

Pornography of the Gaze

By Lord B.

With an essay by Sunil Manghani

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Barthes / Bataille

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Barthes / Bataille

...there is an alternation of knowledge and value, rest from one in the other, according to a kind of *amorous rhythm*. And here, in short, is what writing is, and singularly the writing of essays (we are speaking of Bataille): the amorous rhythm of science and value: heterology, delight.

- Roland Barthes, *Outcomes of the Text*

Why did Roland Barthes choose to write about Georges Bataille? In terms of themes, subject matter and imagery there would appear to be some distance between them.

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Bataille chose to write about death, violence, eroticism, blindness and transgression, while Barthes is known for his interest in popular culture, hedonism, the pleasures of the text, the brevity of haiku, the ‘wonders’ of Japan, and mourning – and all with a certain underlying ‘discretion’. Historically, between Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*, from 1928, and Barthes’ acute commentary upon it, in his well-known essay ‘Metaphor of the Eye’ from 1962, there are clear differences.

Bataille emerged as a notable figure of the surrealist movement and comes from a generation of writers and artists directly affected by the First World War. A stark visual experience is attributed to this period, leading to whole new preoccupations and perturbations. ‘I MYSELF AM WAR’, Bataille writes in a text on joy before death: ‘There are explosives everywhere that will soon blind me. I laugh when I think that my eyes persist in demanding objects that do not destroy them’. By the time Barthes publishes his essay in 1962 (a year after Bataille’s death), there is a very different outlook. The post-War period had given rise to a growing middle class, increased affluence and new cultural configurations. The main intellectual debates of the period now centred around structuralism and the linguistic turn in philosophy. It is generally in this context that the Bataille we evoke today properly emerges.

In his lifetime, Bataille was not widely read, yet he gained significant posthumous interest in the 1960s following his ‘discovery’ among a generation of post-structuralist thinkers (Barthes included among them). In keeping with Martin Jay’s thesis of ‘downcast eyes’ (the denigration of vision in 20th-century French thought) it was Bataille’s counter-Enlightenment critique of vision that was ‘a vital inspiration’ to the poststructuralists’ own insistent

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interrogation.¹ Certainly this can be seen in Barthes' commentary on *Story of the Eye*, and is also picked up in a range of scholarly writings around the time of the novel's republication in 1967. Barthes' essay was a key early text offering clarity upon Bataille. It fits with Barthes' later account of Sade, whom he argued offered a *system* of meaning of greater importance than the pornographic subject matter it employs.

Yet, such clarity would be anathema to Bataille. He argues, for example, against Jean-Paul Sartre's desire for the lucid and reflexive mediation of a message (as associated with committed writing). Instead, Bataille argued that true communication demands obscurity. 'Communication, in my sense', he writes, in *Literature and Evil*, 'is never stronger than when communication, in the weak sense, the sense of the profane language, or, as Sartre says, of prose which makes us and the others appear penetrable, fails and becomes the equivalent of darkness'.

Nevertheless, to judge Barthes only on his 'lucid' exposition of *Story of the Eye* would be to miss a closer connection. His reference to the work as poem rather than novel is significant. Sartre privileges prose over poetry (the latter being a thing in itself, rather than the mediation of something). In *What is Literature?*, Sartre describes poets as those who 'refuse to utilize language'. It is the utilization of language that Bataille refuses, arguing instead that it is through the excess of language that we are able to be free, or at least seek to break from what he refers to as our restricted economy (or what Barthes calls the *doxa*). It is a position that equates with Barthes' infamous remark that all language, or specifically *the performance of a language system*, is fascist. Furthermore, while Barthes writes very little on poetry, it is his characterization of modern poetry as 'a quality *sui generis*

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and without antecedents ... no longer an attribute, but a substance' (in *Writing Degree Zero*), which aligns closely with Bataille's conception and 'operation' of language.

It is worth noting that Bataille's *The Impossible* (which presents both an erotic narrative and an essay on poetry) was originally titled 'The Hatred of Poetry'. The operative word is 'of' – rather than read this as Bataille holding a hatred of poetry, it is his interest in the 'hatred' or subversion that can *come of* poetry that is the point. His argument is against 'beautiful poetry', and in favour of a subversive poetry: 'if there is no subversion, poetry stays trapped in the realm of everyday activity, which reduces it to the status of merely "beautiful poetry", that is, pure rhetoric, or poetic verbiage'.² Bataille's distinction between beautiful and subversive poetry echoes that of Barthes' distinction of the classical and modern.

Barthes' other essay on Bataille, 'Outcomes of the Text', has received less attention, but here Barthes' reading of both Bataille and 'what writing is' becomes more salient. Written in 1972, a decade on from his first essay on Bataille, the account reveals a connection to Bataille that underpins much of Barthes' thinking throughout his career. Indeed, a thread can be traced from Barthes' first book, *Writing Degree Zero*, through to his final lecture courses, notably *The Neutral*, given at the Collège de France between 1977–8. It is worth noting, in this later period, Barthes takes up a regular practice of painting, as a private and 'amateur' practice, which we can read in a Bataillean fashion as 'expenditure', as surplus to Barthes' own writing and thinking. The paintings are a form of 'squandering' and 'drift'. In taking this broader view of Barthes, the contention is that, despite differing styles and sensibilities, both Barthes and Bataille gather upon similar philosophical concerns, and that, crucially, looking

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between them provides an opportunity to contend with the difficult position they both sought to take up vis-à-vis neutrality and heterology, respectively. Bataille's reference to a 'general economy', as the rejection of what he referred to as our 'restricted economy', and Barthes' frequent formulation of, or search for, a 'third' term help us to locate certain commonalities of 'Barthes/Bataille'. Neither holds a singular position, rather they both present a sliding or 'baffling' form of structuralism, which is against categories, and is instead attuned to intensities (as expressions that defy classification). In conclusion, the 'practice of writing' for both Barthes and Bataille is framed as an ethical response, pertaining to what might be referred to as the 'preparations' of knowledge; a judiciousness towards what forms *in* and *around* knowledge, allowing as much for pauses as the possibilities of thought.

