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## Georges Bataille's 'Ethics of Violence'<sup>1</sup>

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An understanding of Georges Bataille's 'ethics of violence' requires that violence be read in the general context of his theory of the *heterogeneous*,<sup>2</sup> as well as from an *amoral* perspective. This element of amorality, which I will shortly discuss briefly, is tightly connected to the *heterogeneous*, which is what is denied and rejected on the very ground of what has generally been considered moral. Bataille therefore calls for a return to what has so far been excluded and rejected as dangerous, monstrous, destructive, sick, mad and perverse on these grounds. The expression of violence is just one of the manifestations of the *heterogeneous* which is met with most resistance in this project of revaluation, because of its complex web of psychological, ethical and political implications. At this early stage, a clarification is of the essence: the term 'ethics' is to be distinguished from 'morality'.<sup>3</sup> For this distinction, I am drawing on the analysis of the two terms by Bernard Williams, who himself draws on the Socratic question, 'how should one live?', contrasting it with questions such as 'what is our duty?' or 'how may we be good?'. Williams explains that Socrates' question may be interpreted as one about 'a good life' or 'a life worth living' but that it does not in itself 'bring in any distinctive moral claims' (Williams 1993: 5). He therefore argues that 'morality should be understood as a particular development of the ethical, one that has a special significance in modern Western culture. [Morality] emphasizes *certain* ethical notions rather than others, developing in particular a special notion of obligation [...] In view of these features it is also, I believe, something we should treat with a special skepticism' (6; emphasis added).

It is precisely this notion of morality as a 'special system [which] demands a sharp boundary for itself (in demanding "moral" and "nonmoral" senses for words, for instance)' (7) that Bataille aims to transgress (and not reject). In this sense, Bataille's project challenges

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first presented as a paper at *Pharmakon: Literature and Violence*, a postgraduate conference organised by the School of English at the University of Kent and held on 20th May 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Bataille does not italicise the key concepts he analyses, e.g. 'heterogeneous', 'heterogeneity', 'heterology', 'homogeneous', 'homogeneity' and 'hypermorality', unless he treats them as terms to be defined. The terms are italicised throughout this article, so that it is clear that they are used as Bataillean concepts. However, it should be noted that not all italicised words in this article are necessarily Bataillean concepts.

<sup>3</sup> In 'Not Choosing between Morality and Ethics', Robert Piercey argues that even if Hegel's distinction between *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life) and *Moralität* (morality) does not 'map exactly onto the contemporary distinction between ethics and morality', it is Hegel who 'paves the way for such a distinction' (Piercey 2001: 54).

conceptions of morality which have excluded the *heterogeneous* but remain within the realm of the 'ethical' which consists of this very act of transgressing 'morality'. The alternative (transgressed) morality, which has already acknowledged and opened up to the *heterogeneous*, Bataille calls '*hypermorality*' and will reappear in the last part of this article. Before that, I will first demonstrate the relationship between *violence* and the *heterogeneous* by contextualising it in Bataille's *science of heterology* and his wider discussion of suffering and anguish. This discussion will revolve around the events and the ideas that played a significant part in Bataille's fascination with violence, his understanding of anguish and war, and Bataille's reaction to the reception of his thought about violence especially in the context of and in relation to Nazi violence.

