

## Effects of the Unknowable: Materialism, Epistemology, and the General Economy of the Body in Bataille

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Du non-savoir lui même, il y aurait en somme impossibilité  
de parler, tandis que nous pouvons parler de ses effets.  
Georges Bataille

### I 'Materialism'

My point of departure is Bataille's extraordinary two-paragraph early essay 'Materialism' (1929), announcing a radical materialist epistemology, eventually developed by Bataille and my main subject here. 'Materialism' has a deliberate and precise structure: the first paragraph offers a condensed, Nietzsche-like, critique of classical, metaphysical materialism as an idealism, even 'a senile idealism', of matter; the second appeals to a different, more critical and more alive, form of representation of matter. Bataille writes:

Most materialists, even though they may have wanted to do away with all spiritual entities, ended up positing an order of things whose hierarchical relations mark it as specifically idealist. They situated dead matter at the summit of a conventional hierarchy of diverse facts, without perceiving that in this way they gave in to an obsession with the *ideal* form of matter, with a form that was closer than any other to what matter *should be*. Dead matter, the pure idea, and God, in fact answer a question in the same way (in other words perfectly, and as flatly as the docile student in a classroom) – a question that can only be posed by philosophers, the question of the essence of things, precisely the *idea* by which things become intelligible. ... [Materialists'] need for external authority in fact placed the *must be* of all appearances in the functional role they unconsciously assigned to the idea of science. ... The conformity of dead matter to the idea of science is, among most materialists, substituted for the religious relations earlier established between the divinity and his creatures, the one being the *idea* of the others.<sup>1</sup>

In the second paragraph, Bataille makes an extraordinary move by suggesting that it is 'from Freud, among others – rather than from long-dead physicists – that a representation of matter must be taken'. He explains: 'Materialism will be seen as a senile idealism to the extent that it is not immediately based in psychological or social fact, instead of on artificially isolated psychological phenomena... When the word *materialism* is used, it is time to designate the direct interpretation, *excluding all idealism*, of raw phenomena, and not a system founded on the fragmentary elements of an ideological analysis elaborated under the sign of religious relations'.<sup>2</sup>

If, however, in our approach to the representation (or unrepresentability) of matter, we can no longer rely on the *long-dead* physicists, whose 'ideas today have no meaning', what can be said of the ideas of those who were alive at the time? The date, 1929, at the opening of the debate concerning the epistemology of quantum physics, and ascertainable links throughout Bataille's works suggest that behind Bataille's reference to the long-dead physicists is one to the physicists and physics that were, and still are, very much alive. This physics, I argue, proceeds, most radically in Bohr's work, towards the kind of epistemology and materialism that Bataille envisions, and helps to elucidate both.<sup>3</sup>

## II Sovereign Concepts

If one could *sum up* Bataille's experience, thought and writing in a single phrase, it would be his own phrase 'encounter with the impossible', 'the impossible' itself eventually used by Bataille as his title.<sup>4</sup> This statement must be understood not so much in the sense that these are shaped by an encounter with the impossible, but in the sense that they *constitute* this encounter, or are reciprocal with it. Nor, by the same token, can one say that Bataille's experience and thought precede and are then (re)presented in his writing; these relationships, too, are defined by a complex mutual reciprocity. Accordingly, in part following Derrida, I shall speak of Bataille's *writing* as designating this multi-reciprocal field. This type of multi-reciprocity is one of the effects of 'the impossible' to which Bataille's 'encounter' aims to relate, in, in Blanchot's terms, the form of 'nonrelation', thus enacting the radical epistemology under discussion. It would also constitute a form of what Bataille calls 'sovereign' practice, even though, while the efficacy of (all) knowledge, the impossible itself in question cannot be mastered by any knowledge, is irreducibly unknowable (the term correlatively employed by Bataille). Thus, Bataille's writing *is* his experience – the experience of existing at 'the limit of the possible' and on the threshold of the impossible – using, however, the term 'experience' in Bataille's sense of 'interior (or inner) experience' [*expérience intérieure*], in juxtaposition to the classical concept of experience as the experience of presence and particularly of consciousness.

The phrase 'encounter with the impossible' occurs in *Inner Experience* [*L'Expérience Intérieure*], an installment, along with *Guilty* [*Le coupable*], and *On Nietzsche* [*Sur Nietzsche*], of what was originally conceived of as *La somme athéologique* – a quasi-autobiographical 'summing-up' of this encounter and a conceptualization of interior experience.<sup>5</sup> However, the atheological or, more generally, a-ontotheological nature of this encounter and of this 'summing-up' makes them rigorously un-summable.<sup>6</sup> Both and,

hence, Bataille's writings 'decohere' away from any *attempt* to link them to classical, for example, dialectical, or any conceivable wholeness (a coherent arrangement of parts). I stress 'attempt' because one cannot think here in terms of some (logically or ontologically) preexisting coherence from which one would then decohere. Bataille's practice is defined by heterogeneous but mutually engaging – heterogeneously interactive and interactively heterogeneous – relationships among various problematics, terms, concepts, fragments and other elements of Bataille's text, rather than by any single one of them or a summable totality of them.