An Eye for an Eye

Barthes' 'The Metaphor of the Eye' offers an exemplary commentary on Bataille's *Story of the Eye*. The story is not of the main characters, Barthes argues, but of an object, the eye, or more particularly its movement from image to image. As such, it is not a novel, he claims, but a poem:

The novelistic imagination is 'probable': the novel is what, all things considered, might happen ... the poetic imagination, on the contrary, is improbable: ... the poem alone can designate; the novel proceeds by aleatory combinations of real elements; the poem by an exact and complete exploration of virtual elements.

Establishing Bataille's story as a 'poem' allows Barthes to

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focus upon the text as ‘operation’, rather than as simply form and content. A structuralist account is provided, looking at ‘arrangement and selection, syntagm and paradigm’. In particular, Barthes takes the pairings metonymy and metaphor. Of the latter, the Eye is traced through various substitutions (eye, egg, testicles, i.e. as ocular globes), which in turn leads to liquid forms (tears, milk, egg yolk, sperm, urine). It is ‘the very mode of the moist’, Barthes suggests, where metaphor is the richer; ‘from damp to runny, it is all the varieties of the inundant which complete the original metaphor of the globe; objects apparently quite remote from the eye are suddenly caught up in the metaphoric chain’. Reference to ‘dampness’ recurs in Barthes’ Neutral lectures, which is symptomatic of his interest in that which falls outside of systems of signification (i.e. there is an indeterminacy to dampness, that is neither fully wet nor dry). It is not so much the specific metaphors that count (which are held within sign systems), but their *movement*, within the ‘space’ in which metaphors metamorphose.

The eye as globe also serves as a reminder of the circularity of meanings, the fact there is no originary sign. *Story of the Eye* is ‘a perfectly spherical metaphor’: one signifier is always contingent with the next.

[It is] not a ‘profound’ work: everything is given on the surface and without hierarchy, the metaphor is displayed in its entirety; circular and explicit, it refers to no secret: . . . an open literature which is situated beyond any decipherment and which only a formal criticism can – at a great distance – accompany.

However, it is not just on the paradigmatic axis that

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Bataille's text produces its 'poetic' effects. Its metaphoric substitutions are also 'crossed' syntagmatically. The breaking of an egg, the poking of an eye, become the breaking of an eye, the poking of an egg. In reference to Roman Jakobson's opposition of metaphor (as similarity) and metonymy (as contiguity), it is the latter, Barthes argues, that gives rise to Bataille's eroticism. Metaphor *varies* the objects, it 'manifests a regulated difference among them', while metonymy *exchanges* them: 'properties are no longer divided: to flow, to sob, to urinate, to ejaculate – these are a vacillating meaning. . . [signifying] in the manner of a vibration which always produces the same sound'. Reference here to 'vibration' again can be shown to resonate with Barthes' later writings on the Neutral as a spectrum or degrees of meaning, as intensities, rather than as categories. Metonymic exchange, Barthes explains, enables the transgression of values, 'for metonymy is precisely a forced syntagm, the violation of a signifying limit of space; it permits, on the very level of discourse, a counterdivision of objects, usages, meanings, spaces, and properties'.

While Barthes' analysis of *Story of the Eye* has drawn criticism over the years, the essay leads to a significant resolution with its closing comparison of Bataille and Sade:

Sade's erotic language has no other connection than that of his century, it is writing [*une écriture*]; Bataille's erotic language is connoted by Georges Bataille's very being, it is a style; between the two, something is born, something which transforms every experience into a warped language and which is literature.

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Barthes' use of the word 'style' is to be understood in terms of the body (though notably not the gendered body). As he outlines in *Writing Degree Zero*, style is not something the writer chooses, but is of the accumulations of the body. It is only through writing (*écriture*) that the strictures of language and the body (style) can be outplayed. This is Barthes' final argument as regards Bataille. His 'warped language' is the new force of Writing, which presses against or outplays the codifications of Literature. Of course, as Barthes' thesis in *Writing Degree Zero* acknowledges, all writing will eventually be subsumed within the categories of Literature, but at least the *practice* of writing is an open site of exchange. It is worth noting that Bataille does not figure in *Writing Degree Zero*, yet, according to Barthes himself, this is merely due to an 'ignorance' of his work at the time. By inference, then, Barthes acknowledges Bataille a notable absence in the book.

Of course, there is always a dilemma in placing the writing of Bataille, since he was wary of *both* the rejection and the enthusiastic appropriation of his work. In 'The Use-Value of D.A.F. de Sade', he looks to uphold the 'scandal' of Sade's writing. Counter-intuitively, he suggests those who receive Sade's work with indignation and protest better uphold the value of his work, more so that his admirers, who make him 'acceptable', part of a 'thoroughly literary enterprise'. Bataille's argument with many in the Surrealist movement (notably André Breton) is this literary appropriation of Sade, which is similarly a concern held over the reception of Bataille's work. Rejection and appropriation are arguably two sides of the same coin; both share a form of control over the transgressive writer. Yet, equally, neither can take complete control. There remain 'unassimilable elements', which underlie his practice of writing. Rather

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than making Sade acceptable (part of the canon), we need to accept the full force of his writing (in the same way as those who reject him for his perversity). *An eye for an eye*: it is to make a reading that allows for a 1:1 association with the text, *not* its approximation or domestication (which is to recall Bataille's 'hatred' of poetry, the 'impossibility' of language). As has been said: 'Bataille's objective is to expose all writing to the violent excitation of the heterogeneous and so to force us to confront the impossibility at the heart of thought'.³

In connection with Barthes, it is worth remembering he opens *Writing Degree Zero* with reference to a journalist writing in *Le Père Duchêne* who would always begin his articles with a series of obscenities. 'These improprieties had no real meaning', Barthes explains, 'but they had significance.' They embodied a revolutionary situation through 'a mode of writing whose function is no longer only communication or expression, but the imposition of something beyond language'.

