Bataille's influence upon the poststructuralist and postmodern theorists who regarded Bataille as a precursor and as a "contemporary" *avant la lettre*.

As mentioned, one of the earliest and most noteworthy responses to Bataille's work can be found in André Breton's *Second manifeste du surréalisme*.² There Breton responds to Bataille's accusations that the Surrealists had "a sordid thirst for all integrities." In a passage at the end

of *Sur Nietzsche*, Bataille intensifies his criticism by accusing Breton and his Surrealists of idealism, in that the destruction of objects and words at which they aim does not go so far as to subvert the value of nothingness (*le néant*), which retains its superiority and transcendence, conferring this value ultimately upon the Surrealist search itself and the experience of those that engage in it.

Breton's relationship to idealism is indeed a complex one. In the *Premier manifeste du surréalisme*,³ he seems to decry the fact that we "are still living under the reign of logic" (22), suggesting instead that the processes of abstraction be modified and subverted by the illogic of dream as well as by material from the unconscious. Yet he later proposes that these very illogical forces be controlled by reason: "If the depths of our mind are receptive to strange forces capable of augmenting those of the surface, or of fighting victoriously against them, it is in everyone's interest to capture them, to capture them first, in order to submit them later, if necessary, to the control of our reason" (23).

While Breton in the *Second manifeste du surréalisme* maintains that it was necessary to "do away with idealism per se" (172), and that, along with "historical materialism," Surrealism takes as its point of departure "the colossal abortion of the Hegelian system" (171), it is precisely the movement's idealist tendencies that inform Bataille's criticism of Breton. Breton's famous definition of the "ideal point" is indicative of the movement's tendency towards idealism:

Everything would lead one to believe that there exists a certain point in the mind where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low cease to be perceived as contradictory. Now it would be vain to seek in Surrealist activity a motivation other than the hope of determining this point. (134)

It is highly significant that Bataille—who was acquainted with the Surrealists but who refused adherence to their movement—would write in *Inner Experience* of a similar point, but with one important modification: while Breton seeks to determine this point, Bataille writes of its ability to cut, with the trenchancy of catastrophe, like the blade of a razor. Thus one can compare Breton's desire to determine, and no doubt contemplate, the point—and this, despite its supposed goal of "annihilating being in a blind and inner brilliancy"—with Bataille's desire

to be the fabric torn by the experience of the point. "To summon all of man's tendencies into a point, all of the "possibles" which he is, to draw from them at the same time the harmonies and violent oppositions, no longer to leave outside the laughter tearing apart the fabric of which man is made, on the contrary to know oneself to be assured of insignificance as long as thought is not itself this profound tearing of the fabric and its object—being itself—the fabric torn."⁴ Where Breton envisages being's "annihilation" (or culmination) in a brilliancy, Bataille dramatizes its "tearing."

The polemic between the two authors is also oriented by the prefix "sur" of Surrealism. In the *Premier manifeste du surréalisme*, Breton writes: "I believe in the future resolution of those two states, those of dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, a *surreality*, as it were" (27). But other quotations from the *Manifeste* suggest that Breton was more interested in a sort of absolute reality of *thought*, not one which would incorporate lived, and at times obscene or vulgar experience into this equation. This tendency is manifest in his defense of Surrealism's power to "wrench thought away from an increasingly difficult bondage" in order to "put it back on the path of total comprehension, to return it to its original purity" (155).

It is this intoxicated quest for the purity of thought—unsullied by baser attributes, which it refuses—that leads Breton to write utopically of the poet who will "rise above the momentary feeling of living dangerously and dying." Breton continues: "May he use, in contempt of all prohibitions, the venging weapon of *the idea* against the bestiality of all beings and of all things and may he one day—vanquished—but vanquished only if the *world is world*—welcome the discharge of sorrowful guns, like the return of volley fire" (221).

This intoxication with the purity and the transcendence of the *idea* also leads Breton to criticize Bataille's fascination with the "sullied, senile, rancid, sordid, ribald, imbecilic" (218) aspects of the very reality that Breton's *absolute* reality seems intent on eclipsing.

Hence Bataille's accusation that the Surrealist enterprise is essentially Icarian, disdaining all that is base and vulgar: "From one who speaks across the heavens, full of aggressive respect for heaven and its lightning bolts, full of disgust for this too base world that he believes he scorns—scorns more than anyone has ever scorned it before him—after touching Icarian naïveté has betrayed his desire for the miraculous, we can only expect... the betrayal of the vulgar interests of the collectivity, which have become simply filth, a pretext to rise with cries of disgust."⁵

This disagreement between the two authors—the one accused of a penchant for idealism, the other of a morbid preoccupation with filth and the obscene—is resumed in their discussion of the rose, metaphor for ideal beauty and love. In “The language of flowers,” Bataille reminds one that “even the most beautiful flowers are spoiled in their centers by hairy sexual organs. Thus the interior of a rose does not at all correspond to its exterior beauty; if one tears off all of the corolla’s petals, all that remains is a rather sordid tuft... But even more than the filth of its organs, the flower is betrayed by the fragility of its corolla: thus, far from answering the demands of human ideas, it is the sign of their failure. In fact, after a very short period of glory the marvelous corolla rots indecently in the sun, thus becoming, for the plant, a garish withering” (*Visions*, 12). Breton, for his part, comments in the *Second manifeste du surréalisme* that Bataille “must surely not be well”; for “the rose, deprived of its petals, remains the *rose*” (219). Bataille decries the tendency to idealize an object by eliminating its *base* elements, while Breton clings to the transcendence and identity of the *idea*, despite its abstraction from the base and the particular.

