

Immanence and the Sacred in Bataille's *On Nietzsche*

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“Nietzsche wrote “with his blood:” whoever criticizes him or, better, *experiences* him can only do so by bleeding in his turn” (ON, p. 7)

“Not hearing Nietzsche's voice, the earth would not seem to me completely the earth: it resounded, this voice, perhaps as a laceration, a kind of strange joy, inhuman, foreign to man...” (ON, pp. 333 - 34)

“Reading Nietzsche is easy, but only apparently: it is normally a euphoric, even exalted, *flight*” (ON, p. 334)

For Bataille, Nietzsche's thought calls for a response through which both the thought and the 'commentary' this receives are subject to the very processes of critique and 'expenditure' both Bataille and Nietzsche identify as the essence of life. In this regard Bataille's *On Nietzsche* is, in his terms, an attempted 'communication' (*see* ON, pp. 22 - 25) with Nietzsche's texts. As he states, “(m)y life in Nietzsche's company is a community; my book is this community” (ON, p. 24). This interpretative practice pursues what can be termed a 'hermeneutic eroticism' - a 'sacrificial' reading in which theoretical and propositional tendencies seeking textual dominance are ritualistically consumed so that the primary forces of affirmative expenditure within them, their voicing of the sacred, can re-emerge. I aim to identify some of the distinctive characteristics of *On Nietzsche* and suggest, for future development, some lines of critical exchange between Nietzsche's and Bataille's respective (non-) 'projects' as these arise in the text.

## I

At the heart of Bataille's overall theoretical endeavour are two fundamental claims supporting an overarching task which itself presupposes the epochal event of the 'death of God' as adumbrated in Nietzsche's texts. The general task is the articulation of a post-theistic, naturalistic, conception of the 'sacred' and religious-spiritual experience. Bataille pursues this through the elaboration of two basic commitments. Firstly, the primacy of 'expenditure' within the energetic processes that constitute natural life. Secondly, that such expenditure is *indigenously sacred*. For Bataille, the self-affirmation of the economy of the production and consumption of energy is auto-consecrating, a self-anointing that occurs (uniquely it seems) in human consciousness in and through the relations of taboo and transgression it maintains. Hence, the distinctive challenge of Bataille's Nietzsche consists of its insistence on the fundamentally 'religious' nature of Nietzsche's thought and the experience in which it originates. The ultimate concern of Nietzsche's thought is, for Bataille, the recognition of the religious character of natural life and the role the human organism can play in its self-affirmation. For Bataille, to lack a 'feel' for the (atheistic) religious core of Nietzsche's thought and response to existence is, ultimately, to deny its source and misread the orientation of his critique of modernity. For Bataille, the 'death of God' in Nietzsche's sense is an inherently religious event within the historical manifestation of the sacred [i.e., the 'great ladder of religious cruelty' passage – M20/ON, p. 195] whereby it jettisons the guise of the transcendent and its alliance with the 'ascetic ideal'. Furthermore, Bataille's Nietzsche demands a religious response to the epochal event in question if the condition of the 'last man' (TZS: P5) and 'incomplete nihilism' are to be avoided and overcome.

*On Nietzsche* prioritises two key themes in Nietzsche's texts. Firstly, an underlining of the centrality of the 'madman in the marketplace' passage (GS 125/M18 ON, p. 194) for any configuration of the basic historical task of thought Nietzsche identifies – the vital importance of sustaining and reinvesting in self-transcendence in the absence of the transcendent. Secondly, Nietzsche's recovery of, and life-long devotion to, the 'Dionysian' and its contestation of the claim to ontological primacy of the objectificatory categories and principles of theoretical and scientific discourse including those of 'self-interest' and 'self-preservation'. Hence, at the centre of these shared insights and interests is the striking claim, independently elaborated by both Nietzsche and Bataille, that natural life is ultimately self-expending rather than self-preserving and that, furthermore, this movement of immanent self-expenditure is intrinsically sacred. For both, natural life is religiously self-sufficient. They agree therefore that the principle task of thought is to pursue what Nietzsche termed the 'religious affirmation of life' (WP §1052).