A different form of organization is at stake, which is a consequence of Bataille's radical epistemology, here at work in his own writing. The particular elements involved interact and are organized (i.e. we may meaningfully consider configurations formed by them as having structure). This organization, however, does not govern the functioning of each of these elements in their particularity. Instead, it allows them to assume singular and independent significance – to the point of defying any attempt to define them by any denomination and thus making each unique or singular. Indeed, the same dynamics may govern each element of the (always arbitrary) initial arrangement, in which case the (untotalizable) whole would be reorganized accordingly. Bataille's writing continuously submits to and enacts these dynamics, even though and *because* it pursues that which escapes even these (far-reaching) dynamics or indeed anything; that which is irreducibly inaccessible, inaccessible even as 'inaccessible' or as 'that'. For, the efficacy itself of the interplay of the (organized) collective and (singular) particular elements, or of either type of 'effects', to begin with, appears to be irreducibly inaccessible in the same sense. As such, it cannot be assigned any available or conceivable terms, such as 'underlying' or 'efficacy', which makes Bataille appeal to the radically, irreducibly unknowable and, in conceiving of this (ultimately itself inaccessible) process, to 'unknowledge'. Nor, however, can it be postulated as existing in itself and by itself as anything to which inaccessible properties can be assigned. Accordingly, the unknowable is not something excluded from the domain or the configuration in question, as an *absolute* other of it, which would return the situation to a classical regime by enabling one to master the unknowable by exclusion. Instead, it is irreducibly linked to this configuration and made the efficacy of the effects that define it.

The situation may appear paradoxical or impossible. Indeed it does lead to an epistemology that, while technically free of contradiction, is complex and difficult, and for some impossible to accept, especially since, in addition, radically heterogeneous or even contradictory effects must both be engaged with. Bohr speaks of complementary effects in quantum physics in this sense. One can, however, avoid logical paradoxes here only at the expense of introducing something that cannot be accessed by any means in the field of investigation and making it the efficacy of all accessible effects. In quantum mechanics, contradictions arise only if one attempts to apply attributes of these effects, say, simultaneously wave and particle properties, to quantum objects themselves. Bohr, by contrast, argues for the impossibility of so doing, which enables him to avoid all contradiction and ambiguity in quantum theory and replace them with complementarity, which refers only to the (mutually exclusive) manifest effects of the interactions between quantum objects and measuring instruments, rather than quantum objects themselves.<sup>7</sup> In Bataille such

contradictions, for example, between death and eroticism, to some degree remain in place, as experimental effects, and in this respect (in contrast to the status of the unknowable) the situation is different from quantum mechanics. Bataille's direct references to quantum-mechanical complementarity, as in *Guilty*, must be read with this difference in mind.<sup>8</sup> At this limit, one encounters an irreducible loss of meaning, which, at the level of the experience of this loss itself, could lead to interior experience and/as sovereignty, as defined by Bataille. What is intolerable to some, but would be affirmed by and is a necessary condition of interior experience and sovereignty, is that this irreducible loss of meaning is the efficacy of all possible meaning.

In question, as Bohr said, is not an arbitrary renunciation of a further analysis of the situation but the recognition that, at a certain point, any further analysis is in principle excluded. This impossibility, however, does not preclude, but instead enables, a rigorous analysis of the effects of this unknowable efficacy. Hence, according to Bataille, 'it would be impossible to speak of unknowledge [for example, as 'unknowledge'] as such, while we can speak of its effects'.<sup>9</sup> Reciprocally, 'it would not be possible to seriously speak of unknowledge independently of its effects'.<sup>10</sup> The conjunction of both propositions defines both Bataille's and quantum-mechanical epistemology. It is not surprising, therefore, that strictly analogous formulations are found in Bohr. In particular, we cannot speak of 'the quantum world' itself (for example, as 'the quantum world') but only of the *effects* of the interaction between 'quantum objects' and measuring instruments.<sup>11</sup>

In Bataille, this 'formal calculus' is applied to such ordinary human effects as laughter and tears, which are in question in the elaboration just cited – except that these are neither ordinary nor, in a certain sense, even 'human'. They are joined with, and coupled to, such (more conventionally) extraordinary effects as sexual excitation, poetic emotion, the sense of the sacred, ecstasy, sacrifice, and the death of God.<sup>12</sup> The conjunction, characteristic of Bataille, of a formal theoretical framework and something that is outside formalization is, thus, given a rigorous epistemological justification by virtue of the fact that these effects, the uniqueness of each occurrence of such phenomena, are 'formalized' as irreducibly unformalizable, while *accessible*. By contrast the efficacy of all effects involved is irreducibly inaccessible, unknowable, and is inferred as such from 'the sum of these effects [*la somme de ces effets*]'.<sup>13</sup> How this dynamic conspires to make such effects form rich and complex orders is equally mysterious, although it cannot be seen as (ontotheologically) mystical since the sum of these effects disallows one to postulate a single, omnipotent agency behind them.

