

# DEATH, A SURREPTITIOUS FRIENDSHIP: mortality and the impossibility of dying in bataille and blanchot

## abstract

This article explores the friendship of Maurice Blanchot and Georges Bataille through a close reading of their thought on death and dying. An intellectual and personal friendship, both conceived of death as an “impossible” space and “limit-experience” that not only constituted human subjectivity, but could also puncture it, leading to joy through deindividuation. This could only occur indirectly – for Bataille, via the sacrifice, eroticism, drunkenness or laughter – and for Blanchot, via literature. This line of thinking leads to varying formulations of sovereignty at odds with the prosaic world of use-value. Proceeding first through their friendship, this paper then explores this thinking death through the contexts of French Hegelianism, Kojève and Heidegger. While holding much similar, the paper argues that Bataille’s transgressive, embodied and deindividuating visions of death present a form of community that was overlooked by Blanchot subsequently, with consequences for theories of community and collective power today.

He was perhaps suddenly invincible. Dead – immortal. Perhaps ecstasy. Rather the feeling of compassion for suffering humanity, the happiness of not being immortal or eternal. Henceforth, he was bound to death by a surreptitious friendship. – Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death* (5).<sup>1</sup>

The friendship of Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot has long interested scholars of both. Most agree that this *friendship* – and it is worth italicising what becomes the name of key works for both, an often intellectual friendship, though not without personal warmth – was constitutive and in Surya’s words “decisive” (2002: 312) for each in different ways. Yet the precise nature of this mutual influence is often unclear, with comparative analyses (like French 2007, Gregg 1994) glossing over similarities at the expense of differences. One gets the impression instead of an “oath of silence” between the pair, a refusal to disclose not only what Blanchot in *Friendship* described as the “vulgar” detail of their association (F 291), but to also speak of the difficulty of what interested both. In particular, that of the difficulty of speaking of (let alone truly thinking) the inherent risk and uncertainty of death and dying. This was not merely in a sense of some rarefied “finitude,” as in

Jean-Luc Nancy's influential reading, but of the repulsive, deindividuating power of the corpse, the suicide, ritual murder and sacrifice – all areas consuming Bataille's research in the years up to his first encounter with Blanchot.

Within that unutterability is also a challenge to traditional philosophical views on mortality as a form of solemn self-awareness that constitutes human subjectivity, like in Hegel and Heidegger. As Bataille was beginning to tentatively explore, what if such beliefs actually served not to liberate the knower, but to recuperate them as objects of productive use-value?<sup>2</sup> In contrast to this fear of dying, Bataille's work – particularly the *Summa Atheologica (La somme athéologique)*, produced over 1939-44,<sup>3</sup> overlapping with his early, intense friendship with Blanchot – reinterprets death and its reception as foundational not just to sovereignty, incorporating all passions and behaviours contrary to use-value, but also to a community that exceeds even the lifespans of the individuals concerned.

What would such a difficult thinking involve? While a vital interlocutor in its development, Blanchot has subsequently become one of its main interpreters, first in *Friendship* (1971), then in the debate around community following Nancy's *Inoperative Community* (1983) a decade later. "The basis of communication is not necessarily speech," Blanchot writes in *The Unavowable Community* in response, "but exposure to death, no longer my exposure, but someone else's" (UC 25). Blanchot's account of communication has emphasised a literature of memory, if not mourning; of a cerebral "beatitude" in the calm contemplation of the impossibility of dying (IMD 5-9; IC 113).<sup>4</sup> This resulting surreptitious friendship, as expressed by Blanchot, is one of the text, of a community at the level of literature, one that tends to sanitise the "sweet, shared slime" of Bataille's more transgressive thinking (ON 95). For Deleuze and Guattari, this was the highlight of Blanchot's contribution to an understanding of friendship, one based on the "thought of the concept as distrust and infinite patience" (1994: 5). It's shared in Nancy's reading (1991: 99-102; 2016: 21) of an idealised community in Bataille which, while rightly opposed to use-value, leaves the impression of an anaemic, non-conflictual, mutual haunting.

But I wonder if such vigilance does not inadvertently restore some of the traditional concepts of death Bataille had set out to undermine, one that involved a present-focused and embodied "laceration" and escape from the self, from which "we are thrust from our anticipation of the future into the presence of the moment" (AS2-3 207). What I want to explore is the deindividuating power of death in Bataille, a thinking that emerges prior to and in contact with Blanchot's guidance. In my

reading, it presents a striking ideal of communication, if not friendship, in which life and self are risked, “placed at the limit of death and nothingness” (ON 19). For Bataille, death ushers in the possibility of collective depersonalisation, or what the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher called “positive depersonalisation” (2015). A rupturing of individual subjectivity, exiting from the sad, myopic fetters of the isolated ego into practices of communal ecstasy, in which the continuity of collective, continuous being is momentarily glimpsed. For Bataille, this comes through sacrifice, eroticism, laughter or of joy before death, but parallels can be drawn to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, saturnalia, Nietzsche’s Dionysian, the medieval fair, or rave culture subsequently (Stallybrass and White 1986, Fisher 2016). In each, a transgressive activity leads to joyous forms of self-escaping and openness to the other, establishing, usually too briefly, an intense and unrestricted experience of community. For Bataille, and a lesser extent Blanchot, this occurs rather unusually in the witnessing of death.