It is the working in and against structures of signification that is most pertinent about Sade and Bataille's writings and draws a line between them (and which brings us to the connection with Barthes). As Susan Sontag notes: 'despite the obvious differences of scale and finesse of execution, the conceptions of Sade and Bataille have some resemblances. Like Bataille, Sade was not so much a sensualist as someone with an intellectual project: to explore the scope of transgression'.⁴ Breton famously asserted that Bataille thought too much to be a surrealist, but arguably that is what makes him of continued interest today. It is the 'scope' of transgression, not transgressions in themselves, that is at stake and which, importantly, suggests a *rigorous* inquiry. As has been said of Foucault's account of Bataille, for example, 'transgression does not overcome limits. . . but shows that

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what we are, our being, depends on the existence of limits'.⁵ Thus, at root, Barthes' reading of *Story of the Eye* holds true. With both these thinkers there is a (post-)structuralist project in play (Bataille through his reading of the proto-structuralist Mauss; Barthes through his reading of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Jakobson). Yet perhaps attention upon the story of the 'eye' is too loaded. To get closer to a 1:1 reading, to locate the more 'radical' nature of their respective projects, we might avert our gaze, to look below the line; to turn from the nexus of the eye to the prosaic big toe (and Barthes' fragmentary essay that presents its 'outcomes').

Operation Formless

Barthes' later essay on Bataille, 'Outcomes of the Text', is more in keeping with Bataille's avant-garde writing and his compiling of an alternative dictionary in *Documents*. Barthes' text is composed as a series of fragments, 'in a more or less emphatic state of severance from each other' and presented in alphabetical order so as to be 'both an order and a disorder, an order stripped of meaning, the degree zero of order'. In suggesting these fragments are 'outcomes' of the text, we can suppose there is a play on Jacques Derrida's famous remark that there is no outside-text. These fragments are commentaries on Bataille's consideration (or desire) to reach an outside or periphery of meaning (as well as a sexual connotation, or 'outcome' as *jouissance*). In this case, Barthes' text is a reading of Bataille's 'The Big Toe'. In his opening lines, Bataille remarks how the big toe is the most singularly unique part of the human body, while equally a great leveller; its position upon the ground gives a 'baseness', it is horizontal, material, not vertical and ideal. In casting our gaze downward, upon the horizontal, as Barthes explains, we encounter a wider, heterogeneous field of knowledge:

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In Bataille's text, there are many 'poetic' codes: thematic (high/low, noble/ignoble, light/muddy), amphibological (the word *erection*, for instance), metaphorical ('man is a tree'); there are also codes of knowledge: anatomical, zoological, ethnological, historical. Of course, the text *exceeds* knowledge – by value; but even within the field of knowledge, there are differences of pressure, of 'seriousness', and these differences produce a heterology.

Of course, it is not to suggest *Story of the Eye* does not present similar pressures on knowledge to produce a heterology. Running through these various texts of Bataille is an interest in their 'operation' (which goes beyond questions of form and content). Barthes' key observation of *Story of the Eye*, for example, is to identify the 'eye' with imagination itself, 'not its product but its substance'. To elucidate this point, we can refer to W.J.T. Mitchell's account of the image as something that is not necessarily tangible or visible. In Milton's *Paradise Lost* there is the evocative phrase 'in their looks divine', which is to deliberately confuse, or indeed conjoin the visible and invisible, the pictorial and the spiritual. Mitchell explains how everything pivots upon the word 'looks', which may refer to outward appearance as much as the intangible sense of 'looks' as a quality of one's gaze.⁶ Bataille's metonymic writing in *Story of the Eye* can be said to operate similarly, i.e. to 'look' both ways, offering in Barthes' words again 'a counterdivision of objects, usages, meanings, spaces and properties'.

Yet, still, there is something about the eye as an object that is hard to divide. The problem is made apparent, with Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali's film *Un Chien Andalou*, which Bataille viewed favourably. While conceptually the film's

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famous and shocking scene of the cutting of the eye *signified* a cut in the ‘visual field’, it nonetheless remains a singly difficult image. As Bataille notes, Buñuel remained sick for a week after filming the scene. Both *Un Chien Andalou* and *Story of the Eye* reject the penetrating gaze, the idea that it is possible to *see through* things, to realize a true (Platonic) meaning ‘behind’ what is shown. Both eschew the (hierarchical) distinctions of surface and depth. As cited above, Barthes ‘profoundly’ notes *Story of the Eye* is ‘not a “profound” work’. Yet, the problem remains: we still cannot take our eye off the shot of the slicing of the eye (the ‘money shot’ of the avant-garde). We tend only to look one way (if we don’t look away), returning always to this moment, not where it might take us. We cannot help but replace an eye for a (mutilated) eye.