A second early and noteworthy response to Bataille’s work may be found in Sartre’s article “Un Nouveau mystique.”⁶ In the first section of this text, Sartre accuses Bataille of putting forward a “totalitarian thought,” one that is “syncretic” in approach. Sartre writes: “In contrast to the analytic processes of philosophers, one might say that Bataille’s book presents itself as the result of a totalitarian thought” (149). According to Sartre, Bataille’s thought “does not construct itself, does not progressively enrich itself, but, indivisible and almost ineffable, it is level with the surface of each aphorism, such that each one of them presents us with the same complex and formidable meaning seen from a particular light” (149).

Sartre seems to be accusing Bataille of not being systematic, of not elaborating a *system* beginning from *founding principles*. He appears to be dissatisfied with the exposition of Bataille’s thought because it refuses to be *linear*. One can suppose that Bataille’s response to this accusation would, in itself, issue from various points of departure, thus once again refusing linearity and system.

To put forward this hypothetical response to Sartre, one might first refer to the sections of *Inner Experience* which deal with Descartes and Hegel. In Bataille’s eyes, Descartes’ philosophy is driven by the project to establish a ground or foundation for knowledge. This *project* begins in the spirit of contestation—“the tormenting genius of Descartes”—but a

contestation that is assuaged by the assurance of knowledge methodically accumulated in the interests of *project*. "Without activity linked to *project*, Descartes would not have been able to maintain a deep assurance, which is lost as soon as one is no longer under the spell of *project*" (106). Were Descartes to allow the spirit of contestation to torment him unabated, he would direct it to the need for *project*, to the need to provide a foundation for a system of thought: "It is henceforth less a question of the well or poorly founded nature of accepted propositions than of deciding, once the best understood propositions are established, if the infinite need for knowledge implied in the initial intuition of Descartes could be satisfied" (106). To allow the spirit of contestation, as opposed to the need for *project* to drive one's philosophical quest causes the ground or foundation of the resultant system to give way. The systematic thought which Sartre seems to be advocating in his criticism of Bataille is thereby rendered impossible.

Both Descartes and Hegel are viewed by Bataille as being unable to sustain the unknowability of the unknown and the unknowable. The systems of both philosophers envisage the project of appropriating the unknown to the known. "Which supposes either a solid ground upon which everything rests (Descartes) or the circularity of knowledge (Hegel). In the first case if the ground gives way... in the second, even if assured of having a well-closed circle, one perceives the unsatisfying nature of knowledge. The unending chain of things known is for knowledge but the completion of oneself" (108). In Bataille's view, the movement of Hegel's system towards closure of the circle denies the moment of negativity to which the entire circle could be subjected. "But this circular thought is dialectical. It brings with it the final contradiction (affecting the entire circle): *circular absolute knowledge is definitive non-knowledge*" (108). As was the case with Descartes, it is once again the satisfaction of knowledge obtained through the accomplishment of project that drives Hegel's philosophical system. The systematic thought which Bataille's thought *denies* is only possible under these conditions: either a ground or a closure are needed to satisfy the demands of the project to sustain a philosophic "system."

Keeping Bataille's view of the systems of Descartes and Hegel in mind, we might now respond to Sartre's accusation that Bataille's thought is not systematic, that it does not "construct itself" or "enrich itself," with Bataille's identification with Nietzsche: "In relation to him I am burning, as through a tunic of Nessus, with a feeling of anxious fidelity. That in the path of inner experience he advanced, inspired, undecided, does not

stop me—if it is true that, as a philosopher he had as a goal not knowledge but, without separating its operations, life, its *extreme limit*, in a word experience itself..." (26).

What Sartre cannot seem to accept in Bataille's thought is its very point of departure in *experience*—"sole value, sole authority"; his deliberate decision to let "experience... lead where it would, not to lead it to some end point given in advance. And [Bataille] say[s] at once that it leads to no harbor, (but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense)" (3). Thus to Sartre's critique that Bataille's thought, in its nonlinearity, does not "construct itself" or "enrich itself," Bataille would reply that: "Inner experience, not being able to have principles either in a dogma (a moral attitude) or in science (knowledge can be neither its goal or its origin), or in a search for enriching states (an experimental, aesthetic attitude), it cannot have any other concern nor goal than itself" (7).