Any claim for an illuminating interpretation or final word on Bataille is always fraught with peril. As Bataille warns in *On Nietzsche*, in response to a bad review from Sartre, “I don’t lead anywhere” (ON 173). The remark is a challenge to any didactic interpretation of his work, as Bataille mischievously intended (“That is why criticism of my thought is difficult. Whatever might be said, my reply is given in advance”). What is also at stake here is a death that does not lead anywhere, which neither reinforces “making the most of life” and other platitudes, nor recognises for the sake of self-knowing the catastrophe that is the inevitable termination of one’s being. Instead, the encounter with death in Bataille and Blanchot is constitutive of a deeper kind of relationality between individuals whose communication involves the risk of loss. While communication and community has been explored more in relation to Bataille than Blanchot, this paper re-orientates this around what might be called, in the kind of yonic terms Bataille might approve, the black hole of death.

The argument is structured as follows. Part 1 presents a contextual outline of Bataille and Blanchot’s friendship, situating their common interest in death and subjectivity, and the nature of death as an impossible limit-experience. Part 2 argues for the constitutive centrality of death in Bataille’s work, assessing Bataille’s working-through of the Kojévian account of death in Hegel. Part 3 develops its importance for Bataille’s subsequent conceptual development of joy and sovereignty, in contrast to use-value, a framing of the stakes of death then used to critique Blanchot. Part 4 then appraises the pre-eminence of death as the basis for communication and an undying community via Heidegger, with the conclusion reappraising Bataille as a thinker of a

deindividuated, collective ecstasy, one which poses an important challenge to modern political and economic imperatives of individual productivity and use-value.

## friendship

In what way were Bataille and Blanchot friends? Broadly speaking, the pair established a close personal bond from around late 1940/early 1941 which continued, if becoming more distant, over the remaining years of Bataille's life. Bataille was first introduced to Blanchot in December 1940 by a mutual friend, Pierre Prévost. While biographical conjecture is made difficult by a mutual silence over details, Blanchot recalls "seeing Georges Bataille almost on a daily basis and discussing a whole range of works with him" (IUS 226), while Bataille recalls that at "the end of 1940 he meets Maurice Blanchot with whom links of admiration and agreement are immediately formed (MM 221)." Blanchot's influence over *Inner Experience*, produced over 1941-42, is apparent: Bataille refers to Blanchot seven times, and regularly discussed his work both in their regular meetings and among the discussion group, the Socratic College set up by the pair in December 1941 (IE 3, 7, 12, 53, 61, 101-02, 180). Blanchot encouraged him to "pursue my inner experience as if I were the *last man*" (IE 61), he writes, and at one point even planned to write *Maurice Blanchot et l'existentialisme*, proposed to Gallimard in 1948 (Kendall 2007: 179).

This affinity was not lost on contemporaries. Albert Camus told Sartre that Bataille's work was "the exact translation and commentary of *Thomas the Obscure*," written by Blanchot in 1940 and published in 1941. A misunderstanding of both texts to be sure, but one that nicely reflects a common turn to the internal self-sufficiency of experience, without reference to authority, that appears prominently in both writers from this time. For Pierre Klossowski, Blanchot saved Bataille with "so much strength" (in Surya 2002: 312), and elsewhere, that "their friendship could not have been more beneficial for himself [Bataille], that he had recognised in total incommunicability the condition from which a true action can be exercised" (in Stamp 1999: 30). Commentators have largely agreed. As Surya puts it, "the one mirrored the other" (2002: 312), with Bident (1998: 168) agreeing that each one "embodies the latent qualities of the other," Bataille expressing Blanchot's passion, and Blanchot expressing Bataille's passivity, or as Kaufman (2001: 42-43) has it, Blanchot representing restraint, Bataille excess. Lessana (2001: 30-31) goes further still, arguing that the friendship with Blanchot enabled Bataille to re-emerge from (pornographic) obscurity as a serious philosophical writer.

There are problems with such characterisations. The elision of both into a singular project excludes a good deal fundamental to either – Bataille’s anti-fascist politics, or his earlier and later communal projects like the *Documents* and *Critique* journals, the group Counter-Attack established with André Breton, or Acéphale and the College of Sociology, or Blanchot’s attention to the fundamental ambiguity of language. It is also at the expense of other decisive friendships – for Bataille, with Klossowski, Roger Caillois, Michel Leiris, or his lover Laure (Colette Peignot) – for Blanchot, that of Emmanuel Levinas or Robert Antelme.

It is also unclear whether the influence was initially so reciprocal. References to Bataille in Blanchot are at first sparing: a favourable review of *Inner Experience* in 1943, republished in *Faux Pas*; a 1957 short story on “The Last Man,” but one whose Hegelianism draws as much from Kojève (and Bataille) as Hyppolite (Kendall 2007: 159). A chapter of the 1959 collection *The Book to Come* covers *Madame Edwarda*, a work he later described as “the most beautiful narrative of our time” in *The Infinite Conversation* (1969), and which dedicates a chapter to Bataille’s account of the limit-experience (BC 189; IC 202). The latter’s date is significant. It is following Bataille’s death in 1962 that a certain idealisation of their friendship emerges, reciprocating the laudations of Bataille’s *Inner Experience* two decades earlier. First, in the essay “Friendship” (“L’Amitié: Pour Georges Bataille”) in *Les Lettres nouvelles* (1962), which was then subsequently extended into an eponymous 1971 monograph prefaced by a quote from Bataille, and concluding with a meditation on death and friendship inspired by the latter. But again, references to Bataille are fleeting. In an otherwise wonderful essay, I find Patrick French indicative of elision in his overly-generous remark that the book “reproduces the intellectual trajectory of Bataille” (2007: 41 n18), given it makes no comment on eroticism and religion.