### 1. The Science of Heterology

Those who aim at an experience of human entirety and freedom need, according to Bataille, to acknowledge and embrace the *heterogeneous*, that is, the ἕτερον [*the other*] element in existence, a term which should already suggest a moving away from what is or can be made our own and familiar and which is eventually identified as one with us, the ὅμο [*the same*]. 'The very term *heterogeneous*,' Bataille writes in 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism', 'indicates that it concerns elements which are impossible to assimilate' (Bataille 1979: 67). On the one hand therefore, *homogeneity* is associated with assimilable entities and qualities, elimination of differences and individuality, conformity, reason, accumulation of power, energy and wealth, as well as a hypocritical rejection of those aspects of life which put the individual in any kind of risk or instability, be these physical or psychological. *Heterogeneity*, on the other hand, clearly stands in total opposition to all this. The realm of the *heterogeneous* contains what is conventionally classified as base, filthy and dangerous and is therefore associated with the world of the wastes, bodily and mental: excrement, sweat, menstrual blood, sperm, vomit, deviant sexual acts, 'the various unconscious processes such as dreams or neuroses' (69), madness, cannibalism, sacrifices, squandering, crime, violence etc. In short, the term *heterogeneous* encompasses all social phenomena characterised by '*violence, excess, delirium, madness*' (70; emphasis in the original). Acknowledgement of the *heterogeneous* therefore implies not only tolerating but also perceiving it and living it as necessary. Only then is the commonly valued aspect of life (beautiful, good, pure etc.) justified: 'I love purity to the point of loving impurity; without it purity would be a fraud' (Bataille 2008: 42).

To the study of these heterogeneous elements, Bataille gives the name of *science*. This is a word choice which could be interpreted as ironic, yet it is successful in denoting the

seriousness and respect, one could even say piety, with which Bataille approaches the *heterogeneous: the science of heterology*. Among the other words which Bataille was considering when making his choice, as Michel Surya (2002: 138) and Dennis Hollier (1989: 131) explain, were the words *scatology* and *agiology*, Greek words for the study or science of *excrement* and *saintliness*, for their repulsive and sacred character respectively.

It is important to distinguish, however, the *science of heterology* from the *heterogeneous*. While the *heterogeneous* is inassimilable and unrepresentable, *heterology* is a product of rationality, set in motion by the rational intention to acknowledge the inassimilability of the *heterogeneous*. This intention, however, risks either being hypocritical about its actual bonds with the *heterogeneous* or appropriating it by making false claims about it. Such an appropriation implies a fake, even if unintentional, bridging of the gap between the *heterogeneous* and the *homogeneous*, in other words, between the inassimilable, unrepresentable and discourse-less, on the one hand, and discourse and representation, on the other. Despite this, it needs to be acknowledged that *the science of heterology* marks the space within rationality where the supremacy of reason – and by extension the multifaceted expression of *homogeneity* – is put into question, or according to Botting and Wilson, that it marks ‘the uncertain space within rationality where heterogeneity declares its necessity...’ (1993: 197; ellipsis in the original). It is the response of reason to this declaration that Bataille concentrates on when he explains that ‘the intellectual process automatically limits itself by producing of its own accord its own waste products, thus liberating in a disordered way the heterogeneous excremental element’ (Bataille 1997: 153). On the one hand, Bataille is careful to maintain and respect the distance between the *heterogeneous* and *heterology*, even if on the other, he proposes an experience of getting as close as possible to the former. Bataille is interested in experiencing the horrors that are involved in this movement towards the *heterogeneous*, which he describes as *inner experience*. ‘By *inner experience*’, Bataille writes, ‘I understand that which one usually calls *mystical experience*: the states of ecstasy, or rapture, at least of meditated emotion’ (Bataille 1988b: 3; italics in the original). Inner experience is therefore a state, in which everything (including oneself, or rather mainly oneself) is challenged; in short, inner experience ‘is, in fever and anguish, the putting into question (to the test) of that which a man knows of being’ (4). In inner experience one’s rational faculties are not absent, yet one tries to maintain them in a dormant state; it is generated by reason with the intention of challenging itself and the claims that are made on its behalf: ‘it leads to no harbor (but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense)’ (3). It is in the

wider context of inner experience that Bataille proposes an internalisation of the experience of violence or the experience of the war, a dying without dying and of going *as deep as possible* into the darkest horrors yet returning intact. It is essential, therefore, to remember, that along with the experience of ecstasy, *inner experience* entails the experience of the horrible, of *suffering* and of *anguish*.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Life: an Open Wound: *doleo ergo sum* (I suffer therefore I am)