Another point of departure for Bataille's hypothetical response to Sartre's accusations may be found in Bataille's admitted deliberate use of reason to deconstruct its own constructions. Without the use of reason as the privileged tool of deconstruction, the latter would lose much of its significance. Madness is ineffectual as a means of deconstruction; mystic and ecstatic release would not be directed or stable enough in their undoing: "Reason alone has the power to undo its work, to hurl down what it has built up... Without the support of reason, we don't reach dark incandescence" (47). What Sartre cannot seem to tolerate is Bataille's use of reason to undo any "system" that depends on self-construction and self-enrichment from principles it carefully elaborates. Indeed Bataille's thought is transgressive vis-à-vis traditional philosophical enterprise by virtue of its very ludic nature. "I set out from notions which were in the habit of closing off certain beings around me, and I played about with them [*je m'en suis joué*]" (349), announced Bataille in a *Discussion sur le péché*⁷ held with Sartre, among other intellectuals. In this discussion, Bataille declares his desire to escape the limits of all notions so as to "surpass them infinitely," and this with gaiety, irony, and a certain lack of deference [*désinvolture*]. Given his desire for a playful thought, one bent on its own expenditure, it is difficult to accept Sartre's accusation that Bataille's thought is "totalitarian."

As a final rejoinder to Sartre's criticism, one might turn to Bataille's recognition in himself and in all others of the inevitable desire to "carry his person to the pinnacle," to identify with the desire to be everything. This desire is countered and undermined by the impossibility, by definition, of embracing this everything: "Being is *nowhere*" (82) he writes in

Inner Experience, there is but a labyrinthine composition of beings, each composition a composite of other compositions, themselves composites... The recognition of a composition of beings, transcended by no totality, but which is rather composed by mobile groups in provisional positions of transcendence and immanence—this recognition that “Being is *nouberé*” would preclude the establishment of a system reflecting a totality. In short, it is Sartre’s seeming need to identify a linear, systematically developed thought, there where he sees one that is only “totalitarian” and “syncretic,” that Bataille would qualify as totalitarian.

Sartre’s criticism of Bataille is also informed by principles laid out in *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*,⁸ where he makes the following declaration: “...man exists first, then he encounters himself, surges forth into the world and defines himself after” (21). This subsequent definition which man gives himself is *willed* according to conceptions made of his future life and actions. But no matter what form these conceptions take, man is ultimately nothing other than what he makes of himself. In this sense, man is project and arises from project. Sartre writes: “...man is first of all that which throws itself toward a future and which is conscious of projecting itself into the future. Man is first of all a project that is lived subjectively...nothing exists prior to this project...man will be first of all what he will have projected to be” (*EH*, 23).

It is the primordial role that Sartre gives to project that causes him to criticize Bataille for his assertion that inner experience is the opposite of project. Bataille writes in *Inner Experience*: “I come to this position: inner experience is the opposite of action. Nothing more. Action is utterly dependent upon project... Project is not only the mode of existence implied by action, necessary to action—it is a way of being in paradoxical time: *it is the putting off of existence to a later point*” (46).

Not surprisingly, Sartre takes issue with Bataille’s view that one must escape from project to gain access to inner experience, where one might finally become what one truly *is*. While Bataille sees loss of man’s essence in project, Sartre sees the impossibility of loss within the experience of the *cogito*. For Sartre, man *is* project. He cannot escape from project, for it constitutes his subjectivity. Thus Bataille’s invitation to loss in an experience of “*l’instant*,”—outside of project (which simply postpones this experience indefinitely)—is seen by Sartre as residing still within the experience of a *cogito* for which the experience of loss, of Night, and the abyss is impossible. In “Un nouveau mystique,” Sartre explains: “Once one has found oneself through the *cogito* it can no longer be a question of losing oneself: no longer is there an abyss, a

night, man carries himself everywhere with himself, wherever he may be he illuminates, he sees only what he illuminates, it is he who decides what meaning things will take" (185).

Bataille and Sartre could not fail to disagree on the importance of project to experience and the possibility of experience outside of project. Where Bataille sets as a "principle of inner experience: to emerge through project from the realm of project" (46) and this, through laughter, through intoxication, *désœuvrement*, and loss in eroticism, Sartre views project as constitutive of subjectivity, a condition from which one cannot escape, even by means of project. To Bataille's will to experience "*l'instantanéité*," Sartre opposes the existentialist invocation to action, the call to a responsible use of one's time, the realization of acts conceived within and through project, acts whose ultimate meaning would be the search for freedom *en tant que telle*.

Given the existentialist call to commitment, to *la bonne foi*, and responsibility, Bataille's invocation of childishness, of glory, and irresponsibility, of the exuberant love of the present instant can only be seen by Sartre to be an "unuseable experience" (187). "...[T]he joys to which we are invited by M. Bataille, if they are not to be integrated into a fabric of new enterprises, or to contribute to the formation of a new humanity that would surpass itself by striving towards new goals, are worth nothing more than the pleasure of having a drink, or of sunning one's body at the beach" (187).

The third early response to Bataille's work that I wish to discuss may be found in a chapter of *Homo Viator*⁹ written by the Christian existentialist Gabriel Marcel in 1943 and entitled "The Refusal of Salvation and the Exaltation of the Man of Absurdity." In this chapter, Marcel accuses Bataille of, among other things, abrogating for himself a "patent of superiority" when he (Bataille) declares that "spiritual life can only be founded upon an absence of salvation." In the face of this alleged "patent of superiority," Marcel responds that Bataille cannot "install [himself] in an authentic world beyond"; on the contrary, what he does is "merely limit [himself] to playing a game of which the inspiration is boundless pride merging into a will to intimidate" (200).