Nonetheless, the abiding preoccupation with this friendship seems to be *because* of its elliptical nature, something that itself fascinated Blanchot. “[T]hey reserve, even on the most familiar terms, an infinite distance,” writes Blanchot in *Friendship*, a “fundamental separation on the basis of which what separates becomes relation” (F 291). In Bataille, Blanchot found a vital interlocutor for his explorations in the impossible and indeterminate – an influence that should not be underestimated. For Blanchot, Bataille’s “entire work expresses friendship, friendship for the impossible that is man” (IC 211). For Bataille, as he wrote in one letter, “*Fundamentally*, I think what Blanchot thinks” (CL 283). There is undoubtedly a tendency to generosity in both towards one another – a mark of the friend, though also a mark of gift-giving. It is unclear here whether Bataille thinks what Blanchot has already thought, or (less likely to Klossowski) vice-versa. And in what

might this commonality of thinking consist? Both *Inner Experience* and *Thomas the Obscure* share concerns with death and the impossibility of dying, a rapture which both constitutes and overwhelms individual subjectivity, one which has “its principle and end in the absence of salvation, in the renunciation of all hope,” as Bataille writes in “Socratic College” (USN 12). Such thought must be understood against a long philosophical tradition to which the reception of Hegel in early 20<sup>th</sup> century France posed a stark challenge.

## **unemployed negativity**

Philosophical questions of subjectivity have long been haunted by the problem of death. In the Western tradition, Plato’s *Phaedo* famously puts forward that philosophy is a “training for dying” (1997: 68a), and envisions the immortality of the soul when untethered from a corrupting, bodily world. Stoic *apatheia* and Epicurean *ataraxia* variously strive for a freedom from pain and emotional disturbance through the courageous contemplation of one’s inevitable death. The subject demands solemnity, from medieval *memento mori*, *ars moriendi* and skeletal murals like that of *la danse macabre* in the Cimetière des Innocents in Paris, to the cross-cultural significance of great monuments and tombs, architecture which, for Bataille, served to conceal humanity’s “repugnance for death” with citadels that gesture to eternity (AS1 61; cf. Hollier 1992: 6).

The Stoic lineage returns in Montaigne’s essays (“To philosophise is to know how to die”) and Shakespeare’s Hamlet (“in that sleep of death what dreams may come” (2013: 309)). One finds it in the works of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. It shares a view of death as immanent (if not imminent), life’s sole certainty and the conditioning for its purpose. Noting that (male) insects often die during sex – a pleasure also proposed by Crito to Socrates to distract him from his imminent death – Kierkegaard observes that “life’s highest, most splendid moment of enjoyment is accompanied by death” (1987: 20; Plato 1997: 116e). Yet Socrates, having dismissed Crito’s suggestion, replies in the moments before his death, “save a cock for Asclepius” (1997: 118a), a parting tribute to the god of healing. In Nietzsche’s mocking view (2008: IV §340), it is a life-denying cry for the welcome cure of death for a life one wishes to escape (“O Crito, *life is a disease*”). Then there is the question, raised by Blanchot and returned to later, of the impossibility of experiencing the moment of our death. But in terms of its fundamental importance in constituting human subjectivity, a subjectivity that is always limited by, and other to, itself, its most significant author is Hegel.

“Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful,” writes Hegel in the *Phenomenology*, and to “hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength” (1977: §32). This remark was important to Bataille: it prefaces *Madame Edwarda*, an erotic novella written as “Pierre Angélique” in a period in which the working-through of Hegel in Bataille’s works was strongest, and holds the key to understanding Bataille’s paradoxical stance. For Hegel, an awareness of our own mortality distinguishes human from animal consciousness. Death, this “pure nothingness” or “negativity,” is fundamental to life – indeed, death is overcome or sublated in life (cf. Kojève 1980: 255-256), a living that “endures death and maintains itself in it,” as Blanchot (LRD 322) reformulates Hegel. It is through consciousness of death, and at the risk of death, that the subject approaches self-awareness. It’s a freedom burdened by morbid preoccupation.

As has been observed by many, Bataille’s early philosophical thought is imprinted with his engagement with Hegel, and in particular its re-introduction in France through the seminars of Alexandre Kojève on the *Phenomenology* in Paris between 1933-1939, which would have a seismic impact on French philosophy subsequently. Bataille had begun reading Hegel from 1925 using Augusto Vera’s outdated translations, but like Raymond Queneau, Jacques Lacan, Raymond Aron, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Leiris and others in attendance, arrived at Hegel first through the lectures of Kojève and, later, with the aid of Jean Hyppolite’s translation of the *Phenomenology* (1947). In characteristically effusive tones, Bataille wrote to Kojève (who became a friend and dinner companion) of being “suffocated, crushed, shattered, killed ten times over” (IE 7) by the encounter.<sup>5</sup> In particular, it was the centrality of death in Kojève’s reading which resonated with Bataille, one which ensconced it even closer to the constitution of life than Hegel proposed. For Bataille, Kojève’s was a “philosophy of death” (HDS 10; cf. Kojève 2001: 321). As Kojève writes, man is death incarnate, or “death which lives a human life” (1980: 285). “If the animal which constitutes man’s natural being did not die, and – what is more – if death did not dwell in him as the source of his anguish,” Kojève puts, “there would be no man or liberty or history or individual” (ibid. 281). In Kojève’s reinterpretation, Hegel provides a philosophical anthropology of human action that is defined by its negation and transformation of nature. Such a negation is founded on desire, whose pursuit drives men into the conflicts of recognition out of which self-consciousness emerges.