Bataille begins *Inner Experience*, and with this his *Summa Atheologica*,<sup>5</sup> by establishing man's 'desire to be everything' (Bataille 1988b: xxxii), the desire to achieve human entirety, part of which implies a relation of knowledge between the knowing subject and the totality of everything which is to be known, only for this desire to be frustrated and registered as an impossibility due to the limits human beings come with. In all three books of the *Summa* therefore, Bataille establishes the existence of a wound, which is primarily based on the lack of reconciliation between our incompleteness and the recognition of the impossibility of completeness, a painful gap which in the absence of God (Bataille 1988a: 14) is made deeper. In other words, he establishes for man an existential suffering, which in one's effort to ignore or avoid, the alternative is 'inner hypocrisy' (Bataille 1988b: xxxii). In the same way, *Guilty* and *On Nietzsche* set out with this suffering being taken for granted, and develop as manifestations of the author's relating to this suffering, as a proof of living to the height of it:

If my suffering were eliminated [...] human life would peter out. And as life vanished, so too would our far-off, inevitable truth, the truth that incompleteness, death, and the unquenchable desire are, in a sense, being's never-to-be-healed wound, without which inertia (while death absorbs us into itself and there's no more change) would imprison us. (Bataille 1988b: 24)

This wound which is crucial in Bataille's thought is never to be healed because 'without your pain, you're nothing!' (Bataille 1988a: 69). An open wound becomes therefore the condition of a *human* and sovereign<sup>6</sup> life and the experience of pain is by no means a symptom of weakness. Those in pain should not feel pity for themselves, for what they should seek is strength: 'I don't avoid either pain or wounds. Wounded in my eyes or gut? What I want all

<sup>4</sup> One may already perceive the Heideggerian reverberations in the concept of *anguish* (*Angst*), as well as in the concept of *project* and the idea of death being relevant to the way we live rather than the way we die (*being-toward-death*), which appear later in this paper. However, such a comparative reading merits a much more extensive analysis and will not be attempted here.

<sup>5</sup> *Summa Atheologica* (*La Somme athéologique*) is a trilogy consisting of *Inner Experience* (1943), *Guilty* (1944) and *On Nietzsche* (1945). The title of the trilogy is a meaningful distortion of Thomas Aquinas' 13th century unfinished theological treatise *Summa Theologica*.

<sup>6</sup> 'Sovereignty can only exist on the condition that it should never assume power, which is action, the primacy of the future over the present moment' (Bataille 1973: 134).

the same is strength, not sickness—unwavering strength. [...] Strength comes from knowing the secret, and the secret's revealed in anguish' (57).

I claim that an understanding of Bataille's 'ethics of violence', implies an understanding of the concept of *anguish*, which is both the generator and the result of the suffering. Anguish does not have an end and does not lead anywhere other than anguish: If the will to anguish can only *ask* questions, the answer, if it comes, wills that anguish be maintained. The answer is, 'anguish is your fate' (75). It is pain that maintains the wound open and, quite predictably, experiences of shock and suffering are of particular interest for Bataille.

### 3. Violent Stimuli

It was at around the age of twenty, that Bataille started to become aware of the emergence of a deep fascination with violence. It can be thought that this fascination, which was both of an emotional and intellectual nature, had been triggered by a number of incidents Bataille experienced at that time as well as by other people's ideas with which he had become familiar.