Marcel is referring here to the passages of *Inner Experience* in which Bataille discusses the role that salvation plays in the religious life of the Christian. In Bataille's view, salvation fulfills a function not dissimilar to that of project in the philosophical investigations of Descartes and Hegel: it affords the value of a positive object which orients questioning and ultimately assuages the spirit of contestation. Just as Descartes

refuses this spirit, which had incited his questioning, so the Christian, in dramatizing the sacrifice of Christ, stops short of an experience of anguished loss of self by recuperating this anguish in the project of salvation:

It is doubtful...if salvation is the object of a true faith or if it is only a convenience permitting one to give the shape of a project to spiritual life (ecstasy is not sought for its own sake, it is the path of a deliverance, a means)...salvation for the faithful is "becoming everything"... (22)

Marcel counters this view of salvation with his own: where Bataille views salvation as a value permitting Christians to satisfy their desire, and one shared by all beings, of "carrying their person to the pinnacle," of "wanting to be everything," Marcel argues that salvation delivers one from the egotism of the self:

But how is it possible not to recognize that spiritual life is found in the renunciation of ambition?...The aspiration to salvation is seen to be...different in character because in its principle it is not and cannot be a will, and it thus escapes from the world of the project which the author never tires of excommunicating. Salvation can only be deliverance, but deliverance from what, if not from the principle of the egotistical self ruled over by avarice? (195)

It is noteworthy that Marcel, while denying the possibility of a "will" to salvation, speaks in this passage of an "aspiration to salvation." He thus seems to be suggesting that salvation is something that is accorded by God, not made to materialize by the practising Christian. Yet he cannot deny that the "aspiration" for salvation is there. Bataille's point is not that the Christian "wills" his reward, but that he desires to be "saved" and not "lost" to the abyss of nothingness, of forgottenness after death. It is in this sense that salvation responds to the "*will to be everything*"—to which Bataille opposes the opposite will: "where the will to become everything would be regarded as an obstacle to that of losing oneself...To lose oneself in this case would be to lose oneself and *in no way to save oneself*" (22). Christians, if they lose themselves in the dramatization of Christ's sacrifice, do so, Bataille argues, safe in the knowledge that they will ultimately be saved from radical loss. It is to

this difference between his and the Christian experience that Bataille refers when he writes: "I feel that I am situated with respect to [the Christian] as the opposite of one who calmly looks from the shore at a dismasted ship. I am sure that the ship is dismasted. And I must insist upon this. I am amused and I look at the people on the shore much more joyfully than those on the shore can look at the dismasted vessel, because, in effect, despite everything, I cannot imagine anyone so cruel that, from the shore, he could observe someone dismasted with a joyous laughter. The act of sinking, however, is something else: one can give oneself fully to this experience with a joyful heart" (*Discussion*, 359). Unlike the Christian, who fears for his salvation, Bataille gives himself freely to loss without salvation.

As for Marcel's criticism that Bataille "installs himself in an authentic world beyond" from which he uses his "boundless pride" to "intimidate," one must respond to these remarks from various perspectives. First of all, Bataille can hardly be said to "install himself," since he writes repeatedly of the impossibility of knowing the extreme limit attained: "I can only, I suppose, reach the extreme limit in repetition, for this reason, that I am never sure of having attained it, that I will never be sure" (42-43). That Marcel should believe Bataille to consider his experience as an "authentic" "beyond" is a remark that also demands clarification. Bataille prefers to use the term "authority," rather than "authentic," since he can never guarantee the "authenticity" of his having attained the extreme limit of experience. He writes, rather, of inner experience as "sole value, sole authority," refusing to submit it to any value or authority affixed in advance and from without. This authority, however, eludes canonization as authority; in Blanchot's words, it is an authority that "expiates itself." Nor can one say that experience is really "beyond," for this would once again imply the objectification of it, in order to situate it vis-à-vis what is this side of it. Rather than access to a "beyond," Bataille writes of experience as spiraling, agitated, culminating in supplication: "The extreme limit of the possible assumes laughter, ecstasy, terrified approach towards death; assumes error, nausea, unceasing agitation of the "possible" and the impossible and, to conclude—broken, nevertheless by degrees, slowly desired—the state of supplication, its absorption into despair" (39).

Finally, to Marcel's accusation that Bataille suffers from a "boundless pride" that is intent on "intimidation," one must respond with passages from *Inner Experience* in which Bataille speaks of the "vanity of vanity" and of "community." That "vanity" (pride) should be "vain" (idle, useless) is what Bataille suggests as he intertwines the two meanings in the

following passage. He begins by showing that vanity and pride are the catalysts that engage one in project: "...vanity is...only the condition for a project, for a putting off of existence until later...One has egotistical satisfaction only in project; the satisfaction escapes as soon as one accomplishes..." (49). Given that vanity and pride engage one in projects that merely put off existence, and given that they are dissipated upon the completion of projects, inciting one to a further postponement of existence in renewed projects, they can only be recognized as "vanity"—emptiness, what is inessential. It is only "vanity" *recognized* as "vanity" (a celebration of idleness), that, paradoxically, permits one to escape "vanity" (as both pride and inanity). "In the anguish enclosing me, my gaiety justifies, as much as it can, human vanity, the immense desert of vanities, its dark horizon where pain and night are hiding—a dead and divine gaiety" (49). This is playfulness, joyful expenditure, idleness, the *désœuvrement* unknown to pride in project, be it surrealist, existentialist, Christian, or other. It is this disdain for pride that leads Bataille to write: "Infinite surpassing in oblivion, ecstasy, indifference, towards myself, towards this book..." (59).