The struggle for recognition is fundamental to Hegel’s outline of the emergence of human self-consciousness in the well-known master/slave dialectic. It takes place between two conscious beings, each of which desires recognition of this consciousness by the other, and from which a

struggle ensues. Out of fear of death, one (the bondsman, or in Kojève's translation "slave") backs down and submits to the authority of the lord (for Kojève, "master"), who has no fear of dying. In this new master/slave relation, both sides grant recognition to each other. Yet as Kojève notes, there is something "tragic" (1980: 19; cf. Hegel 1977: §193) about the impossibility of recognition that unfolds, in that the lord is dependent on the bondsman for the recognition of his full humanity, a recognition that cannot be freely given.<sup>6</sup>

In Kojève's Marxian reading, the class struggle is layered over the fight for recognition. The idle lord (and capitalist class) consumes the slave's products, while the slave transforms nature through working upon it objectively. In the process, the slave discovers his subjectivity, that which makes him human and not animal – a level of self-consciousness the lord can never attain (1980: 12-15; cf. Hegel 1977: §195). Thus "the man who works transforms given being ... where there is work there is necessarily change, progress, historical evolution" (1980: 51). It is in this continuous negation of nature, underlined by the fear of death, that Kojève's philosophy of human action meets the end of history. In his view this classless and equal society was ushered in not by Napoleon (as Hegel thought), but by Stalin and the industrialisation of the Soviet Union – a view that apparently shocked his audience at the College of Sociology in December 1937 (Hollier 1988: 85-86). For Kojève, this marked the emergence of a rationally-organised, socialist-capitalist synthesis, dissolving class distinctions, and, by ending the necessity of human action, marked the "definitive annihilation of Man" as conceived by Hegel (1980: 159).

It was this "end" which Bataille had most problems with. It becomes the basis for his departure not just from Hegel, but with his growing discomfort, accentuated after the war, with what Foucault would call a certain "bureaucratic" communism, "reducing each man to an *object*" wrote Bataille, to a "life entirely devoted to producing" (AS2-3 368; 352-353).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, for all the Hegelian themes in Bataille's writing uncovered by diligent scholarship, what is more impressive is how Bataille ultimately subverts its solemn, dreadful strength, and in turn the dialectic of which it constitutes.

This becomes clear in his "Letter to X [Kojève]" of 1937, where Bataille attempts to formulate a reply to Kojève's reading of the Hegelian end of history with the "definitive satisfaction" of the recuperation of all negativity (1980: 258). Reconceiving the Hegelian dialectic as an open (and not closed) thermodynamic system, Bataille argues that negativity does not simply disappear but enters a dormant state of unemployment; in a further twist, Bataille himself embodies



this negativity. “Personally, I can only decide in one way, being myself precisely this 'unemployed negativity' (I would not be able to define myself more precisely),” he writes. “I imagine that my life – or, better yet, its aborting, the open wound that is my life – constitutes all by itself the refutation of Hegel’s system” (LX 296).<sup>8</sup> The remark encourages us to take seriously in what ways Bataille had to think through Hegel, and in particular the challenge of death and desire, in order to identify what would become a persistent concern in his oeuvre – a heterogeneous, negative excess that cannot be recuperated into the universal positivity of the self-transparency of the subject and of thought. To be “unemployed” was not merely to become superfluous or marginal, but to constitute and puncture the very limits of use-value.

Death had already been a preoccupation in Bataille’s earlier work. In *The Solar Anus* (1927), an impressionistic treatise fascinated with the birth, copulation and decay of living things, Bataille writes that “beings only die to be born” (VE 7), while the 1933 essay “Sacrifices” uses the self-sacrifice of the god-king to reckon with the “reciprocal dependence” of life and death, the “absorption of a life avid for imperative joy in the heavy animality of death” (VE 132). Yet these reflections are fragmentary, and Bataille’s sustained thinking of death unfolds with greater energy from 1939 with work on *Guilty*, which would become the second volume of the *Summa Atheologica*, completed over the war years (which we might also provocatively call “the Blanchot years”). While Derrida poses that “all of Bataille’s concepts are Hegelian” (1978: 253), it is rather the case that much of Bataille’s concepts are wrested through the encounter with Hegel. “In a sense, Hegel’s thinking is the direct opposite of my own,” Bataille noted a decade later while producing *Théorie de la religion*, “but I can make sense of this only dialectically, to put it another way, 'Hegelianly'” (in Stamp 1999: 18). The central role that death would take in Bataille’s thought from hereon is not so much in an inversion of the abject horror and prohibition of death into an erotic embrace of life, but a facing without resolution or overcoming its anguish. Bataille’s inward turn to the experience of death would draw on, and contribute to, the intense friendship and community with Blanchot.

## **joy before death**

In a short essay of 1939, “The Practice of Joy Before Death” that appeared in the journal *Acéphale*, Bataille begins to explore a possibility that would subsequently be unpacked in his later work on sovereignty in *The Accursed Share*, completed over 1946-49. Still bearing the influence of Kojève, he writes that “it appears that no less a loss than death is needed for the brilliance of life to traverse and transfigure dull existence” (VE 239). Likewise, in *Guilty*, begun in September 1939 just after

the outbreak of war,<sup>9</sup> Bataille writes “Death is a disappearance; it is a suppression so perfect that, at the summit, complete silence is its truth, so much so that it is impossible to speak of it” (G 6). The remark is still burdened by banalities (“disappearance,” “silence”), but the impossibility of its description hints at the new direction Bataille was exploring.