The demise of the transcendent reveals, for both Nietzsche and Bataille, the primacy of (self-) transcendence, of desire over its objects, and the reconceiving and revaluation of 'immanence' this entails. The notion of immanence, and its articulation as a primary and inherently insatiable desire, is a key recurring theme in *On Nietzsche*. Both Nietzsche and Bataille pursue a revaluation of immanence, challenging its theistic ontological constitution, (as insufficient, conditioned and derivative) moral interpretation, (i.e., its 'demonization' as the 'egoic' or 'self-interested') and negative existential evaluation (i.e., the struggle against 'Schopenhauerian pessimism'). The aim being the affirmation of a primary instinct of insatiable, self-expending desire and the formulation of a 'morality' rooted therein. As Bataille formulates it, "(E)ach human being is occupied by killing what is human within him. To live is to demand life, to make the sound of life resound, is to go against one's interests" (ON, p. 102). This recovery of a

‘Dionysian’ conception of immanence forms the basis for Bataille’s elaboration, in *On Nietzsche*, of the notion of transcendence and its identification with the undermining of the theistic-humanist conception of the natural order in terms of the individuated ego and its interests (i.e., the utile order of ‘a’ or ‘the being’ as Bataille characterises it throughout ON [see, p. 181]). As he states, “(I)mmanence signifies “communication”” (ON, p. 145).

Among the many formulations of these points is the insightful claim that, “the extreme unconditional longing of humanity was expressed for the first time by Nietzsche *independently from a moral goal and from serving a God*” (ON, p. 4). Similarly, the naturalistic repatriation of transcendence to immanence is implicit in the claim that Nietzsche’s difficulty consisted in, “letting go of God and the good, yet nevertheless burning with the ardour of those who died for God or the good” (ON, p. 5). In the fifth ‘Appendix’ (“Nothingness, Transcendence and Immanence”, ON, pp. 181 – 82), transcendence is aligned with a non-privative ‘nothingness’ that marks the surpassing of the limits of the bounded, self-contained being, its recuperation in the ‘totality of being’ (ON, p. 181) or ‘immanent immensity’ (ON, p. 161) and the ‘risking’ of itself (and surrender to ‘chance’) this entails. As Bataille states, “for us this non-being is full of meaning...I know that I can be *annihilated*” (ON, p. 181. See, p. 299). Insofar as the individuated being, as it loses its concern for the interests that constitute it, acknowledges and affirms the emergent realm of ‘continuity’ or ‘communication’ to which it is being restored, then it recognises ‘immanence’ (see, ON, p.181) and sustains this to the extent that the move beyond the order of the interests of ‘the’ being is not referred to a transcendent object (whether ‘this’ or ‘other’ - worldly). A key mode of disclosure of this order of primary existence is, Bataille claims, ‘laughter’ literally at ‘nothing’, “an immanent morality would demand...that I die without

reason...in the name of nothing, at which I laugh” (ON, p. 182. See, pp. 65, 145 – 148, 151f, 157, 161).

Bataille, following Nietzsche, therefore uncovers an autonomous desire at the core of natural immanence. Bataille’s (and by implication Nietzsche’s) thought reconfigures the transcendence of desire as classically articulated in Plato’s *Symposium* such that the ‘slippage’ (see ON, pp. 124, 132, 252) beyond the individual beloved in ‘communication’ culminates not in the transcendent ‘form of pure beauty’ but the return, in ‘un-knowing’, to a pre-individuated realm of natural immanence that places both beings beyond themselves in ‘continuity’ (see ON, pp. 36f, 77f, 80, 124, 132, 248f, 252, 256), “...what I love in the beloved – to the point of desiring to die from this love – is not the particular being, but the share of the universal in that being” (ON, p. 77). For Bataille, although this movement beyond the interests of beings takes many forms and can be both ‘benefic’ and ‘malefic’ (with the latter having ontological priority, see pp. 258f), it always marks the advent of the ‘sacred’, “...the sacred is always dangerous. The sacred is the fusion of beings in place of their separation” (ON, p. 258). When taking an (empirical) religious form, the movement of expenditure in which the primacy of immanence is reaffirmed is aligned (by Bataille) with mystical states of union through divine love, “in the state of immanence – or *theopathy* – the mind itself is entirely penetrated by nothingness...transcendence no longer grows at the expense of, over and above, nothingness, abhorring it (ON, p. 142).