This indifference toward the self which arises when the "vanity of vanity" is recognized is doubled by the desire for a community composed of beings lost as waves among waves. Thus, to Marcel's accusation that Bataille engages in "intimidation," one can only respond with the passages where he writes of "the passage of warmth or of light from one being to another" (94). In a direct address to his reader which is hardly characteristic of one who "intimidates," Bataille writes of this passage "from you to your fellow being or from your fellow being to you (even at the moment when you read in me the contagion of my fever which reaches you)...Thus we are nothing, neither you nor I, beside burning words which could pass from me to you, imprinted on a page: for I would have lived in order to write them..." (94). This desire for communication, this disdain for pride and vanity leads him to add at a later point: "I find in myself nothing, which is not even more than myself, at the disposal of my fellow being. And this movement of my thought which flees from me—not only can I not avoid it, but there is no movement so secret that it doesn't animate me. Thus I speak—everything in me gives itself to others" (128–129). These are hardly the words of one whose "boundless pride" is used to "intimidate."



Since the publication of these early reactions to Bataille's writings, the interest which his work has solicited has resulted in conferences

given in his honor (from the 1971 Colloque de Cerisy to one held 20 years later at the University of London¹⁰), journal editions devoted entirely to his work (notably those of *Critique*, *Arc*, and more recently, *Yale French Studies* and *Stanford French Review*¹¹) as well as articles and books, in increasing numbers, on various aspects of his work.

Although viewed at times as “no more than a shadowy (if crucial) precursor of such poststructuralists as Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard, and Kristeva,”¹² Bataille has also been judged instrumental in effecting a “mutation” in modern epistemology and theories of classification. “A veritable culture hero of the French literary and philosophical avant-garde,” writes Susan Suleiman, “Bataille’s writings functioned as a major intertext in the theories of cultural subversion and of (literary) textuality that were being elaborated around the *Tel Quel* group during the years immediately following the explosion of May 1968.”¹³

My intention in this section of the introduction is to stimulate an examination of the way in which Bataille’s work may be situated with respect to the aforementioned mutation in modern epistemology and theory, although to define with some accuracy and precision the nature of this “mutation” is, of course, an impossible task which, given the variety and complexity of perspectives on this question, can only be dealt with peremptorily in the space of this introduction. In the interest, however, of opening discussion on the nature of this mutation which has come to be associated with the onset of “postmodernism”—in order to better situate Bataille’s work vis-à-vis this phenomenon and question the extent to which his singular and idiosyncratic work risks distortion once again, this time in order to accommodate the concerns of contemporary theorists—I will, in the next few pages, refer to the arguments of Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard (although many others could have been chosen): Foucault, because he refers directly to Bataille’s contribution; Derrida, because of his articulation of what he identifies as the closure of Western metaphysics; and Lyotard, because his controversial views on the nature of postmodernism have in turn stimulated a variety of responses which together attempt to define the nature of the postmodern and its relationship to the modern.

Foucault’s *The Order of Things*¹⁴ ends with passages that refer to the phenomenon, in our day, of a literature fascinated by the being of language, a literature in which *finitude* posits itself in *language*. “And it is indeed in this space thus revealed that literature, first with surrealism (though still in a very much disguised form), then, more and more purely, with Kafka, Bataille, and Blanchot, posited itself as experience: as

experience of death (and in the element of death), of unthinkable thought (and in its inaccessible presence), ... as experience of finitude (trapped in the opening and the tyranny of that finitude)" (383–384). Foucault's book ends with his famous suggestion that the return of a preoccupation with language in literature and in the human sciences heralds the disappearance of "man" as the epistemological figure that appeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century when man first "constituted himself as a positive figure in the field of knowledge" (326). This figure of man first emerged in the form of an "empirico-transcendental doublet"—the being in whom knowledge would be attained of what makes knowledge possible (318). For Foucault, this new figure appeared only after a major epistemological shift, for in the classical period, from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, knowledge was ordered by representation, a system in which "the subject is kept at bay."¹⁵ In this classical period, the relationships between things and their representations were articulated and understood in tabular form, but the knowing subject did not have a place in this network of representation. It was only at the beginning of the nineteenth century that historical depth was given to what were formerly viewed as the "surface regularities of classical knowledge" (*F*, 51). It is only in this new, dynamic, historical space that the figure of man as knowing subject could be postulated. As the new "empirico-transcendental doublet," man is now recognized as the knowing subject in whom the conditions of knowledge arise and are met. The phenomenological enterprise epitomizes this search, in its effort to grasp both the empirical and transcendental elements of experience. As J. G. Merquior observes, this was an epistemological requirement almost impossible to meet in a satisfactory way. "No wonder, then, such an ambiguous figure of knowledge [man, the empirico-transcendental doublet] is threatened by the prospect of dissolution" (*F*, 53).