Both *Guilty* and *Inner Experience* are haunted by a certain silence and disorientation, reflecting an unravelling normality amid war, occupation and the arbitrary slaughter of aerial bombardment. Bataille had also withdrawn to the French countryside over 1941-42 to recuperate from tuberculosis, from which Laure had died in 1938. “A kind of hallucinating darkness causes me to slowly lose my head, communicates a contortion of all being toward the impossible,” Bataille writes, recounting the force of erotic desire, compelling him towards a profound sense of disassociation “in which I escape the illusion of a solid relationship between me and the world” (G 10). In contrast to the friendships and communities Bataille had been instrumental in forming over the 1920s-30s, Bataille now explored, with Blanchot’s encouragement, the conditions of an inner experience with neither goal, purpose nor authority except its own sufficiency.

As he wrote in the 1940 *Mesures* essay “Friendship,” “a state of profound friendship requires that a man be abandoned by all his friends ... I now seek friends, readers that a dead man can find” (in Stamp 1999: 81, echoed in G 53). But what kind of friend or reader did this dead man seek? With the breakdown of *Acéphale* following a rumoured abortive attempt at human sacrifice (with Bataille as the apparent subject, Surya 2002: 252), the dispersal of the College of Sociology with the war, and the death of his companion and lover, Bataille’s world had become much smaller and more dimmed. His response to that is interesting. For Bataille, this new ideal of the friend would be a partner through which to transgress the everyday world of “external representation” and penetrate a realm of inner experience, “a pure inner fall into a limitless abyss” (VE 238). When Bataille writes that “words can’t describe” death, what is intimated is the impossibility for language or the individual self to contain the kind of intense experience of community death (and elsewhere, eroticism, drunkenness and laughter) might involve. What has been traditionally conceived as belonging to just one, our own unique fate, became in Bataille the basis for a new ideal of association, one with the difficulty of combining intense inner experience with embodied moments of collective, desubjectifying joy. A joy coupled with anguish, one that “finally tears me apart,” glimpsed in festival-like moments of the Mexican Day of the Dead in Bataille’s view, or the Irish wake (HDS 24-5).

Bataille had been exploring the puncturing of the “half-dead state” of a world disenchanting of the sacred and denuded to productive use-value before meeting Blanchot, as he writes in “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” (in Hollier 1988: 14), in collective ventures like *Acéphale* and the College of Sociology. But where these earlier works turned to ethnography and the history of ancient religions, with Blanchot there is a tilt towards inner experience and the inexhaustibility of language, captured in the shift to meditative journals. Death involves “the happy *loss of self*,” a preoccupation of the “Practice of Joy Before Death” and later developed in *Inner Experience*, where “[i]n experience, there is no longer a limited existence” (IE 27). Death, as a form of meditative inner experience, requires something “*outside of itself*” (IE 73) to which it discovers or communicates the possibility of its absence. This recognition by the other allows the dead person to become part of a community, a community without restriction, in which mortality is understood through an awareness of the other’s finitude. In an important way, this retains the fundamental relationality of the Hegelian struggle for recognition, while re-establishing self-consciousness on the very grounds of an irrecoverable negative Hegel sought to sublimate.

This attention to deindividuation is a new one in Bataille’s work. While he had written effusively of the “contagious emotion” of the revolutionary crowds in “Popular Front in the Street” (1935), the work remained burdened by the influential reading of Gustave Le Bon of the crowd as a being of collective madness and disorder, “turning hesitating man into a frenzied being” as Bataille wrote approvingly (VE 162). A subsequent remark indicates the significance of it, and marks the transition from *Madame Edwarda* to *Inner Experience*. “[E]roticism opens the way to death. Death opens the way to the denial of our individual lives” (E 24). Eroticism is already at work in the “hallucinatory darkness” that leads to disassociation in *Guilty*; it is being tested in *Madame Edwarda*, where the protagonist “lusted after her secret and did not for one instant doubt it was death’s kingdom” (MM 153). In contrast to sexual reproduction and its perpetuation of life, the social customs and privileges of monogamy, or the romantic “fusion” and completion of two beings in one another, eroticism in Bataille necessitates losing “the feeling of self” (E 99). Like “death and nothingness,” that pairing we encountered earlier, its experience necessitates the *risk* of giving oneself away, opening oneself up and opening up the other to an intense, transient frenzy, where the impermanence of being is most apparent.

Unlike the more overtly-politicised texts and letters Bataille wrote before the war, often for an arranged audience, both *Guilty* and *Inner Experience* mark an internal reflection on how eroticism and death enable man (and it is indeed a male perspective, burdened with what Freud might call

castration anxiety) to escape the confines of the self and join into a community with the other without name or restriction. A collective depersonalisation realised through an expenditure of passions – a definition that Bataille elsewhere called “the sacred,” the “antithesis of production,” and which ushers in a new thinking of sovereignty (TR 49).