## II

Bataille is convinced that Nietzsche's thought is rooted in a similar affective familiarity with, and transport into, immanence thus conceived (*see* ON, p. 142). It is this sustained focus on identifying, evoking and articulating the sensibility (or 'type of will') seeking expression in Nietzsche's text, that is one of the most distinctive aspects of *On Nietzsche*. Arguably, Bataille offers the most sustained attempt yet made to provide something like a *philosophical* (rather than psycho-biographical) 'existential' reading that applies to Nietzsche's texts his own claim that, "...every great philosophy (is) ... a confession on the part of its author... a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir" (BGE §6). Bataille spells out the implication of this for Nietzsche interpretation, "(D)on't doubt this for a moment longer: not a word of Nietzsche's work can be understood before having *lived* this dizzying dissolution into totality; outside of that this philosophy is a maze of contradictions..." (ON, p. 13). This is not at odds with Bataille's (and Nietzsche's) rejection of the claim to ontological primacy of self-interest as, in the case of Nietzsche's texts, it is the 'Dionysian artist' in the process of losing its individuation in a reconnection with immanent nature that seeks expression. A modern Archilochus, a 'lyrist' at one with the primary currents of life itself (*see*, BT §5). This focus on Nietzsche's 'spiritual life' is most obviously apparent in Bataille's idiosyncratic inclusion in *Memorandum* of a selection of passages from Nietzsche's texts in a sub-section he entitles 'Mystical States' (ON, pp. 231 - 238). This consists almost entirely of texts Bataille regards as positive biographical reports of the exalted states and moods of Nietzsche's enraptured experience of immanence. Bataille thereby seeks to present Nietzsche's thought as imbued with, and grounded in, a profoundly religious disposition akin to his own.

In considering the implications of Bataille's selection from Nietzsche's texts in *Memorandum* (and throughout *On Nietzsche*) there are two striking, virtually total, omissions. These are, firstly, *The Birth of Tragedy* – arguably the text that can be said to be the 'best fit' for Bataille's roughly sketched ontology and socio-political and psychological critique of modernity and, secondly, *On the Genealogy of Morality* – the text which, as I shall indicate later, contains many critical resources for a possible 'Nietzschean' critique of aspects of Bataille's thought. Bataille's selections and focus reflect his conception of what he regards as essential to Nietzsche's thought (and life) – its chthonic 'backbeat' of atheistic religious affirmation and joy. The implicit, provocation – that the abundant rigor and virtuosity of the theoretical argumentation within Nietzsche's corpus notwithstanding – he was (like Bataille), first and foremost, a 'mystic' (albeit of immanence rather than the transcendent), a thinker for whom critique is always orientated toward, and serves, affirmation (*see ON*, p. 170).

Hence, for Bataille, it is a question of retrieving and celebrating, as crystalized in the title of one of the appendices 'Nietzsche's Inner Experience' (*ON*, pp. 169 - 70) in which he states, "I wanted to enter a comprehension of the Nietzschean experience" (*ON*, p. 169). He emphasises that the mysticism he finds in Nietzsche is the manifestation of the auto-affection of immanence itself in its becoming-sacred a textual 'solar flare' expressive of an enraptured psyche, "I believe that Nietzsche was thinking of 'mystic states' in the passages in which he speaks of the divine... a mystic mode of feeling, in the sense of experience and not of mystic philosophy" (*ON*, pp. 169 - 70). For Bataille, the pre-eminent task of Nietzsche interpretation is the articulation of the 'spiritual dimension' of his texts. This claim is expressed in a *Nachlass* passage Bataille cites (twice), "(T)he new feeling of power: the mystic state; and the clearest, most daring rationalism serving the path to reach it. Philosophy: the expression of an extraordinarily elevated state of the

soul” (ON, pp. 170, 232). Nietzsche’s texts are here conceived as, first and foremost, a breviary for the atheistic, biologically-grounded, *religious* spiritual life. The implicit claim is that his texts voice the spirituality of expenditure itself as manifest in the specific quality of Nietzschean ‘happiness’ (see ON, pp. 202, 206f, 208, 210, 215, 222, 236, 238), that affirms life finding, without dialectical or teleological appropriation, a positivity in the suffering (from the perspective of the individuated being) it inherently contains. In the concluding, ‘Mystical States’ sub-section Bataille gives free reign to the expression of the ‘elevated state of the soul’ (ON, p. 232) of the ‘this-worldly’ mysticism so often found in Nietzsche’s texts, reports of his episodes of fusion with a self-transfiguring life in expenditure (*see* ON, pp. 233f).

### III

Bataille seeks to develop his economics of sacred expenditure by fusing his key terms and themes with Nietzsche’s. This thematic and discursive melding is strikingly apparent from the outset in Bataille’s recasting of Nietzsche’s contrast between ‘ascending’ and ‘descending’ life (AC §2, 17-18) and associated conception of a ‘*healthy* morality’ (TI: “Morality as Anti-Nature” §4), as a morality of ‘summit’ and ‘decline’ in which the ‘good’ is concerned with the transcendence of the interests of the individuated organism and species in a self-consuming expenditure. Bataille finds in Nietzsche a kindred concern to articulate a reconceived morality of immanence inherent to energetic life itself, ‘to burn without answering to some moral obligation’ (ON, p. 4. *See* ON, p. 149).