Bataille’s essay ‘The Big Toe’ is again prompted by the visual image, but in a quite different way. It is a text that accompanies a series of three arresting photographic close-ups of big toes, by the photographer J.A. Boiffard, which appeared in the sixth issue of *Documents* (in 1929). The use of the close-up, of strong lighting, tight framing (presenting the toe in isolation) and enlargement (each image scaled larger than life, as a full-page image), had the effect of both documenting the human toe, yet equally making it somehow ‘other’. Unlike Bataille’s narrative of the eye (that is taken out and inserted in different ways; that has its own ‘story’), the images by Boiffard are supposed to offer a more direct encounter with our own eyes. We are ‘seduced in a base manner’, writes Bataille, ‘without transpositions and to the point of screaming, opening [our] eyes wide: opening them wide, then, before a big toe’. Interestingly, Bataille takes this to be against ‘poetic concoctions’, which he suggests are ‘nothing but a diversion’ (though again, poetry here is not

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the same as Bataille's notion of the 'hatred' of poetry). Instead, we ourselves enter the 'substance' of seeing rather than viewing its product (or empirical outcome). Of course, we might argue 'an image stands as the conclusion of Bataille's thoughts – possibly because that is where thought slips away, living on in its own death'.⁷

While sharing much with the surrealist project, Bataille imposed a subversive power that could undermine *all* meaning. So, while the surrealists' work might present a heterogeneity of the real, it would point to a 'unity at another level – that of the subject's lost but recoverable subjectivity'.⁸ By contrast, in Bataille's project, as evidenced in *Documents*, 'disunity presides ... the juxtaposition of radically different and incommensurable images... insists on relationships that serve to undermine the integrity of the entities caught up in a violent process of dislocation, rather than pointing to a higher level of interpretation'.⁹ However, rather than focus on the notion of 'disunity', suggestive of a binary order/disorder, Bataille's project can be understood more particularly as an opening out of the fields of knowledge, of the *othering* of knowledge, or heterology. This is certainly evident in the language of 'The Big Toe', which explicitly plays upon the distinction of high and low, ideal (vision) and base ('grounded' by our feet). However, Bataille is not merely presenting a critique of the longstanding mind/body dichotomy. In his writing on the eye and toe, his heterology is *operative*, a notion that is developed further in reference to his interest of *informe* (formless), notably in his essay on the painter Édouard Manet.

In a catalogue essay for the Manet retrospective in 1982 (Paris and New York), Françoise Cachin argues there are broadly two responses to the painter's work. On the one hand formalist, concerned with painterly values and

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technique, and on the other, a consideration of the ‘scandal’ of Manet’s subject matter.¹⁰ At first glance, Bataille’s essay on Manet appears to sit within the formalist concerns, yet this position is based on Bataille’s précis of André Malraux. Instead, Bataille suggests of a ‘disinterested’ point of view. In *Shootings of May Third* (1812), he suggests Francisco Goya captured ‘the blinding, instantaneous flash of death, a thunderbolt of sight-destroying intensity, brighter than any known light’. While Manet’s rendering in *The Execution of Maximilian* (1867) presents something altogether different, having ‘wrung the last drop of meaning out of the subject’. ‘*Maximilian*’, he writes, ‘reminds us of a tooth deadened by novocaine; we get the impression of an all-engulfing numbness, as if a skilful practitioner had radically cured painting of a centuries-old ailment: chronic eloquence.’ Bataille goes on to offer further ‘blithe’ descriptors of Manet’s work, suggesting he poses models, for example, ‘as if they were about to “buy a bunch of radishes” ... There remain a variety of colour patches and the impression that the subject ought to have induced an emotional reaction but has failed to do so – the curious impression of absence.’ The ‘effect’ of absence gives rise to what Bataille calls an ‘imponderable plenitude’, which he argues is ‘perhaps essential to what modern man really is, supremely, silently, when he consents to reject the pompous rhetoric that seems to give sense to everyday life, but which actually falsifies our feelings and commits them to a ludicrous abjection’.

Manet, according to Bataille’s account, breaks with ideological and formal codes; his subject is not located ‘anywhere’, it is rootless. And indeed, for Bataille ‘it is this uprooting, which he also calls slippage, that is Manet’s “secret”: the true goal is to “disappoint expectation”’.¹¹ In tracing Malraux’s account, Bataille pushes further,

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suggesting Malraux ‘fails to define what gives *Olympia*. . . its value as an operation’. It is this ‘operation’ of slippage that is also to be understood in what Bataille calls the *informe* (formless), and which underlines the ‘general movement of Bataille’s thought, which he liked to call a “scatology” or “heterology”’.¹² Bataille’s account of *informe* is given in just 15 lines, as part of the ‘critical dictionary’ published in *Documents*; arguably ‘one of the most effective . . . acts of sabotage against the academic world and the spirit of the system’.¹³ Its effectiveness is derived from its ‘formal ruse’, which turns the conventional upon its head:

The whole of Bataille’s writing rests on such apparent non sequiturs (which he calls ‘ink spots’ or ‘quacks’ in his essay ‘The Language of Flowers,’ which gave André Breton heartburn): ‘bunch of radishes,’ ‘the tooth deadened novocaine,’ in all his text we find these rude belches, the virulence of which owes much to irony. The ‘dictionary’ accumulates them, functioning, so to speak, as one big quack: nothing stirred up Bataille’s blasphemous energy more than the definition of words, which he calls their ‘mathematical frock coat’.¹⁴

The metonymic is seemingly pushed more to an absurdist mode (parallels have been noted with Beckett), but still the writing maintains a contiguity, a way of moving one thing to (and against) another. It is a means of working against and exposing our restrictive economy (or the *doxa*, to use Barthes’ favoured term). The phrase ‘frock coat’ (itself an ‘ink spot’), is reference to our restricted way of thinking and knowing the world. It is a phrase picked out from Bataille’s 15-line statement:

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A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.

Despite, or indeed due to its brevity, this statement can be read as Bataille's manifesto on heterology. The idea that 'each thing have its form' suggests a massive taxonomy, but of course the very idea of a 'taxonomy' (of imposing a system of meaning) is contra to Bataille's position. It is to give shape to the universe, when he suggests of a shapeless, or formless array. Politically, or at least ethically, allowing for the formless is to allow for all and sundry; the things that we usually miss or elide – the spider that hides in amongst the dust, or the spit that is quashed under foot, or looked upon as abject.