Sovereignty would continue to preoccupy Bataille in the later, unfinished drafts of the third part of *The Accursed Share*. It marks an irrecuperable and excessive energy that is “essentially the refusal to accept the limits that the fear of death would have us respect,” and which audaciously challenges this limit: “the sovereign is he who *is* as if death were not” (AS2-3 221-222). What makes the sovereign significant is that, in contrast to the fear and repugnance of death considered earlier, the sovereign actively affirms death in his challenge. We might say for the sovereign death *is*, but is not a problem to be afraid about. Like the master in Hegel, Bataille’s sovereign is willing to risk his life and the lives of the other(s) to attain a more intense experience of mutual recognition, one whose exchange of gazes temporarily rupture our isolated selves into a common intensity. “Everything I have *lived*, said, or wrote,” Bataille writes elsewhere, “everything I have loved – I considered *communication*” (ON 7). Although the sovereign is aware of death, he is unwilling to accept the fear of death or the anguish it leads to, which would place him in a servile state. “Not that dying is hateful – but living servilely is hateful,” he writes. “The sovereign man escapes death in this sense: he cannot die *humanely*. ... He cannot die fleeing ... Thus, in a sense, he escapes death, in that he lives in the moment.” (AS2-3 219) To face death without seeking to resolve it, to experience tragic jubilation before it, is conditional to one’s sovereignty, but the experience of that sovereignty cannot be a solitary one, but involves this very risking of one’s self to another.

It is interesting then to contrast the role of sovereignty in Blanchot’s work, which takes a more definitive character after *Thomas the Obscure*. It bears the imprint of Bataille, while also being characterised by an ineffable, infinite “distance” and “silence.” “It was truly night,” Blanchot writes in *Thomas the Obscure*, “the totality of things wrapped about me and I prepared myself for the agony with the exalted consciousness that I was unable to die” (TO 91). Like “The Last Word” (1935) and *Death Sentence* (1948), Blanchot’s narrative also describes an unspecified and “irreducible” sense of loss and distance, an encounter with sickness and near-death, mediated through a vague, unsatisfied relationship with a nameless, cold female, in a situation of torturous silence. The impotence of its narrator is deferred into the fecundity of language.

This question of the authentic and the banal death had also preoccupied Rilke’s *Notebooks of*

*Malte Laurids Brigge*, which Blanchot also worked through in the writing of *The Space of Literature*, with its exposition of two forms of death – the one that actually occurs, and the other that cannot be subjectively experienced, remaining indeterminate (SL 148). Blanchotian sovereignty then is tied up with an exploration of indeterminacy and, crucially, negation. Writing of Sade, Blanchot claimed that “[w]hat he has pursued by pushing the spirit of negation to its limit is sovereignty” (LS 34). Sade’s sovereignty through negation was through a series of philosophical absolutes – Man, then God, and then Nature itself. This form of true sovereignty as negation would in turn interest Bataille in *Accursed Share* III, but again there is a dualistic divergence between the two, as Blanchot explores negation through language and thought, and Bataille through transgressive forms of embodiment and disembodiment.

In his later works, Blanchot came to view the indeterminacy of death with the possibility of a “boundless pleasure,” a shift Bataille might approve. Again though, this is a cerebral pleasure through one’s release from the embodied self. In “Gazes From Beyond the Grave” (1949), he writes “his lucid gaze by which the *I*, penetrating this 'inner darkness', discovers that what is looking in it is no longer the *I*, 'structure of the world', but already the monumental, gazeless, faceless, nameless statue: the *He* of Sovereign Death” (GBG 255). “The Madness of Day” (also 1949) also explores the sovereignty of death through the meditations of an anonymous first-person narrator who is determined to face it unflinchingly. For the narrator, as for Bataille, there is a profound joy both before and during the moment of dying: “[w]hen I die (perhaps any minute now), I will feel immense pleasure. . . . this is the remarkable truth, and I am sure of it: I experience boundless pleasure in living, and I will take boundless pleasure in dying” (MD 191). As Blanchot well knew, this pleasure was one of mysticism, but one of “the outside,” beyond self, God or the reincarnated Word of Christian mysticism. Foucault would commend “its real, absolutely distant, shimmering, invisible presence, its inevitable law, its calm, infinite, measured strength” (1987: 19). One willing to think beyond not just the Nietzschean death of God, but the death of the subject seeking that God.

But as the *récit* ends, this boundless pleasure is one of abandoning not just the eros of the body, but also the possibility of having the last word. “A story? No. No stories, never again” (MD 199). Blanchot’s reading of sovereignty, and its resultant community, involves a monastic ascesis that Bataille subverts. Klossowski writes that “Bataille, despite his atheist attitude, remains in solidarity with the whole Christian cultural structure” (2007: 68). Taken at the level of a profound inversion of its norms, as in the *Summa Atheologica*, there might be something in that view. Bataille pursues transgression with a zealot’s fervour, as a kind of inverted ascetic practice. Klossowski no

doubt had in mind Bataille's youthful, aborted training for the priesthood. In Blanchot, this community is for one, its relationality being in the extirpation of relationality, an onanistic relief. In contrast, Bataille's model of community which involves intense mutual regard, consumption and self-abandonment of eroticism, inebriation, laughter and the spectacle of death.

### **the moment of dying**

The problem facing any *atheological* subjectivity is the dreadful knowing that everything is constituted by matter, no subject can outlive the death of the body, yet an experience of oneself as mere matter is impossible. This "phenomenological dualism," as Mark Fisher (2017: 109) calls it, is the condition which, for Bataille – writing on Hegel and reading Heidegger – separates human from animal (AS2-3 61; HDS 12). It is the influence of the latter which introduces a final dimension to the impossibility of death in Bataille and Blanchot.