The first one, chronologically, is the tragic death of the Spanish matador Manolo Granero, in Madrid in 1922. Despite the fact that he was not close enough to the ring to see the actual accident, in which Granero's head was pierced through the right eye, this death, horrified and fascinated Bataille. This is critical to our understanding of Bataille's later perception of violence and horror; after describing how 'theatrical entrance' of Granero's death at the festival's height had an 'evident, expected and intolerable quality', he continues: 'From that day on I never went to a bullfight without a sense of anguish straining my nerves intensely. This anguish not in the least diminished my desire to go to the bullring'. The crucial point is his next observation: 'On the contrary, it exacerbated it, taking shape with a feverish impatience. I *then began to understand* that unease is often the secret of the greatest pleasures' (Bataille in Surya 2002: 43–44; emphasis in the original). The emphasis by Bataille in this last sentence is important in showing how his fascination with as well as horror of extreme violence is of both an affective and an intellectual nature, and how, eventually, Bataille would become attracted by experiences which could grant this kind of unease, connecting one back to the existential wound. In other words, Bataille focuses on the *product* of the experience of violence and not on the violent act *per se*, which for Bataille has to be stripped of any moral judgments.

This experience was followed by Bataille's introduction to photographs of the *Ling Chi* Chinese torture.<sup>7</sup> These showed several stages of an act of torture which entailed cutting one hundred pieces from the victim's body.<sup>8</sup> Besides the obvious horror that these photos aroused, Bataille was especially intrigued by the quasi-ecstatic expression on the victim's face. The unique quality that Bataille finds in this specific example of torture, which is not found in other, religiously justified torture for example, depends on the fact that in the Chinese torture there is no meaning, no redemption and no salvation implied. It is a simple squandering of life. Then and only then, does horror acquire its sacred quality, when torture and horror are experienced meaninglessly and purposelessly; when, in other words, pain is wasted. Bataille writes: 'This photograph had a decisive role in my life. I have never stopped being obsessed by this image of pain, at once ecstatic (?) and intolerable' (Bataille 1989: 206; question mark in the original).

Moreover, Bataille's fascination with death and violence was enhanced by his research on the human sacrifices practiced by the Aztec, a lifestyle disturbed by violence, horror and death that was to become for Bataille the model of a healthy and sovereign society. Related to the idea of sacrifice is Bataille's concept of 'general economy' which is based on the notion of 'expenditure', which implies Bataille's convictions that 'a society always produces more than is necessary for its survival; it has a surplus at its disposal' (Bataille 1988c: 106) and that people should also indulge in expenditure, squandering and prodigality with the same passion with which they work, produce and accumulate. This is an idea that Bataille extends from Marcel Mauss' research and analysis of the Native American tribes' customs of gift giving and of 'potlatch', the tribal chiefs' competing in the destruction of considerable amounts of wealth. Suspicious of Western values and trust in moderation, hard work and measures to secure the future, Bataille, therefore, dismisses work as 'the foundation for knowledge and reason, [...] which humanized the animal we once were' (Bataille 1989: 41). Bataille draws from Mauss' discoveries but extends the notion of expenditure from its economic and material context to the more general framework of his philosophy so that it encompass activities such as one's own putting into risk, maintaining one's wound open and exposing oneself to shocks, depression, crises, wars and horrors. At the same time, Bataille is aware of the fact that expenditure, of any type, is met with great resistance, and claims that 'between

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<sup>7</sup> Transliteration of the Chinese name of the torture, which can be translated as *slow slicing*, *slow process*, *lingering death* or *death by a thousand cuts*. It literally means *cutting into pieces*.

<sup>8</sup> These photographs were taken by Georges Dumas in 1905 and seen by Bataille via Adrien Borel, his analyst, in 1925.

the horrors of war and the renunciation of one of the activities by which a society believes it must assure its future, society chooses war' (Bataille in Surya 2002: 385), a cursed choice, humanity's 'accursed share'.