A particularly sustained, and problematic, instance of this permeation of theme and discourse in *On Nietzsche* is Bataille’s investment in the notion of ‘evil’. Given Nietzsche’s predominantly ‘strategic’ use of the term as part of his rhetorical process of inversion and revaluation of Platonic-Christian values – with the clear aim (e.g., GM I) to surpass such inherited moralistic



terminology, Bataille's insistence on its retention and positive redeployment is challenging notwithstanding the fact that he obviously agrees with Nietzsche's critique of the moralized 'good/evil' opposition. As he states, "(T)he state of immanence signifies *beyond good and evil*" (ON, p. 151). For Bataille, Nietzsche is, provocatively, *the* "philosopher of evil" (ON, p. 7) suggesting that the 'value of evil' (*ibid*) – which Nietzsche certainly did acknowledge – is the key to the sense of the term 'power' in the notion of the 'will to power' (*see* ON, pp. 7, 148). This claimed shared lineage of 'evil' is also a theme into which Bataille weaves another striking discursive feature of *On Nietzsche* its language of 'beings' and 'being'. Bataille regards the metaphysical conception of the moral 'good' to be a transcendence manqué, a mere projection of the interests of individuated being into a universality of (individuated) species interest hence not a fundamental contestation of the interests of the being *per se* and thus a refusal of natural life's inherent normativity and the source of its native 'categorical imperative' – 'Expend!'. A 'beyond of beings' (*see* ON, pp. 33f) is, given the most basic energetic imperatives that govern human life, for Bataille (and by implication Nietzsche) to be identified with an exceeding of both the empirical *and* transcendent interests of the being (*see* ON, pp. 31f, 42f, 249). Supporting these reflections on the exorbitance of a primary desire that refuses total alignment with the interests of species being is a revaluation in which, (implicitly following the early Nietzsche), 'evil' is identified with individuation as such, "...evil would be the existence of beings – insofar as existence implies their separation" [*see* ON, p. 31] - the sacrilegious 'dismemberment' of the unified whole of Dionysian life.

The 'morality of the summit' concerns, therefore, the desire to surpass the limits imposed by self-interested investment in the productive life-project of both the 'ego' and the human species, "(B)y destroying in myself, in others, the integrity of being, I open myself to communion, I attain

a moral summit” (ON, p. 40). For Bataille’s moral energetics, the ‘good’ of the ‘moral summit’ is indexed to those expenditures which promote the “violation of the integrity of beings” (ON, p. 32). It is, therefore, “closer to evil than to good” (*ibid*) in the sense these terms have in the anti-naturalistic and idealist appropriations of the ‘moral’ premised on the erroneous prioritisation of utility. In contrast, ‘decline’ refers to those expressions of exhaustion and fatigue that “gives all value to the concern for conserving and enriching the being” (*ibid. See ON, pp. 150, 254, 259*) – the source, therefore, of the moralized sense of the ‘good’.

Hence, for Bataille, the ‘summit’ can only have an ‘immanentizing’ and sanctifying effect as expenditure inevitably induces ‘communication’, the reintegration of superficially separate beings, into the relations that precede and exceed them as individuated entities (*see ON, p. 33, 41*). In the end, the lure of the ‘anguish’ of ‘risk’ prevails over the ‘boredom’ of self-possessed integrity (*see ON, pp. 36f, 248ff, 254f*). It is on this basis that Bataille offers the claim that, “the sovereign desire of beings has the beyond of the being for its object” (ON, p. 36. *See pp. 150, 251f, 288, 305*). Bataille’s aim, in dialogue with Nietzsche, is not to abandon or denigrate the aspiration for transcendence but to seize the epochal opportunities arising from the collapse of the failed, transcendent appropriation of it. He articulates a non-objectificatory, yet fully positive, realisation of transcendence founded in the ‘lived experience’ of a self-transfiguring immanence as disclosed in the affectivity of self-expenditure and ‘communication’. Nietzsche’s authority is evoked in relation to the elaboration of a non-voluntaristic conception of the ‘will to power’ in terms of a de-individuating (i.e., ‘self-overcoming’) and immanentizing return of expenditure. It takes the form of both interpretative claims, for example, “(T)he Will to power is equivocal. It remains in a sense the will to evil, finally the will to expenditure, to risk...” (ON, p. 150. *See pp. 53, 124, 273, 288f, 338*) and the selection made of passages for inclusion in *Memorandum*. The

‘Dionysian’ is, of course, the single theme in Nietzsche’s texts in which both of Bataille’s inter-linked ‘obsessions’ (expenditure and the sacred) are encapsulated and Bataille includes a considerable number of passages on this theme in his selection (e.g., ON, pp. 200ff, 221-24, 235).