We need to hold onto Bataille's actual operation of writing, one that is 'baffling'. As he puts it in the opening of his statement, the 'dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks'. There is a connection with Barthes' writing, including his early and arguably most well-known book, *Mythologies*. Here, we should not be

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drawn to the semiological terminology, as located in the book's closing essay (nor the pseudo-theoretical terms encountered later on, such as the 'obtuse meaning', or the 'punctum', etc.). Instead, we can linger over the journalistic texts that make up the bulk of the book, including, for example, the seemingly benign 'Operation Margarine'. There is a myth attached to margarine, which Barthes derives from the publicity of *Astra* margarine, whereby prejudice against it (as being inferior to butter) stands in the way of progress and common sense and will literally 'cost you dearly'. However, this is not what the article seeks to unravel. Rather it assumes we *already* share in this knowledge, and as such can use the myth of margarine as an effective means to expose something of greater significance.

The text is actually concerned with how the 'Established Order' (those in power, etc.) can turn their weaknesses to advantage. He gives two specific examples, how the army and church both openly note their failings, yet in doing so herald their continued importance and virtue. 'It is a kind of homeopathy', he suggests, 'One inoculates the public with a contingent evil to prevent or cure an essential one'. The argument is that we put up with ongoing, seemingly temporary complaints (or 'contingent' wrongdoing), in order to uphold the idea of some greater good. He ends the article with the allusion to margarine, which in all its banality would seem to have the effect of both inoculating us against Barthes' own critical argument, yet equally seeming to expose the fact we were aware of the mythological construct all along. Thus, Barthes writes: 'It is well worth the price of an immunization. What does it matter, *after all*, if margarine is just fat, when it goes further than butter, and costs less? What does it matter, *after all*, if Order is a little brutal or a little blind, when it allows us to live cheaply?'. This is the

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‘operation’ noted in the title. He manages to link the exposing of what he takes to be a deep-level flaw in society with the simple act of spreading margarine on one’s toast at the breakfast table. He achieves a way of ‘bringing home’ to us an otherwise abstract, political problem. It is perhaps no such surprise then, at his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Barthes claimed the semiologist needs to be ‘an artist’ playing with signs ‘as with a conscious decoy, whose fascination he savours and wants to make others savour and understand’. The sign for this artist ‘is always immediate, subject to the kind of evidence that leaps to the eyes, like a trigger of the imagination’, which is why semiology in this case ‘is not a hermeneutics: it paints more than it digs’. The *operation* of Barthes/Bataille is indeed one of ‘painting’, of writing (fiction), not digging.

Déjouer: General/Neutral Economy

The underlying thread of the preceding account works upon a trajectory from Barthes’ first book, *Writing Degree Zero*, to his late lecture course *The Neutral*, through which Bataille offers a way of thinking about both a philosophical position (or an a-philosophical position) and writing *as practice*, relating to a mode of writing as being operational. These points can be drawn together to suggest an ethics of knowledge. Barthes’ original reference to ‘degree zero’ is in the service of trying to secure *writing* as a defining feature of literature, as something that can outplay the strictures of language and style. He turns attention to neutral, colourless writing, exemplified at the time by novelists such as Camus and Robbe-Grillet (to whom could be added Bataille as already suggested). Of course, according to Barthes’ own thesis, ‘zero degree’ soon becomes its own genre, subsumed within the ‘culture industry’. It is not until his penultimate

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lecture course, published posthumously as *The Neutral*, that Barthes returns critically to the phrase ‘zero degree’. In these lectures, taking a wide-ranging and metonymic approach, he draws up a series of dossiers on topics as various as benevolence, weariness, tact, damp, sleep, retreat, arrogance, through which he presents various ‘figures’ of the Neutral, putting together what he describes as a ‘dictionary not of definitions but of twinklings [*scintillations*]’. There is a parallel here to Bataille’s dictionary of words as tasks, and his mode of writing through apparent non-sequiturs (his ‘ink spots’ and ‘quacks’). In referring to weariness, for example, Barthes says it is ‘not coded, is not received … [it] always functions in language as a mere metaphor, a sign without referent’. This is in contrast to depression and mourning, he notes, which have been inscribed with ‘social claims’. He suggests the following experiment:

...draw up a table of received (credible) excuses: you want to cancel a lecture, an intellectual task: what excuses will be beyond suspicion, beyond reply? Weariness? Surely not. Flu? Bad, banal. A surgical operation? Better, but watch out for the vengeance of fate! Cf. the way society codifies mourning in order to assimilate it: after a few weeks, society will reclaim its rights, will no longer accept mourning as a state of exception...

What interests Barthes about weariness is that it is not codified, it cannot be assimilated in discourse (connection can be made to Bataille’s *Guilty*, which, rather than portray a heroic account of the war, speaks of drift, distraction and disengagement – sentiments that again cannot easily be assimilated, certainly in the context of the Second World

War). Thus, for Barthes, weariness is unclassifiable:

...without premises, without place, socially untenable → whence Blanchot's (weary!) cry: 'I don't ask that weariness be done away with. I ask to be led back to a region where it might be possible to be weary.' → Weariness = exhausting claim of the individual body that demands the right to social repose (that sociality in me rest a moment [...]). In fact, weariness = an intensity: society doesn't recognize intensities.