In his notes to "Sovereignty," the incomplete third part of *The Accursed Share*, Bataille boasted of introducing Heidegger to France (as had Sartre). While he had only read what little was available in translation – *What is Metaphysics?* in 1931, and excerpts of *Being and Time* anthologised by Henri Corbin in 1938, Heidegger's influence is significant.<sup>10</sup> Like Hegel, for Heidegger death has *the* constitutive role for individual human subjectivity, but experience of it belongs to each of us alone. In its "existential-ontological" conception, writes Heidegger, "death, as the end of Dasein, is Dasein's ownmost possibility – non-relational, certain, and as such indefinite" (2001: 303). This not-shared aspect is challenged by Bataille, and a lesser extent, Blanchot. In an important clarification to Heidegger, Bataille proposed that knowledge of Dasein requires a community who not just seek it, but collectively realise it: "there cannot be knowledge without a community of seekers ... communication is a phenomenon which is in no way added to Dasein, but constitutes it" (IE 24).

For Bataille, death's knowledge necessitates the puncture of unhappy selfhood into a collective ecstasy. In his 1930 essay "Base Material and Gnosticism," it is defined by the recognition of the "base matter" of a teeming, noisome nature that threatens to overwhelm the discontinuity of individual human existence with an immanent, all-encompassing and continuous being (VE 51). The death and dying of living things piqued Bataille's interest in their capacity for life. While the melancholic Stoics might mourn the brevity of human life, Bataille's insight was to recognise that the return to death would also be a return to life for something else; that all life-and-

death belongs to one continuous form of being, which for a brief span of years takes on an individuated mind and body. A view then of life that could incorporate, as Spinoza once said, “the face of the whole universe” (2016: Letter 64, 439), or the entirety of nature as of one common order. One that subverts the reductive aspirations of human use-value, while embracing a uniquely human capacity to face death, the “glory of the human body to be the substratum of a spirit” (TR 40).

Heidegger had also raised the possibility of experiencing the moment of one’s death through witnessing the death of another person. It was impossible, he concluded, as the other person’s death is necessarily theirs, and cannot be meaningfully experienced by me (2001: 281-284). For Bataille however, this called for leaving behind the perceiving I, and finding forms of identification that rupture individuality. “In tragedy, at least, it is a question of our identifying with some character who dies,” writes Bataille, and of “believing that we die, although we are alive” (HDS 20). In this respect, theatre for Bataille offers a partial possibility of experiencing death through an identification with another (as literature would for Blanchot).

But it is through the sacrifice that the deindividuating force of death is faced down joyously, as “life and the void are confused and mingled like lovers,” Bataille writes in “Sacrifices” (VE 133). Such a paradoxical, dangerous joy, a “*human joy*” (HDS 23), is one which simulates death’s potential dissolution of self and other, without involving one’s disappearance into that oblivion. Yet despite Bataille’s typical overemphasis, this subterfuge results only in a voyeuristic identification, its community not merely “inoperative” in Nancy’s words, but spectral. Bataille’s esteem of the sacrifice, having first been explored largely via comparative religious historical work – Hubert and Mauss’ book on the subject, and Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, and explored over the 1930s in the “Sacrifices” essay and *College of Sociology*, comes to bear the imprint of Blanchot and Heidegger’s moment of arrested indeterminacy, the vantage of the solitary individual. From such an impasse, community fades in importance, and individual sovereignty would take on greater (if no less incomplete) prominence in his later work.

This impossibility of dying is also taken up in Blanchot’s “Instant of my Death,” where the young protagonist experiences death without dying after being faced by a Nazi firing squad. At the moment when he expects to die, the young man encounters a form of “beatitude,” a deep feeling of “ecstasy” and “lightness” (IMD 5-9) that embodies what Bataille described in the sovereign practice of joy before death. After his encounter he feels bound to death by “a surreptitious friendship” – a

phrase that encapsulates not just Blanchot's relationship with Bataille, but the relation of both to the fundamental problem of death and dying in their work. Yet in this *récit*, the relation is interrupted by the discovery that while his life was spared, three young farm labourers were not. Suspecting his social class may have saved his life, the young man ruminates on Hegel and mortality. This paradoxical space, to witness death without dying, and to experience a "joy" (IMD 52) in this encounter with death is ultimately, like Bataille's sacrifice, a subterfuge, though based on real events.

Like Heidegger's earlier problem of experiencing one's death, in *The Space of Literature* Blanchot also explores this possibility of dying. His method for doing so, and its basis for a kind of community, marks a divergence from Bataille with important implications for how we come to read both. For Heidegger, death is "non-relational," belonging to the individual alone, as we'll recall. As Heidegger writes, and Blanchot quotes, "death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped*" (2001: 294; SL 91). "In *dying*, the horizon of the future is given," writes Levinas, "but the future as a promise of a new present is refused; one is in the interval, forever an interval" (1987: 11). These two interlocutors give the shape of death in Blanchot: death is not merely a moment of expiration but a threshold of "irreducible" and distant experience. "Presence is only presence at a distance," Blanchot remarks in *Friendship*, "and this distance is absolute – that is, irreducible; that is, infinite" (F 218). Like Kafka's "Before the Law," an important parable for Blanchot and Bataille, the threshold of death is not one that can be passed through, its transcendence deferred, "possible, but not at this moment" (2008: 185).