This threat is also fired by inquiries launched by the new human sciences—particularly the "counter-sciences" of psychoanalysis, ethnology, and linguistics which turn their critical attention to man's Other, his unthought [*impensé*] and in so doing, "ceaselessly 'unmake' that very man who is creating and re-creating his positivity in the human sciences by revealing the concrete figures of finitude... Desire, Law and Death."¹⁶ In his discussion of the emergence of linguistics as a counter-science, Foucault points to the "reunification of language" which had taken on a variety of forms and modes of being when man first emerged as a positive epistemological figure. It is this reunification of language and its

increasing importance in our day, together with the way in which linguistic categories are extended and applied to a growing number of disciplines and areas of study that heralds the "end of man" in its present epistemological configuration (382), for "linguistics no more speak[s] of man himself than do psychoanalysis and ethnology" (381). Foucault notes that the return of language and the disappearance of man are perceptible in philosophy and literature as well, for the question of language is posed more and more not only within philosophic reflection, but outside and "against" it in literature (385).

Bataille's fiction, from *Histoire de l'oeil* (1928) to *L'Abbé C.* (1950), contains numerous passages that indeed exemplify what Foucault has identified as the positing, within literature, of the 'experience of death, of finitude, and of unthinkable thought (in its inaccessible presence)'. One can also discern the questioning of language throughout the corpus of his work, and this is a questioning which often arises within his literature, where one could even say, with Foucault, that it is played out and directed *against* the reflections contained in his own philosophic texts. But to situate Bataille's thought vis-à-vis Foucault's postulation of the "disappearance of man" is more difficult. Bataille referred to his works as "un anthropomorphisme déchiré",¹⁷ but never ceased to meditate upon what it was that made experience *human*, writing in the Preface to *Eroticism* that he had "sacrificed everything to the search for a point of view from which the unity of the human spirit emerges..."¹⁸ From his early articles in *Documents* to his later texts *Eroticism* and *The Accursed Share*, Bataille examined the rituals and practices that showed the inevitable *human* need for expenditure and participation in the sacred. At the same time, Bataille's work, as precisely this "anthropomorphisme déchiré," privileged the phantasmagorical figure of *Acéphale*, the headless being whose sovereign experience culminated in a blinding and all-consuming non-knowledge. In this sense, this figure already stands in complete opposition to the epistemological figure of man as Foucault has defined it, the empirico-transcendental doublet whose objective, as subject, is to secure and master knowledge of himself as object in and of the world. The figure *Acéphale* delivers an experience of the *impossible* auto-mutilation or blinding to which one could say that the figure of the "empirico-transcendental doublet" fantasmagorically subjects itself. It is not surprising, therefore, that the singularity of Bataille's work, a work that claimed to both rupture anthropomorphism and to bear witness to an inner experience, should be difficult to place in the context of Foucault's discussion of the "disappearance of man" in *The Order of Things*.

Derrida's article entitled "The Ends of Man"¹⁹ also addresses the way in which contemporary French thought has witnessed a mutation of sorts: where existentialism (both Christian and atheist) *and* Marxism could be said to share a common ground of humanism, it is the critique of humanism and anthropologism that united and dominated much of French thought since the 1960s. In this article, however, Derrida emphasizes that contemporary philosophical language and, by extension, the language of this critique, is still marked by Hegelian discourse, a discourse that subsumes humanism, for Hegelian *Aufhebung* already designates the end of man—both its achievement and its end, "the appropriation of its essence" (121). Derrida writes that, despite the critique of anthropologism, "the infinity of *telos*" (123) continues to regulate our discourse. He then indicates the following signs of a "trembling" that informs this French thought, a trembling that threatens the "co-belonging and co-propriety of the name of man and the name of Being" (133). These signs are *the reduction of meaning*, which, in opposition to the phenomenological reduction to meaning, seeks to determinine the "possibility of a meaning on the basis of a 'formal' organization which in itself has no meaning" (134) and what he calls *the strategic bet*—two strategies to mark the effects of this trembling "from the inside where 'we are'." These strategies can only be to "attempt an exit and a deconstruction without changing terrain" (the Heideggerean strategy) and "to decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion" (the strategy of much of this French thought) (135).

To place Bataille's work in the context of this description of recent French thought requires that one ask to what extent he engaged in a critique of anthropologism and if there is evidence in his work of this "trembling" that appears to dislocate the name of man from the name of Being.

Once again, his remark in *L'Amitié* that his work constituted "un anthropomorphisme déchiré" comes to mind. While it is true that his language, like Hegelian discourse and our own, is necessarily regulated by "the infinity of *telos*," and by a discourse that subsumes humanism, his was a singular meditation upon the Hegelian moment of "unemployed negativity." In his letter to Kojève,²⁰ Bataille writes of the man who, at the end of history, would no longer have anything to do, who would recognize the negativity within him as being empty of content; such a man would be unable to escape either his negativity, or the uneasiness he would feel in facing it, for at that moment, there would be no way out, no action would be possible any longer (371). As a manifestation of

Bataille's *anthropomorphisme déchiré*, this meditation is meant as an extension and completion of the process implied by Hegelian *Aufhebung*, inserting unemployed negativity there where Hegel had envisioned satisfaction through work as the *end of man* (meant in both senses of the word). Thus, while Bataille's discourse, like our own, is marked by Hegelian discourse, it extends the latter by imagining, in *désœuvrement*, the culmination of productivity at the end of History, a productivity that Hegel had identified as the "end-point" of man. Tony Corn addresses the singularity of Bataille's meditation on this moment of unemployed negativity in an article of this volume.