#### 4. War: From an Amoral Perspective

Predictably enough, Bataille embraces unreservedly what can provide the individual with anguish, suffering and pain: 'Change and disturbance help give thought the ability to wound, while peaceful times hardly do this. To conquer truth's equivocations, you have to have times that turn people and things upside down, instead of letting them stagnate' (Bataille 1988a: 59). Bataille acknowledges that man's tendency, and sign of weakness, is to remain in a state of stagnation rather than accepting the violent play of change. This weakness is due to the fact that man is unavoidably plunged in time, history and the realm of project. For Bataille it is imperative that man take a distance, an *amoral* distance, from the realm of project which will enable him to see things in their necessary, *ahistoric* and *amoral* universality. Distancing himself from the realm of project and history implies that man realises that death 'is the only serious denial of illusion, for if I die, the world is in no longer reducible to my spirit which reflects it. [...] For I count for nothing; it is the world only which matters' (Bataille 1986b: 65–66).

Bataille does take this distant view; as Surya observes: '[He] abstained from pronouncing himself *morally* on any particular fact (the events of 1934, the rise of fascism, for example), from judging as a moralist; which is to say judging [...] from the perspective of what had to be and what must be' (Surya 2002: 428). Such a distance and abstention of course can be challenged for their ethical implications. How can one experience war *ahistorically* while war is taking place? How legitimate is it for Bataille, who otherwise says that he would indeed be willing to fight if the conditions demanded or permitted it,<sup>9</sup> to read Hervie and Proust while a battle is unfolding (Bataille 1992: 162) or to write at the bar and drink during an air raid (124)? Yet Bataille writes in the opening pages of *Guilty* that 'no one relates to the war madness, I'm the only one who can do this' (Bataille 1988a: 12). And if it is neither the combat aspect of war he finds fascinating,<sup>10</sup> nor the political aspect of it,<sup>11</sup> then what is it? What kind of relation with the war does Bataille claim to have?

<sup>9</sup> 'I'm not unaffected by the war. I'd be glad to give my blood, weariness, and what's more, the brutal moments undergone at death's approach' (Bataille 1988a: 12).

<sup>10</sup> 'I despise the boorishness of people drawn to the combat aspect of war' (Ibid: 56).

<sup>11</sup> '[T]he political is what justifies war, its results are political ... But not war *itself*' (Surya 2002: 285; ellipsis and emphasis in the original).



From September to June, to the extent that war was going on, my awareness of it consisted of anguish. I saw in the war something ordinary life lacked – something that caused fear and prompts horror and anguish. I turned to it to lose my thinking in horror – for me, war was torment, falling off a rooftop, a volcano erupting. [...] it attracted me by provoking anguish. (Bataille 1988a: 56)

By ‘war madness’ then, Bataille does not mean the practicalities of war. Rather, he implies an internalisation of the war experience: ‘Sitting on the edge of the bed, facing a window and the night, I practiced, determined to become a war zone myself’ (15). Internalised thus, the war experience has nothing to do with the actual killing *out there* and becomes useful for *inner experience*. Bataille says so explicitly: ‘I won’t speak of war, but of mystical experience. [...] [H]ow even for a moment can I dismiss this non-knowledge, a feeling of having lost my way in some underground tunnel?’ (12)

It is important to clarify that even if Bataille is fascinated by war, he nevertheless does not call for a revolution of absolute violence. He does not suggest that everybody be killed and annihilated, or that a constant state of massacre be established. ‘It is not that evil would be the contrary of justice’ (Bataille in Surya 2002: 430). This would imply the dissolution of limits, and transgression. an important concept for Bataille, would no longer be possible. Let us remember that Bataille does not call for an eradication of morality but for its transgression. However, even if it is only the acknowledgement of death to which Bataille wants people to commit through violence, horror or the death of the other, he does not exclude real death from being there, available always as a possibility, as a threat, keeping the wound of anguish open. ‘For the individual, partial loss is a means of dying while surviving. It’s foolish to try to avoid the horror of loss. [...] You have to come *as close as possible* to death. Without flinching. And even, if necessary, flinching. ...and even, if necessary, dying’ (Bataille 1988a: 93; ellipsis and emphasis in the original).