#### IV

To finish, I shall suggest some themes in *On Nietzsche* which generate ‘tensions’ between Bataille’s and Nietzsche’s thought that suggest further mutual interrogations. The point is not to reduce the Bataille-Nietzsche dialogue to the norms of utile academic debate but, through the exploration of such creative dissonances deepen their ‘communication’ and thereby intensify the mutual self-overcoming of their encounter.

Firstly, does not Bataille’s critical appropriation of some of the key motifs of Christianity (e.g., ‘evil’, ‘sin’, ‘guilt’, ‘temptation’) and, more importantly, his courting of the sensibility underpinning them, not surpass Nietzsche’s predominantly oppositional-critical stance toward it? Is not Bataille’s critical *affirmation* of, for example, both Christian mysticism and the Crucifixion as emergent traces of sacred expenditure within Christianity indicative of an achieved *immanence of critical relation* to it that Nietzsche rarely achieved? In short, Bataille seems to surpass Nietzsche’s predominant stance of “Dionysus *versus* the “Crucified”” (passage cited ON, p. 201). The challenge of Bataille’s engagement with Nietzsche is not merely therefore the demand that Nietzsche be regarded as first and foremost a religious thinker but also that Christianity be recognised as an erotic economy in tune (if only residually and begrudgingly) with ‘sacred’ energetics and hence not irretrievably pathological as Nietzsche typically suggests? Nietzsche’s religious critique of Christianity, when compared to Bataille’s, appears to limit itself to a critical contrast with a superior, Dionysian alternative (e.g. ancient Greek religion). *On*

*Nietzsche* suggests that Bataille overcame such a restriction and developed a fully immanent critique that affirms Christianity's naturalistic religious essence. He thereby, arguably, out-Nietzsche's Nietzsche!

Secondly, travelling in the other direction, is not Bataille's erotic obsession with the Christian libidinal economy indicative of a fatal psycho-sexual entrapment which often threatens to descend into a mere transgressionism? As he states in a contemporaneous text, "(M)y true church is a whorehouse – the only one that gives me true satisfaction" (*Guilty*, p. 12 [cited in Kendall, S: *Georges Bataille*, p. 45]. See ON, p. 148). Is this not a sensibility worryingly similar to the broken moralist characterized by Nietzsche as 'failed swine' (GM III: 2) and some distance, seemingly, from his aesthetico-ethical exemplar of Greco-Roman 'self-mastery'? Is a place not already prepared for a sensibility and erotic economy such as that expressed by Bataille (albeit without recourse to the 'ascetic ideal') in the form of Nietzsche's critique of Schopenhauer's thought as expressive of a type 'tortured' by their sexuality (GM III: 6 - 7)? Perhaps, Bataille's fascination, with Christian erotics signals a 'fatal attraction' that maroons his thinking in one of the historical *cul-de-sacs* of the 'death of God' catalogued so astutely by Nietzsche? The epochal opening of possibilities in the wake of God's passing was surely not meant to stall human cultural revitalisation in a pathological erotics of 'sin' and 'temptation' but to be a path to a post-Christian future in which the species (or at least its 'higher types') could finally realize a fully transvalued post-moral existence. What becomes in *On Nietzsche*, it might well be asked, of Nietzsche's vision of the promise of a 'second innocence' (GM II: 20) in the human animals' relation to, and evaluation of, sensuality, the instincts, the body etc., made possible by the conjunction of the rise of atheism and the decline in ontological feelings of guilt?