We can begin to see how Barthes' account of weariness relates to Bataille's critique of restrictive economy, with the Neutral leading us similarly to a sense of 'general economy'. Both are against the conception of society based only on (a restrictive definition of) economics. Barthes' lament that we cannot simply call in sick because we feel weary is to raise questions about our relationship (and alienation) to economic labour. And more than that, his description of 'intensities' (as the measure of the Neutral) tallies with Bataille's privileging of excess and specifically with his reference to 'unproductive expenditures': those activities, for Bataille, that are not 'reducible to processes of production and conservation'. Weariness does not lead to anything; it does not give us profit. Instead, it is an energy (albeit a fading energy) that is on a par with Bataille's understanding of economy as energy and expenditure. His particular interest in solar energy as the 'source of life's exuberant development', as an 'open system', and in effect a 'free gift' ('The sun gives without ever receiving'), is something we cannot describe or classify, but is an intensity, an underlying force. Fundamentally, the 'solar economy', as Bataille

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conceives it, positions humans not as ‘wasteful’ beings (as in *utilizing* the planet’s resources), but more simply as the sun’s waste product. We are its outcome, its luxury, and we continue to profligate because of it. We *are* expenditure, yet we fail to recognize this through our own follies of restrictive economy and codified knowledge structures (that define utility, not intensities). According to Bataille, restrictive economy, ‘the sphere dominated by economics’, for example, ‘consists of all that is deemed normal, all that seeks to make society controllable’. Outside of which is excess: ‘eroticism, death, festivals, transgression, drunkenness, laughter, the dissolution of truth and knowledge’,¹⁵ a list to which we might readily append the Neutral (or at least see it as an expression of dissolution). This is the general economy, but importantly, ‘the general economy is also the process whereby the homogeneous realm interacts with excessive phenomena’.¹⁶ In other words, we cannot view restrictive and general economies as separate entities – the former sits within the latter. In Barthes’ terms, as previously suggested, restrictive economy equates in many respects, to what he calls *doxa*, while the Neutral, by contrast, is his way of conceiving of general economy. Indeed, the open structure of his lecture course, as a series of randomly ordered dossiers, provides an unfolding array of ‘excesses’ or figures of intensities. And similarly, it is the interaction of the *doxa* within the Neutral that becomes instructive of how we *choose* to live (which includes, for example, failing to recognize our sense of weariness).

Barthes ‘defines’ the Neutral as ‘that which outplays [*déjoue*] the paradigm, or rather I call Neutral everything that baffles the paradigm. For I am not trying to define a word; I am trying to name a thing: I gather under a name, which here is the Neutral.’ There is an important connection with

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Bataille's use of *informe*, not least the difficulty in attributing the definite article to these terms. In other words, 'informe' (formless) is not the same as 'formlessness':

Form itself, however radical, is by definition, and even by self-definition (in modernism), fixed, or at least located. Bataille's *informe*/formless is something else altogether: in not having an article, it reduces the possibility of becoming an entity ... How it works is as a sort of undoing, an undoing which remains even when something takes or is given form.¹⁷

Similarly, there are no specific examples of the *Netural* that can hold (take form), but akin to the edge of a black hole (which is otherwise undetectable), Barthes' constellation of various 'figures' clusters around points of significance, which in turn can lead us to renewed questions about how we make meaning in the first place (as we see with the example of weariness). The idea that the *Neutral* outplays or baffles the paradigm directly echoes Barthes' reading of Bataille in 'Outcomes of the Text', which also adopts the use of the verb 'to baffle'. In commenting on the high/low distinction in 'The Big Toe', Barthes explains how an 'outside' term underlines Bataille's heterology:

...there is a contradiction, a simple, canonical paradigm between the first two terms: *noble* and *ignoble* ... but the third term is not regular: *low* is not the neutral term (neither noble nor ignoble), nor is it the mixed term (noble and ignoble). It is an independent term, concrete, eccentric, irreducible: the term of seduction *outside the* (structural) *law*.

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Barthes' reference here to a 'neutral term' should not be read in the same sense of the Neutral. Instead, it relates more to the technicalities of rhetoric, of a middle (on the fence) position that ultimately defends the status quo; what he refers to in *Mythologies* as Neither/Nor criticism. Nor should we necessarily read the 'irreducible' as being outside of a structuralist account altogether. *The Neutral* examines various kinds of 'slippage' but maintains a structuralist perspective. He refers, for example, to the lack of opposition between *l* and *r* in Japanese pronunciation as a site of 'no paradigm', and more specifically – drawing upon phonology – he suggests 'the idea of a structural creation that would defeat, annul, or contradict the implacable binarism of the paradigm by means of a third term'. However, again, rather than suggest 'something' that is the Neutral, the meaning of a 'third term' must be taken more as a 'task', as an 'undoing'.

In recounting a scene in which he spills a bottle of ink with the label of 'neutral', Barthes writes: 'I was both punished and disappointed: punished because Neutral spatters and stains (it's a type of dull gray-black); disappointed because Neutral is a color like the others, and for sale'; to which he adds: 'all the more reason for us to go back to discourse, which, at least, cannot say what the Neutral is'. Again, we encounter this need to work within language and its system of signification, but to allow a certain practice of writing to subvert its structures. Thus, the definition of the Neutral remains structural and critical; 'the Neutral doesn't refer to "impressions" of grayness, or "neutrality", of indifference', Barthes writes, 'The Neutral. . . can refer to intense, strong, unprecedented states. "To outplay the paradigm" is an ardent, burning activity'.

Barthes' terms of reference and subject matter are of

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course very different in tone to Bataille. When Barthes writes of Japan, of pleasures of the text and the various figures of the Neutral, we might be inclined to view him as the ‘light’ of Bataille’s ‘dark’ erotic and scatological writing. Yet, in having considered Barthes’ interest in *Story of the Eye* and ‘The Big Toe’, as well as connections between *informe* and Neutral *scintillations* in terms of a recurring writerly method and desire for something more expansive and heterological, structural communalities emerge between the Neutral and Bataille’s ‘general economy’. For Bataille (and not dissimilar to Barthes’ investigations into the Neutral), ‘heterology is precisely (and paradoxically) the scientific and rigorous inquiry into those elements necessarily excluded by science and rational thought’, the outcome of which is twofold. One result can be ‘the ultimate homogenization of heterogeneous elements, in their assimilation to system and order. Here the universe becomes merely another object with clearly defined attributes and heterology remains analogous to other systems of appropriation such as science and philosophy.’ Secondly, however, heterology can lead to ‘an awareness of the fundamental limit between the heterogeneous and the homogeneous, which, from a theoretical perspective, always remains untraversable’. The point is that heterology essentially only reveals an impossibility, but in doing so helps us to judge our limits and so mark out ‘a radical barrier between thought and what is excluded by thought’.¹⁸