As Derrida argues in his own well-known article on Bataille,²¹ the major writing which the latter's works enclose engage in a reduction of, and not *to* meaning, and it is in this sense that his *Inner Experience*—which, among other things, could be construed as a sort of critique of phenomenological bracketing—aligns itself with the critique of anthropologism of which Derrida writes. In addition, Bataille's thought—which recognized *ipse's* impossible attempt to enclose a Being that was precisely *nowhere*—may be said to take account of that "trembling," or the dislocation of the name of man from the name of Being, and no doubt this is accomplished in Bataille's text more from within, "without changing terrain," than by doing so in a "discontinuous, irruptive fashion."

A third text which addresses the question of an epistemological "mutation"—in whose context the works of Bataille can only be placed with some difficulty—is Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*.²² There Lyotard argues that the postmodern "is undoubtedly a part of the modern" (79). Whereas many theorists situate the postmodern as *following* the modern, Lyotard believes that it is inscribed within the *beginnings* of a constantly evolving "modern": "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in its nascent state, and this state is constant" (79).

Lyotard essentially distinguishes between the modern artist, who attempts to "present the unrepresentable," given that the real has become less accessible to representation, and the postmodern artist whose work still inheres in the modern tradition in its attempt to present the unrepresentable, but who tries to situate the unrepresentable within presentation itself. Whereas the modern artist expresses his powerlessness to present the unrepresentable—often exhibiting a certain nostalgia for lost presence—the postmodern artist situates the unrepresentable within his work,

and does so without the assistance of preestablished rules or aesthetic categories to guide the formation of his work of art.

To put the matter differently, Lyotard views the modern artist as making explicit or visible the fact that there is something which cannot be made visible. There are two ways of realizing this task: on the one hand, there are artists like Chirico and Proust who allow the unrepresentable to be invoked as "missing contents" without, however, inventing "new rules" of expression to convey the existence of these missing contents. On the other hand, there are artists like Joyce and Duchamp who invoke the unrepresentable not as "missing contents," but within presentation itself. These postmodern artists experiment with new forms, inventing new rules of the game which, in fact, serve only to heighten, within their work, the invocation of the unrepresentable. The works of these postmodern artists remain, strictly speaking, within the framework of modern art, by virtue of their quest to invoke, negatively, the unrepresentable, a quest that they share with modern artists. What distinguishes their work from the latter is, then, the fact that their experimentation with forms and with new rules of the game in their invocation of the unrepresentable takes place without their reliance upon conventions and consensus of taste that would make their chosen form of expression recognizable to its addressees. This recognition and the consensus that accompanies it would, ostensibly, be forthcoming in time, hence Lyotard's statement that the postmodern is part of the modern, that it is modern art in its nascent state.

Criticism of Lyotard's theory has most often been directed to his placement of the postmodern *within* an always evolving modern,²³ and it is this criticism that has helped to focus the debate on what distinguishes the postmodern from the modern.

Frederic Jameson, for example, suggests that postmodernism arises from a break with modernity.²⁴ Whereas the modern looks "for new worlds," the "postmodern looks for breaks,...for shifts and irrevocable changes in the *representation* of things and of the way they change" (ix). Thus moderns, who are still preoccupied with the essence of the *things* that have changed and the results of these changes, are, according to Jameson, more apt to be caught in a substantialist, Utopian, or essentialist perspective (ix). Postmoderns, on the other hand, explore the *changes* in representation themselves, since they view the contents of these variations as capable of an endless variation according to context. This postmodern lack of concern for the "essence" of things leads Jameson to attribute to postmodern works "a new depthlessness, which finds its

prolongation...in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum" (6), a depthlessness accompanied by a general diminution or waning of "affect," for the new de-centered "subject" is free of the anxiety experienced by its modern counterpart. In fact, Jameson argues that the post-modern subject becomes liberated from other feelings as well, "since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling..."(15).

The distinction (or break) between modernism and postmodernism is also argued by Boyne and Rattansi,²⁵ who nonetheless attribute lines of continuity between the two, since, for them, postmodernism "extends and deepens the critique already begun by modernism" (8). To define what they understand by the term "modernism," Boyne and Rattansi quote Lunn,²⁶ who sees in modern texts the belief that it is possible to locate and recover the world's essential truth, hidden as it is beneath appearances. But for this revelation to be accomplished, more "complex, inventive and self-reflexive" strategies than those used in realist or naturalist art are needed. These strategies include an aesthetic of self-reflexiveness; a juxtaposition or montage permitting the simultaneous existence of various points of view; paradox, ambiguity, and uncertainty; and the waning and displacement of the centered, individual subject.²⁷ Thus, the modern belief in the world's essential and recoverable truth obtains, despite the apparently contradictory tendency to fragment the narrative voice and to highlight paradox, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Boyne and Rattansi view *postmodernism* as deepening and extending this process through its "commitment to heterogeneity, fragmentation and difference" (9). Although the moderns believe that it is possible to uncover the essential truth of the world, the postmoderns, sceptical of such a possibility, believe that literary theory, philosophy, and the social sciences are essentially unable "to deliver totalizing theories and doctrines or enduring answers to fundamental dilemmas and puzzles posed by objects of inquiry..." (12).