As Stuart Kendall reminds us in his “Introduction” (*see* ON, p. xvi), part two of Bataille’s text has its origins in a lecture he gave on the topic of sin. Of course, Bataille is, doubtless, conversant with Nietzsche’s coruscating and sustained critique of this Christian notion (although very little of it is cited in ON – e.g. GM 135). This awareness is signalled by Bataille’s inclusion, as an epigram (*see* ON, p. 36), of an unequivocal statement of Nietzsche’s condemnation of such a theologico-moral notion. Clearly Bataille does not seek to defend the Christian-moral conception of sin. However, he clearly does wish to retain and rhetorically trade upon, for existential and psycho-sexual (rather than literary-deconstructive) reasons, many of the connotations and associations of such inherited theological language. Bataille’s rumination on ‘temptation’ (*see* ON, pp. 37f) seems to indicate that the mere social functioning of taboos and prohibitions, whilst necessary, is not sufficient for the most intense forms of transgression and expenditure. Only those taboos so invested as to ensure a specific quality of ‘anguish’ in the face of the self-defilement and shame linked to the succumbing to ‘temptation’ are so geared as to deliver maximal erotic expenditure. Only, it seems, a very specific quality of affectively-invested taboo maintains the requisite frisson of ‘risk’. The strictures of Christian moralization seem to provide peerlessly the erotic élan associated with suitably excruciating and mortifying debasements, creating and crucially sustaining the ‘low’ in the sense of ‘filth’ and ‘crude obscenity’ (ON, p. 37).

Bataille can be said, particularly throughout the extensive ‘biographical’ sections of *On Nietzsche*, to be offering something like a ‘phenomenology’ of the lived emotional-erotics of the Christian experience he seems to be defined by despite his ‘ferociously religious’ atheism. ‘Once a Catholic...’ it might be said! Bataille seems to find within the Christian experience certain very particular erotic possibilities premised on a psychology of taboo rooted far more in the

indigenous sacred economy of life itself than Nietzsche appreciated. Beyond its Christian expression, Bataille appears to propose a universalised notion of ‘sin’, ontologised as a necessary aspect of the existential reality of erotic life, a specific valence and charge required of taboo precluding the development of what might appear to be a ‘healthier’ relation to it. This is not, like Nietzsche, to pursue the overcoming of Christianity in the sense of its elimination, but a post-moral inhabitation of it as a repository of astute erotic techniques regarded as more in touch with the sacred than it is prepared or able to admit. As he states,

...sin is the violation of a prohibition (the prohibition necessary for the maintenance of the integrity of beings). There is no communication without sin. Sin is the act of a being giving in to the desire to go beyond its own being. The integrity of his own being (and the integrity of the other) must be shattered in order to do this (OC, p. 261).

With the inherent risk entailed of unwittingly universalising Christian eroticism (perhaps acknowledged in the inclusion of the Nietzschean notion of ‘hyper-Christianity’ [ON, pp. 77, 134]) Bataille insists on underlining essential aspects of the subjectivity of sacred experience *per se*. A mere ‘loss’ of the ‘integrity of the being’ is not sufficient in this respect. It is also required that this dissolution of the productive-utile, individuated self be marked by a very specific emotional atmosphere of ‘laceration’, ‘malediction’, ‘sin’ and ‘guilt’. The non-moralistic, *sui generis*, ‘religio-erotic’ sense of these terms in the resonance they have in the domain of sacred ‘communication’ is to be recovered. As Bataille states,

“Communication” is love, love links itself to laceration and cannot be separated from bitterness. The feeling of malediction in love testifies to the depth of the presence of the sacred...the necessity of finding the beyond of the being through nothingness gives communication its characteristic of rape, of sin...communication cannot take place without touching the integrity of beings; communication itself is guilty...communication passes necessarily through anguish – that without anguish there is no real communication...Isn’t evil or sin the basis of communication? Which is to say the sacred...the sacred is always dangerous (ON, pp. 248, 251, 258).

Significantly, communication *via* ‘sin’ characterizes equally both the spiritual and carnal domains and, in each case, can be in the service of either the ‘closed being’ (e.g., conjugal sexual

relations, the spirituality of religious institutions and Ecclesiastical power) or, in its profoundest sense, that of ‘open or lacerated being’ (e.g., carnal acts committed as ‘vice’; mystical life beyond the Church) [see ON, p. 261]. There are dynamics and qualities to such a conception of erotic expenditure that appear to be at odds with an ideal of ‘health’ that Nietzsche seems to frequently promote, the ‘well-adjusted’ type who have no ‘fear of sex’ or ‘anguish’ before the self-expenditure it entails. Bataille’s later critique (see E, pp. 222f) of those perspectives critical of a ‘fear of sex’ *per se* (i.e., not just dysfunctional, pathological forms of it) seems to be anticipated in *On Nietzsche* as it seeks to retrieve and affirm, in contrast, a recognition of the sacred as the loss of integral being for which the joy of release is the counterpart to the anxiety of the threatened ego and which remains a *necessary condition* for it. Without the anguish of the individuated being no ‘beyond of being’ or *erotic* return to immanence is possible. As Bataille states, “...the return to immanence takes place on the heights where human beings exist” (ON, p. 144). For all its considerable faults, Bataille can credit the erotics of Christianity with an un-nerving knowledge of these psycho-sexual dynamics and their economic roots. The provocation of Bataille here is that, in pursuing his path as a ‘cultural physician’ Nietzsche develops a blind-spot to the intrinsic perversity of life’s eroticism – something which, as he demonstrated so mercilessly, did *not* escape the ‘ascetic priest’. Rather than seeking a ‘cure’ with the goal of establishing a ‘healthy’ relation to sexuality (i.e., less agonized and fraught) Bataille pursues the path, more uncompromisingly than Nietzsche, of overcoming Christianity by contesting its moral self-image and alerting it to its vestigial contact with the erotics of the sacred.