What grants the individual the experience of anguish is the acknowledgement that real death always exists as a possibility, a possibility that in the Bataillean system is revalued and repositioned as a process within life and not simply as the end of life: ‘But I like death: the idea of death, which I don’t see as a failure’ (Bataille in Surya 2002: 492). Death is not a passage from life to something other but that human possibility which alone defines what the *human* is. Death should become part of life, not as something castrated, familiar and predictable (like it is in the concentration camps or in the case of suicide), but as the tragic and horrible instant that it is. But the real event of death is apparently the only thing that can alleviate suffering and heal the wound: ‘Someday my tragedy will know completion and I’ll die. Only that day, because I’ve anticipated it and put myself in its light, gives meaning to

what I am. I haven't any other hope' (Bataille 1988a: 15). At the moment of death, existence is justified and the wound is healed.

## 5. Bataille and Fascism

It may have already become apparent how Bataille's position with regard to violence, which is both overt and unskillfully self-defensive, and his fascination with war paved the way for a number of accusations and reproaches concerning what has been considered an ambiguous stance in relation to fascism. Despite the likely validity of these reproaches and the seriousness of the historico-political context, my aim is to remain within Bataille's perspective and look at how he responded to these reproaches rather than providing an accurate account of them.<sup>12</sup>

In pre-war France, when popular opinion was placing its hopes on communism and was investing in the possibility of left-inspired revolution, Bataille was among the very few who were extremely critical of communism, and fascism could have been interpreted favourably for the promise it was coming with for a complete *Aufklärung* (enlightenment, be this social, economic or political). Surya observes that:

Bataille was not a man of the left, [...]: he had hardly any belief – if at all – in mankind. He did not believe in progress [...]: he therefore did not believe in history'. Revolution for him 'would resemble a catastrophe more than a peace, an irrationality rather than a rationality, a liberation of the instincts than their equitable ordering. (2002: 225)

Not at all unintentionally, Bataille had his name associated with acts and statements such as the one which appears in one of the last pamphlets of *Contre-Attaque* in March 1936.<sup>13</sup> The specific pamphlet was titled *Sous le feu des canons française ... et alliés* (Under fire from the French ... and allies' canons), written by Jean Dautry and signed by Bataille among others. The pamphlet read: 'We are against the scraps of paper and the slave prose of chancellors' offices ... To them we prefer in every case and without being duped the antidiplomatic brutality of Hitler, less surely mortal for peace than the dribbling provocation of diplomats and politicians (in Surya 2002: 225; ellipsis in the original). In a defensive attitude towards Dautry, drawing from his active participation in left and communist movements, Surya minimises the politically frightening implications of this tract but cannot hide his disappointment with this fact which he describes 'imprudent', and implies that Bataille should know better when it comes to the not always clear relationship between ideas, words and actions:

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<sup>12</sup> For an account of Bataille's place in fascist politics see Richard Wolin's 'Left Fascism: Georges Bataille and the German Ideology', *Constellations*, Vol.2, Issue 3, pp. 397–428, 26 Oct 2006.

<sup>13</sup> *Contre-Attaque* was a politically inspired movement Bataille co-founded with André Breton in 1935.

This is extraordinary, for Bataille was a long way from being able to subscribe to such a declaration himself. He wrote nothing which authorises us to suspect or allows us to think that his hatred of clerical bourgeois parliamentarianism was such that he preferred the unbridled brutality of National Socialism. Nothing at all, and yet ... (Surya 2002: 225; ellipsis in the original)

And yet, Bataille refused to take seriously the implications of such actions.