The views of Lyotard, Jameson, Boyne, and Rattansi indicate the multiplicity of perspectives from which a certain "epistemological mutation" known as the onset of postmodernism has been represented; within the perspective of these views, it is once again not easy to situate Bataille's work. One could argue, for example, that, while he did not experiment with new forms *per se* in the manner of a Duchamp or a Joyce, he does tend to situate the unrepresentable rather immediately within presentation itself (a phenomenon which Lyotard associates with postmodern art). Witness to this are the numerous passages of his literary texts, punctuated as they are by silence, and where, in the words of

Foucault, the subject engaged in unthinkable thought is "thrown by it, exhausted, upon the sands of that which he can no longer say" (39). There is also, however, in Bataille's work something suggestive of a desire which locates the unrepresentable *outside* of the text, an unrepresentable which orients from afar the text's movement. This is the dead star, NIGHT, the impossible death that would wash him—what his readers would one day know and to which he would not, but for one fleeting instant, gain access. That Bataille's work both attempts to situate the unrepresentable immediately within presentation itself and evinces a desire for the unrepresentable, located outside of the text, makes it somewhat difficult to place within the perspective of Lyotard's categories.

Jameson's formulations also render the situation of Bataille's writings problematic. While it is true, as Klossowski has shown, that Bataille could have recourse only to "simulacra" of notions in his communication of the incommunicable, this use of the simulacrum is not evidence of a certain "depthlessness" seen in a "new culture of the simulacrum." While his work does not point to a depthlessness, neither does it manifest an unequivocal essentialism. For Bataille, it will be remembered, "Being is *nowhere*...It is only "grasped" in error..." (82).

The theories of Boyne, Rattansi, and Lunn help to focus the debate on postmodernism and its distinction from modernism, but once again Bataille's work seems to elude classification. One can find evidence of self-reflexiveness, ambiguity, and paradox (strategies of the centered, modern text) as well as a movement towards decentering which, in the postmodern text, is accompanied by a "commitment to heterogeneity, fragmentation and difference." While it is true that Bataille's work announces the inability of sociology, philosophy, and literary theory to "deliver totalizing theories and doctrines or enduring answers to fundamental dilemmas and puzzles posed by objects of inquiry," it is also accurate to note Bataille's comment that "[t]he world is given to man as if it were a puzzle to solve" (xxxiii). He writes: "My entire life—with its bizarre dissolute moments as well as deep meditations—has been spent solving this puzzle" (xxxiii). Once the elements of a "disciplined emotional knowledge" had come in contact with a "discursive knowledge," and once thought had dissolved before being rediscovered again "at a point where laughs the unanimous throng," Bataille awakened before a new enigma: "one [he] knew at once to be unsolvable..." (xxxiii). With these statements, Bataille seems to exhibit neither a belief in the hidden, recoverable truth of the world, nor in a scepticism that would disengage him from his interest in the "world's enigma."

That Bataille should occupy a singular position vis-à-vis those of the theorists mentioned above is no doubt further complicated by the indeterminacy characterizing the “break” or “mutation” separating modernism from postmodernism. This indeterminacy is problematized by Barry Smart who is perhaps more concerned with the phenomenon of *post-modernity* than he is with the *postmodern per se*. He sees postmodernity as a “contemporary social, cultural and political condition...as a form of reflection upon and a response to the accumulating signs of the limits and limitations of modernity... as a more modest modernity, a sign of modernity having come to terms with its own limits and limitations.”²⁸ Smart’s observations about postmodernity and its relation to modernity point, as well, to the difficulty which inheres in any discussion of the postmodern and its relation to the modern. Does the postmodern constitute a break with the modern, or is it really and more properly a feature of high modernism, modernism radicalized by an extension/recognition of its own features and limitations? Do the heterogeneity and difference associated with the postmodern not arise naturally from modernism, whose relentless “pursuit of order and control, promotion of calculability, affirmation of the ‘new’ [and] preoccupation with ‘progress’...are necessarily articulated” with a simultaneous range of negatively viewed experiences and conditions such as “the risk of chaos, the persistent presence of chance or threat of indeterminacy...” (92–93)? In response to these questions, Smart is inclined to agree with Lyotard that the postmodern is undoubtedly part of the modern. “In consequence,” he writes, “the postmodern does not so much signal the end of the modern, but rather the pursuit of ‘new rules of the game’” (116). Whether or not one accepts this view, or any of the others enunciated previously, Bataille’s writings cannot, I believe, be situated firmly on either one or the other side of the “division” distinguishing the modern from the postmodern. Rather, his texts are perhaps uniquely equipped to problematize the question of the division, for they bear elements attributed to both sides, while escaping reduction to either.

Thus despite the impossibility of determining, without equivocation, the nature of the epistemological mutation under discussion—a phenomenon still very much the subject of controversy in countless books and articles devoted to the question of postmodernism—it is my expectation that the articles in this volume will help to situate Bataille’s work vis-à-vis this troubling epistemological “mutation.” In particular, I believe that the articles in this volume will help to address the issue of Bataille’s “subversive intent”²⁹ vis-à-vis traditional ideology and philosophical discourse.