In, laudably, promoting a recovery from an oppositional, moralized relation to the ‘low’ (i.e., the body, sensuality etc.) for which Christianity, in the guise of the ‘ascetic ideal’, must be condemned, Bataille’s insistence (in contrast to Nietzsche and Freud?) that a ‘healthy’ relation to

sexuality contains a *non-pathological* notion of ‘anguish’ and is surrounded by an emotional atmosphere of abasement and abjection – if that is, its sacred eroticism is to be affirmed – is a highly distinctive aspect of his thought requiring that pathological (i.e., ‘neurotic’) ‘fear of sex’ be distinguished from the sacrificial-erotic anguish of the individuated being, constituted by taboo, facing ‘communication’ through transgression. The loss of the self may be the primary process of desire but it seems to require necessarily, for Bataille, a crucial trepidation on the part of the individuated self in relation to it. It is maybe possible, therefore, to identify a benefit to the strange omission from Bataille’s Nietzsche’s of genealogical critique as apparent in the naivety of the role, in *On Nietzsche*, of the inheritance of the moralized discourse of Christianity. It seems that it is precisely this glaring deficiency in Bataille’s appropriation of Nietzsche which enables him, unlike Nietzsche, to hear the vestiges of (atheistic) religiosity within the pathos of the Christian libidinal economy.

Bataille’s phenomenology of the sacred erotics of Christianity, and its inherently ‘sacrificial’ nature, also governs his interpretation of the pre-eminent Christian symbol – the Crucifixion. Again, a clear tension with Nietzsche’s interpretation of the phenomenon is apparent in *On Nietzsche*. (see ON, pp. 32f, 77, 133f, 248f, 261, 299). Significantly, Bataille does not include in *Memorandum* Nietzsche’s most rigorous critique of the ‘symbol of the Cross’ (see GM II:21) and the alternative libidinal analysis it offers. Bataille criticizes the Christian appropriative interpretation of the killing of Christ as a significantly flawed sacrificial event (see, ON, p. 299) that is surpassed in its religiosity by the sacrificial practice and symbolism of other historical religions (e.g. the Aztec). However, perhaps particularly in the case of the affirmative critique of such an otherwise impoverished religion as Christianity, it is important to appreciate and emphasise its sacrificial core. Behind its ‘official’ Ecclesiastical, doctrinal interpretation (to



some extent Nietzsche's primary focus in his critique) there lies, Bataille suggests, a profounder, more authentically religious, process of erotic 'communication' – quite distinct from Nietzsche's critical conception of its libidinal essence and meaning - in which the 'integrity' of both God and man are dissolved through a transgressive 'lacerating wound' in which they recover their lost 'union',

“...in the crucifixion, man attains the summit of evil. But it is precisely by having attained it that he ceases to be separated from God. Here one sees that the “communication” of beings is assured by evil...This is how it assures Redemption...it re-establishes communication between God and human beings...in the night of the crucifixion, the integrity of beings is violated right through; man and God lacerate one another and bleed together” (ON, pp. 33, 248).