As Barthes remarks in his essay on ‘The Big Toe’, by proceeding from a ‘mixture of knowledges’ (which stem from heterology, from understanding the barriers between/beyond thought), it is ‘writing’ that ‘holds in check “the scientific arrogances” … and at the same time sustains an apparent readability.’ Barthes deliberately adopts Bataille’s phrase (from *Documents*) of ‘scientific arrogance’,

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registering a shared target for their criticism. He describes Bataille's writing as 'a burlesque, *heteroclite* knowledge (etymologically: leaning to one side and the other): this is already an operation of knowledge'. While not burlesque, Barthes' Neutral writing is similarly a *heteroclite* knowledge. The idea of which, leaning from one side to the other, begins to suggest of an ability or at least a desire to move in and out of knowledge. Something that operates at both the level of writing and research (and editing). Thus, in 'Outcomes of the Text', under the heading of '*Déjouer / Baffling*', he writes:

Bataille's text teaches us how to deal with knowledge. We need not reject it. We must even, occasionally, pretend to place it in the forefront. It did not trouble Bataille that the editorial committee of *Documents* consisted of professors, scholars, librarians. Knowledge must be made to appear where it is not expected.

We discern an 'ethics' of knowledge. Neither Barthes nor Bataille are merely trying to subvert or undo knowledge (an act that is quickly subsumed within knowledge itself). They are concerned with the positions we take in leading to (and out from) knowledge. They are interested in the limits, in the 'edges', where things are inevitably *informe*, Neutral (not as forms to be identified, but as positions to be operated, to be untethered or undone). Barthes gives a specific ethical statement in the preliminaries to his Neutral lecture course:

Transposed to the 'ethical' level: injunctions addressed by the world to 'choose', to produce meaning, to enter conflicts, to 'take responsibility,'

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etc. → temptation to suspend, to thwart, to elude the paradigm, its menacing pressure, its arrogance → to exempt meaning → this polymorphous field of paradigm, of conflict avoidance = the Neutral. We are going to grant ourselves the right to treat all conditions, conducts, affects, discourse (with no intention or even possibility of exhaustiveness) as far as they deal with conflict or its release, its parrying, its suspension.

He goes on to describe the Neutral as ‘a manner – a free manner – to be looking for my own style of being present to the struggles of my time’. A particular figure of the Neutral is ‘Arrogance’, the opening of which makes direct reference to Bataille’s phrase of ‘scientific arrogance’. It is under this heading that Barthes ‘gathers all the (linguistic) “gestures” that work as discourses of intimidation, of subjection, of domination, of assertion, of haughtiness’; in other words, all discourses of arrogance (as constitutive of restrictive economy). Within this figure, echoing Bataille’s statement on *informe* (and against the philosophical ‘goal’ for the universe to have to ‘take shape’), Barthes includes an entry on the ‘concept’ (as the defining device of philosophy). Here Barthes places the Neutral on the side of skepticism, which he refers to as being ‘invincible’ (as we might argue of Bataille’s heterology):

Skepticism (to extrapolate: in one sense: the Neutral) is expelled from philosophy, to the extent that it doesn’t retain the philosophical ‘imprint’: the concept ... This ‘im-position’ (at least as seen from the Neutral) = philosophy’s arrogance → one can’t thus (one couldn’t) stay-waft in the space of

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the Neutral except by staying outside philosophy: but this is something banal ... the Neutral cuts itself off from philosophy and from its legitimate victory: it doesn't oppose it but distances itself from it.

Again, we find ideas of proximity to and from knowledge and systems of knowledge (philosophy). Marxism, Barthes suggests, is one example of questioning the concept in a dialectical manner, from within philosophy, but it is Nietzsche whom he considers the 'one who best dismantled... the concept'. Indeed, Nietzsche's writings are an important shared reference for both Barthes and Bataille; his critique of the concept underlines both the Neutral and heterology.

...thus concept: a force that reduces the diverse, the becoming that is the sensible, the *aisthèsis* → therefore, if one wants to refuse this reduction, one must say no to the concept, not make use of it. But, then, how to speak, all of us, intellectuals? By metaphors. To substitute metaphor for the concept: to write.

We return again to a practice of writing, the need to infiltrate knowledge; a *virtual* domain that writing can conjure (recalling Barthes' description of *Story of the Eye* as poem, as 'improbable'). Bataille's writing offers 'a different possibility, a different account of general economy as emerging through difference',¹⁹ which similarly we could say of Barthes' Neutral. The suggestion of 'emergence' is significant. One writes within the available terms to nonetheless allow what exists on one side and the other to emerge. And, like Barthes, Bataille (in *The Accursed Share*), is

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explicit about this as an ethical undertaking: ‘Changing from the perspectives of *restrictive* economy to those of *general* economy actually accomplishes a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking – and of ethics’. This transformation is to be read not from one economy to another, but from within (a sort of turning inside out). ‘It cannot be another type of economy... but instead it is the Other of economy’; Bataille’s general economy (and what might be called Barthes’ Neutral economy) is no longer ‘a place to be occupied outside restricted economy but a fleeting and effervescent effect of the swirling turbulence of energy flows that constantly puncture limits, create openings and new limits’.²⁰