Because of these ‘surfascist’ tendencies, the group of *Contre-Attaque* soon called for its own dissolution, which Bataille recalls in his *Autobiographical Note*:

Counterattack was dissolved at the end of the winter. (The supposed pro-fascist tendency on the part of certain of Bataille’s friends, and, to a lesser degree, of Bataille himself. For an understanding of the element of truth in this paradoxical fascist tendency, despite its radically contrary intention, one should read Elio Vittorini’s *The Red Carnation*, together with its strange postface. There is no doubt that the bourgeois world as it exists constitutes a provocation to violence and that, in that world, the exterior forms of violence hold a fascination. Be that as it may, Bataille considers, at least since Counterattack, that this fascination can lead to the worst.) (Bataille 1986a: 109)

In this text, written circa 1958, Bataille repeatedly stresses the inaccuracy of such accusations but without justifying any further such a protest. This is seen particularly in the phrases: ‘supposed pro-fascist tendency’, ‘paradoxical fascist tendency’, ‘radically contrary intention’, as well as in the reference to Vittorini’s work; *The Red Carnation* was written in 1933-35, published in 1948, and is known for its anti-fascist affiliations. Despite this protest, Bataille retains his polemical attitude towards the bourgeois hypocrisy of complete denial of violence. However, he has spoken of Auschwitz as ‘the decisive, undisputed and irreducible sign of evil’ (Bataille in Surya 2002: 429), and 1958 was most probably the first time that he admitted that fascination with violence ‘can lead to the worst’. Yet, even if for Bataille the specific war ‘had not had the effect he hoped: one of clarification’<sup>14</sup> (Surya 2002: 364), his fascination with war did not fade away.

In an attempt to defend Bataille, Michel Surya and Dennis Hollier, among others, try to provide clues for a distinction between Bataille’s project and Nazi ideology, especially when it comes to their approach to violence and death. Bataille treated death as the meaningless and purposeless event of annihilation that it is, while fascism glorified death, bestowing on it power and immunity. Moreover, violence for Bataille was sovereign and emancipating, in the sense that it was transgressing taboos, while fascist violence was legalised by becoming utilitarian and nationally useful. The motivations therefore behind the Nazi violence were accumulation of power and extermination of the heterogeneous other, which were completely incompatible with the Bataillean principles. Fascism could not include in its project of

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<sup>14</sup> By ‘clarification’, Surya here means *Aufklärung* (enlightenment).

cleansing and purity the ignoble and the filthy and the excluded that Bataille defended and considered as elements and manifestations of the heterogeneous.

Despite or rather because of the monstrosities of Nazism which Bataille had acknowledged,<sup>15</sup> he had not been willing to dismiss Nazi violence as *humanly* impossible. Bataille was provokingly stressing, as *amorally* as possible, that Auschwitz was absolutely *humanly* possible. Auschwitz therefore became a manifestation of humanity not in its specificity but in its universality: 'Like you and I, those responsible for Auschwitz had a human nose, mouth, voice and reason, they were able to make love, have children; like the pyramids or the Acropolis, Auschwitz is a fact and sign of mankind. Man's image is henceforth inseparable from a gas chamber' (Bataille in Surya 2002: 359). Bataille does not separate people between the executed and the executioners but, rather, tries to locate what in their being makes the execution possible, something that is a characteristic of not only the executioners but the victims as well. Such an acknowledgement may not take anything away from its horror but is essential for saving humanity from repeating the same catastrophes, precisely because by being aware of such a possibility, humanity will be able to anticipate and prevent it from happening. This is what Richardson and Surya seem to imply when they say respectively: 'Bataille's whole thinking assumes that the enormity of what happened in the concentration camps was not an aberration of mankind, rather it showed the danger we run if we engage in a collective repression of our fundamental inner violence' (Richardson 1994: 132) and 'to wish to ignore [the possibility of violence] would be to expose oneself to [its] sudden re-emergence in one form or another' (Surya 2002: 360).