Arguably Bataille surpasses his master in such analyses and attains an immanent critique *of religion by religion* beyond that of 'Dionysus *versus* the Crucified'. For Bataille, the task of an affirmative critique of Christianity concerns the identification and prioritisation of traces of the Dionysian within it, as its *residuum* of sacred expenditure – the 'symbol of the Cross' as a sacrificial criminality in which both God and man are implicated.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between Bataille's and Nietzsche's religious critiques of Christianity is their respective evaluations of its mystical tradition. Again, in contrast to what Nietzsche generally perceives to be the pathologies of moralized hysteria and neurosis induced by priestly power and repression (e.g. his reference to St. Theresa of Avila in GM III: 17) Bataille finds a gloriously affirmative release of gratuitous erotic energy. Where Nietzsche finds at best a 'sublimated' instinctual gratification with deleterious effects, Bataille identifies a non-sublimated, inherently self-consecrating, solar radiance finding its requisite combustion in a being prepared to 'die to oneself' (*see* E, pp. 227ff). As he states, "(D)esire lifts the mystic little by little to a ruin so perfect, to an expenditure...so perfect that in it life is comparable to a flash of sunlight" (ON, p. 45). This non-reductive, religious, critique of Christian mysticism underlines

why it is so traditionally inimical to the servile salvationism of the institutional Church [see, ON, pp. 99, 47f]. As Bataille states, “(I)n the real existence of mystics, violent desires normally entail movements well beyond an impoverished concern for salvation” (ON, p. 256).

In anticipation of the remarkable ‘Mysticism and Sensuality’ chapter in *Eroticism* (see E, pp. 221 - 51) Bataille states, “...with the spite and obstinacy of a fly, I say insistently: *there is no wall between eroticism and mysticism!*” (ON, p. 133). Admittedly, at this stage, Bataille still retains a residual assumption concerning the priority of the ‘sensual’ over the ‘spiritual’ apparent in his criticism of mysticism for substituting ‘representations of the spirit’ for ‘real disorders’ (ON, pp. 44f). Subsequently (see E, pp. 15ff) Bataille will attain to the total continuity of life and eroticism and acknowledge the *first-order, non-sublimated* nature and status of a religious mode of eroticism and reaffirm Christian mysticism in this light. There are clear intimations of this radicalization in *On Nietzsche* which already seems to surpass the limitations of Nietzsche’s merely oppositional critique.

Bataille seems, through such an affirmative critique of Christianity, to excavate a possible permutation of the post-moral ‘whole man’ distinct from Nietzsche’s retrieval of Greco-Roman *ascesis*. Of course, this is another topic of vital shared concern. As Bataille states that, “[T]he essential problem agitating this disordered book...is that which Nietzsche lived, which his work attempted to resolve: that of the whole man.” (ON, p. 9). It is noteworthy that the only Nietzsche passage evoking the theme of ‘self-control’ which Bataille includes (i.e., GS 305. See ON, p. 144) is a critique of the Christian-moral conception of it. Nietzsche’s, Greco-Roman inspired alternative (post-moral ‘self-mastery’) as elaborated in many texts, barely registers. Bataille seems to wish to retain something of the fraught self-division of the ‘moral’ type but without their moralization of the relation of ‘high’ and ‘low’. This is neither the de-eroticised existence

of the life of ‘absolute transgression’ nor the tormented ‘return of the repressed’ of those constitutively ill at ease with, and hostile towards, embodiment *per se*. Bataille, like Nietzsche, condemns both moral asceticism and libertinism. He excavates a non-moral inhabitation of the constitutive oppositionality of the Christian-moral psyche finding resources for a conception of the post-moral ‘whole man’ within its erotic dynamics if they are re-orientated towards the sacred in his sense.

Hence, Nietzsche and Bataille seem to develop significantly different conceptions of the constitutive eroticism of Christian life: Nietzsche tends to find only dangerously libidinally-invested ‘guilt’ and self-loathing deleterious to the future health of humanity and the attainment of its expression in a life-affirming religious culture; Bataille, an unwitting sacrificial communication sustained by a psycho-sexual dynamic fundamentally in tune (when inhabited non-morally) with the religious energetics of life itself. Where Nietzsche tends to find only a dubious erotics of cruelty at work in the ‘ascetic ideal’ he takes to define Christianity, Bataille identifies crucial religio-erotic possibilities within the affective libidinal economy of the Christian psyche, particularly in relation to the libidinal meaning transgression has within it made possible by the specific resonance of its taboos. There is, in Bataille, a hesitation before the prospect, apparently inherent in Nietzsche’s vision, of an emergent human health – a concern, not shared by Nietzsche, that the human animal might become altogether *too* at ease with the ruinous desire that perennially thwarts its best laid plans and thereby lose a vital ingredient of religious erotic life, namely, a ‘*pious terror*’ (ON, p. 148) before the affirmative violence of sacred self-expenditure. In this critical affirmation of the ‘sickness’ of the Christian psyche and through its non-eliminative repatriation to an inherently sacred immanence we can detect, arguably, one of the senses in which Bataille’s *On Nietzsche* is *sur-nietzsche*.