For Heidegger and Blanchot then, death is constitutive and restrictive of human subjectivity, an infinite distance that must be invested with meaning, "not a given, it must be achieved" (SL 91). At the same time, "The Instant of my Death," like the end of *Thomas the Obscure*, points to what might be unthinkable – the endurance of the individual in a death without dying. Such a scenario approaches that of Socrates' tribute to Asclepius. When Blanchot fixates on the phrase "the life that endures death and maintains itself in it" in "Literature and the Right to Death," it points to a fear in the latter *récit* where its terms are reversed: a death that endures life and maintains itself in it (LRD 327, 336). Likewise, anxieties about a death without dying concern Blanchot's *Death Sentence*, "The Last Man" and "The Instant of My Death." Each explores death as an experience within an inner decentred space, a "night" unlike any other, beyond physical dying. Yet whereas Bataille draws on transgressive forces to rupture selfhood and embrace the "purulence of anonymous,



infinite life” (AS2-3 70), in Blanchot it is the calmer space of literature, like that of the “irreducible distance” (IC 76) between two interlocutors in a conversation, that best identifies it.

“My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world,” Blanchot writes (LRD 323-324). Here death is not only the condition of language, the alienating distance between two discontinuous beings, but also the very being of man, who is “man only because he is death in the process of becoming” (LRD 337). In a final, important way then, Blanchot inverts Bataille’s own inverted Hegelianism. The inner experience and understanding of an all-too-human death, Blanchot’s *night*, in turn reinforces an elevated solipsism. The challenge Bataille presented however wasn’t merely the pursuit of a solitary joy before death, a banal celebration of life or stoic courage before dying perhaps, but a limit-experience that could lacerate, temporarily, the irreducible distance between two beings and conjure up a community from beyond the grave. At the same time, we should bear in mind Bataille’s own warning about his work via Sartre. It may well be that what Bataille was envisioning in the meditative wartime journals that most bear Blanchot’s influence was something beyond words, beyond language. Blanchot’s intensive exploration of the outside in literature might be considered an attempt to take seriously (and take up) that challenge. But whereas in the outside Bataille found many, Blanchot would find only one.

## **conclusion**

While for Bataille and Blanchot there was a certain frisson in the thinking of death, its force can be fatiguing. Adorno wrote of Heidegger that his philosophy offered little more than “a regression into the cult of death” (2003: 113), and Hegarty is among many in chafing at the excesses of Bataille’s “pseudo-gothic aesthetic” (2000: 144). Gillian Rose also made the same critique of Blanchot, in a remark I find typical of a wider critical problem for readers of Bataille and Blanchot. Rose found his fixation on the impossibility of dying as disquieting, and rounded on his “passivity beyond passivity” in response to the disaster as debarring the possibility of justice (1996: 120-122). Her demand in response for an “*activity beyond activity*” capable of learning from death and mourning, or recognising the consequences of one’s action or passivity for others, is admirable. Nonetheless, it betrays a certain impatience with the necessary indeterminacy and hiatus that dying places before language. It is to consider death as an end, a dead-end, something to be overcome or imbued with meaning. This same *not-going-anywhere* that Bataille offered up as the challenge of his thought is one that presents such critical trouble for commentators, keen to find meaning where its possibility had been so provocatively (and problematically) challenged by both.

In the final case, death, through Bataille, has the power to deface and disassociate, opening us up to the unbearable presence of the other. “A life is only a link in a chain” (ON 7). Its passions and pleasures must be recognised within a much wider web of relationality that does not objectify the other into something of mere use-value, but embraces their finitude on its own terms. Given our current era’s moral imperative to individually work, produce and consume even more than whatever we do at present, this wider assault on use-value through sovereign risk-taking and jubilation is important. As collective spaces like the rave, boozier or massed public protest come under growing threat by “public order” anxieties and social media narcissism, Bataille’s vision of a risk-taking community and deindividuating communication is radical, untapped even. Not in terms of a rarefied ontological community of distant friends or lovers, or a literature of eschatological indeterminacy, but in the sovereign pleasure of opening oneself to others through intense, immanent, friendships.

## notes

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1 Works by Bataille and Blanchot have been abbreviated for ease of reference – see bibliography.

2 In Seminar VII, Lacan would later describe this as the morality of state power: “Carry on working, work must go on’. Which, of course, means: ‘Let it be clear to everyone that this is on no account the moment to express the least surge of desire.’” (1997: 318)

3 Comprising *Guilty* (1944, but begun first), *Inner Experience* (1943) and *On Nietzsche* (1945), and arguably also *Madame Edwarda*, an erotic novella (1941) dealing with similar project to rearticulate the sacred amid the death of God, through transgression. French and Nancy (1983) present this project as marked by a withdrawal from politics, but the historical facts of Paris’s disruption by war, and Bataille’s recuperation in the countryside from tuberculosis, were decisive.

4 Or what Derrida calls “undying as *différance*” (in IMD 95).

5 On Kojève and Bataille’s friendship, see Kleinberg 2005: 65-66.

6 Decisive for Lacan’s mirror phase, and Sartre on knowledge, power and relationality in *Being and Nothingness*.

7 Foucault wrote of the “bureaucrats of the revolution” in his Preface to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (2003: xii).

8 Hollier (1988: 86) notes that the letter was drafted two days after Kojève presented his end of history thesis to the College of Sociology.

9 Its original title had been *Friendship (L'Amitié)* until Queneau, Bataille's editor at Gallimard, intervened (French 2007: 40).

10 Corbin published the former in 1931 on Bataille's recommendation. On Bataille and Heidegger, see Comay 77; on Heidegger in France, and Sartre, see Janicaud 25-36, and Kleinberg 2005: 69-71. I can find no textual evidence for Esposito's peculiar claim that Heidegger "considered Bataille to be the greatest French philosopher of his time" (113).

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