Preparations of Knowledge

As much as we can read for the political in a practice of writing – of the fictions and figures of both Barthes and Bataille – there is equally an ethics of knowledge: a consideration of how we choose to move in and out of meaning, a form of preparation over knowledge and its scaling. Against the so-called ‘knowledge economy’ (which Bataille would of course have identified as a restricted economy, being only for accumulation, for capital gain), the emphasis here has been upon a general economy, or a ‘neutral economy’, to adopt Barthes’ terms. Bataille’s writings for *Documents*, not least his creation of a dictionary in which the words are not defined but made operative, suggests a different way of *preparing* knowledge, or at least preparing ourselves in the face of it. And again, something similar can be found in Barthes’ preparations for his lecture courses; indeed, his final course title was *The Preparation of the Novel*. In terms of their methodologies, one could imagine both writers as entomologists (or Bataille might prefer

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arachnologist!). They locate and collect the small, seemingly insignificant matter, to then prepare alternative points of reference and altered, re-scaled perspectives. But more than that, they *activate* these ‘specimens’ (their ‘inkblots’ and ‘traits’). They could be regarded as homeopaths, turning minuscule elements of a ‘substance’ back upon itself. The ‘economies of scale’ of our restrictive *doxa* are re-imagined and re-articulated into something much vaster, pluralized. For Barthes, as already noted, it is Bataille who ‘teaches us how to deal with knowledge’. In his fragmentary text on ‘The Big Toe’, Barthes writes:

Knowledge is fragmented, pluralized, as if the *one* of knowledge were ceaselessly made to divide in two: synthesis is faked, *baffled*; knowledge is there, not destroyed but displaced; its new place is – in Nietzsche’s word – that of a *fiction*: meaning precedes and predetermines fact, value precedes and predetermines knowledge ... Knowledge in short, would be an interpretative fiction. Thus, Bataille assures the baffling of knowledge by a fragmentation of the codes, but more particularly by an outburst of value (*noble* and *ignoble*, *seductive* and *deflated*). The role of value is not a role of destruction, nor yet that of dialectization, nor even of subjectivization, it is perhaps, quite simply, a role of *rest*...

The idea of ‘rest’ Barthes takes directly from Nietzsche:

...it suffices for me to know that truth possesses a great *power*. But it must be able to do battle, and it must have an opposition, and from time to time one

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must *rest* from it in the non-true. Otherwise, truth would become tedious for us, without savor and without strength, and we would become so as well...

In this account, then, writing (as ‘fiction’) can not only re-order our account of knowledge, it can enable us to take up *other* spaces — spaces which need not necessarily say anything, but simply give the means to pause (again, this is an ethics not a politics of writing). Both Bataille and Barthes were readers of Nietzsche. Both were drawn to what burns, not what sustains. Both engaged in the *writerly*, in *écriture*, as a defiance or baffling of the language and styles that otherwise restrict what we can say.

Between Barthes/Bataille one might place various operators: ‘and’, ‘or’, ‘not’, hyphen, comma, yet the *barre oblique*, the slash, has a particular resonance. It is not to suggest here a split, a dichotomy, but an oscillation, a folding together. It would be too easy, for example, to set them up as dark to light, or weight to weightless. Bataille may have courted the base, the horizontal, while Barthes took delight in a paradigmatic, the ‘empty’ (zero degree) movement of one term over another (in the haiku, the photograph, in Japanese culture), but in having worked through the connections in their writings, Barthes/Bataille is a dialogue. Together, their structuralist concerns are evoked not to transgress limits (to break out), but to situate precisely upon the limits of transgression. In his autobiography, Barthes recounts a childhood game of ‘prisoner’s base’. ‘What I liked best’, he writes, ‘was not provoking the other team. . . what I liked best was to free the prisoners — the effect of which was to put both teams back into circulation: the game started over again at zero.’ This game is emblematic of the *operations* of

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both Barthes and Bataille. And we play this game, Barthes suggests, over and over in regular discourse: ‘one language has only temporary rights over another; all it takes is for a third language to appear … The task of this language is to release the prisoners: to scatter the signifieds, the catechisms.’ Of course, paradoxically, in order to allow for such critique, there is always the need to let it go: to be only expenditure, not accumulation. Hence, the difficulty for the operations of Barthes/Bataille to be fully written up. Indeed, as a ‘final’ word, it is perhaps fitting that Barthes’ Neutral is never fully authored:

As a general rule, desire is always marketable: we don’t do anything but sell, buy, exchange desires. The paradox of the desire of the Neutral, its absolute singularity, is that it is nonmarketable → people tell me: ‘You’ll make a book with this course on the Neutral?’ All other problems aside … my answer: No, the Neutral is the unmarketable. And I think of Bloy’s words: ‘there is nothing perfectly beautiful except what is invisible and above all unbuyable’ → ‘Invisible’? I would say: ‘unsustainable’ → We’ll have to hold on to the unsustainable for [the duration of the course]: after that, it will fade.

Notes

1. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 231.
2. Marie-Christine Lala, ‘The hatred of poetry in Georges Bataille’s

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Writing and Thought', in C.B. Gill (ed.) *Bataille: Writing the Sacred* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.108.

3. Benjamin Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 5.

4. Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination', in G. Bataille, *Story of the Eye* (London: Penguin, 1982), p.107.

5. Jon Simons, *Foucault and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 69.

6. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp.35–6.

7. Patrick Crowley and Paul Hegarty (eds.), *Formless: Ways In and Out of Form* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), p.188.

8. Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.100; see also: Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe ou le gai savoir visual de Georges Bataille* (Paris: Macula, 1995).

9. Sheringham, p.100.

10. Françoise Cachin in G. Bataille, *Manet* (London: Macmillan/Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1983), pp.5–13.

11. Yve-Alain Bois, 'The use value of 'formless'', in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss (eds.), *Formless: A User's Guide* New York: Zone Books, 1997), p.15.

12. *ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Paul Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist* (London: Sage, 2000), p.33.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Crowley and Hegarty, p.12.

18. Kevin Kennedy, 'Heterology as Aesthetics: Bataille, Sovereign Art and the

Affirmation of Impossibility', *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 35. No.4–5, pp. 115–134.

19. Noys, p.115.

20. *Ibid.*