The distinction that needs to be made here, therefore, is between justification and explanation. Bataille does not justify the Nazi monstrosities but he dares to explain them, and this, for him, should be enough for there to be no misunderstandings as to his position *vis à vis* them. We, however, may still find this explanation disturbing and be unwilling to go along and say with him, as he does when defending Nietzsche, that 'it's frightening to see thought reduced to the propaganda level' (Bataille 1992: xxii). Surya accurately suggests that Bataille should have been more careful with the implications and responsibility of theory in a reality which is in a state of socio-political vulnerability, confusion and turmoil. But do we not misread Bataille if we read as evil these states which have to be avoided at all costs? Is this

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<sup>15</sup> 'There is generally an oppressive and sickening element in the fact of being a man which it is necessary to overcome. But this weight and this repugnance have never been so oppressive as after Auschwitz' (Bataille in Surya 2002: 359).

not the very same thought he wants us to escape from in order to be able to redefine ourselves in relation to the *heterogeneous*?

### Conclusion

I have so far analysed violence as one manifestation or expression of the *heterogeneous*. However, at this stage, I would like to argue that violence is not *only* one of the manifestations of the *heterogeneous* but that it lends itself to the *heterogeneous* completely. The *heterogeneous* is imbued in violence; it is violent. In 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' Bataille writes that '[h]eterogeneous reality is that of a force or shock' (Bataille 1979: 70). The expression of the *heterogeneous* always hides in it an attack, especially in the forceful and violent way it confronts the *homogeneous*, servile, assimilative and commensurable reality. But most importantly, the *heterogeneous* is violent for what it is and what it carries within it evil. Despite the fact that violence and evil are two different concepts, they are in this context related in the sense that violence is presented as an expression of evil: '[T]he summit isn't a *submission* to but a *willing* of evil. It is a voluntary pact with sin, crime, and evil. A pact made with a relentless fate that requires that while some live, others die' (Bataille 1992: 26; emphasis in the original).

What Bataille seems to be doing, therefore, is trying to provide an alternative evaluative judgement for evil, an alternative which claims not to be a judgement and which draws from Bataille's respect for the disturbing work of chance, which necessarily negates any possibility of a morally oriented judgement. Bataille clarifies that 'evil is the opposite of a constraint that on principle is practiced with a view toward good. Of course evil isn't what a hypocritical series of misunderstandings makes it out to be: isn't it essentially a concrete *freedom*, the uneasy breaking of a taboo' (Bataille 1992: xxv)? And with this, he reminds us of his intention to distance himself and his project from morality *as it is*. Yet, he claims that the concept of evil does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a 'hypermorality' (Bataille 1973: preface); it demands that morality be transgressed. *Hypermorality*, therefore, needs to be read in the light of 'hold[ing] nothing back' and which favours 'the superabundance of forces, prodigality, ruin, luxury, perversity, sexual release, vice and crime, tearing apart and ecstasy, extreme anguish and death' (Surya 2002: 425).

The problem which arises, however, is that if we accept that the whole realm of *heterogeneity* is primarily violent, then by renouncing the component of violence for its potential ethical risks, the whole edifice of *heterogeneity* collapses too. Despite the frightening implications of *hypermorality*, such a renunciation for Bataille would not be

legitimate. In my opinion, the ethical and political ambiguity to which Bataille's thought may give rise is consciously left unresolved by Bataille, who never felt the need to provide any serious response to politically oriented accusations. For this reason there has never been any clearly articulated self-defence, unlike the monumental defence he made on behalf of Nietzsche.

Any effort to understand Bataille's 'ethics of violence', I claim, is bound to end in frustration, for doing so implies breathing the 'irrespirable air' of Bataille's summit where evil (being open to the amoral working of chance) is good and good (a hypocritical repression and rejection of the *heterogeneous*) is evil, in other words, where morality gives way to *hypermorality*. For Bataille it was obvious, and it should be obvious to all, that his project, even if scary, was not legitimating or endorsing the Nazi brutalities: 'no one, of course, is going to claim that I wish to start new cycles of holocaust' (Bataille 1986b: 61). Because of the lack of a loud and clearly articulated protest against the Nazi brutalities however, Bataille's political or ethical stance was not at all obvious. It remains, lastly, to consider how pharmaceutical Bataille's 'ethics of violence' is and to decide whether the therapeutic and poisonous dosages are correct.

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