Although elements of this logic are found in Bataille's earlier works, such phenomena as heterogeneity are seen there in more immediate and classical-like terms of discontinuity and fragmentation, such as that of the body, without pursuing their nonclassical efficacy, just outlined. Ultimately, however, similarly to quantum physics, discontinuity or fragmentation in Bataille should not be seen as the underlying reality or efficacy of the world, while, say, continuity and wholeness are effects superimposed upon it. Instead, both must be seen as manifest effects of the unknowable. The dismemberment or 'decoherence' – the divergence, ultimately irreducible and uncontrollable, of the meaning of concepts, figures, tropes, signifiers, and so forth – of writing manifests the ultimate inaccessibility of (the constitution of)



the world through peculiar configurations of material, phenomenological, and linguistic effects. In Bataille's later work 'heterogeneity' came to designate these more complex relationships. Various configurations of effects, entailing this type of efficacy, emerge at the outset of his work.

Bataille's own writing becomes a particular case of this epistemology and logic, which defines the epistemology and logic of reading accordingly. They would never allow (Bataille or his readers) a rigorous 'summing-up' of Bataille's (interior) experience and writing, under a single non-provisional rubric, such as 'encounter with the impossible', or 'encounter' and 'the impossible'. This impossibility, however, is also the efficacy of the immense possibilities, of 'the abyss of possibilities', enacted by Bataille's writing and offered to his readers.<sup>14</sup> It follows that, in approaching Bataille's 'encounter with the impossible', one cannot bypass other concepts introduced by Bataille and/in their irreducible interactions, any more than Bataille himself could avoid (heterogeneously) multiplying them. I can here only delineate some of them, especially crucial for this essay. Beyond 'interior experience', they include 'unknowledge', 'chance', 'sovereignty', and 'restricted and general economy'. It also follows that one can centre one's reading otherwise, say, on sacrifice, gift, eroticism, ecstasy, expenditure, heterology, or literature. In particular, Bataille sees 'literature' as the highest or the most intense form of the encounter with the impossible and/as of the writing of sovereignty, or rather he defines (true) literature, accordingly.

The concept of unknowledge (*nonsavoir*) defines the nature or structure of our knowledge under the conditions just outlined. The ultimate nature of unknowledge is itself inaccessible: we cannot know how we ultimately know anymore than what is ultimately responsible for what we can know. However, even though unknowledge thus places an irreducible limit upon all knowledge, it brings into play the limits both of the knowable and the unknowable, the possible and the impossible, the thinkable and the unthinkable, and so forth and of the relationships between them and their limits.

Bataille's matrix entails an epistemologically radical concept of chance, correlative to his radical epistemology and, hence, to the quantum-mechanical concept of chance. Bataille sees this chance as inaccessible to 'the calculus of probability', or, one might add, any calculus.<sup>15</sup> This chance is irreducible not only in practice (which may also be the case classically, in physics or elsewhere) but also in principle. That is, there is no knowledge that could in principle be available to us and that would allow us to eliminate chance and replace it with the picture or claim of necessity behind it. Nor, however, can one postulate such a (causal/lawful) economy as unknowable but existing in and by itself, outside our engagement with it. This qualification is crucial. For, some forms of the classical understanding of chance allow for this type of (realist) assumption. By contrast, radical chance, such as that which we encounter in quantum physics, is irreducible to any necessity, knowable or unknowable. It is *irreducibly* lawless.<sup>16</sup>

Bataille's understanding of chance is presented most dramatically in *Guilty* and 'Conférences 1951–1953'.<sup>17</sup> Bataille speaks of this 'gossamer-like lacerating idea of chance' as 'a philosopher's despair', just as it was the despair of classically-

philosophical opponents of quantum-physics, such as, most famously, Einstein and Schrödinger, founders of quantum physics who never accepted it. For Einstein 'God does not play dice', for Bataille (keeping his atheology in mind) God does.<sup>18</sup>

By analogy with (the science of) political economy, 'general economy' is defined as the science (theory) of sovereignty. Bataille juxtaposes general economy to 'restricted economies', such as that of Hegel's philosophy or Marx's political economy. Restricted economies would aim or claim to contain or compensate for irreducible indeterminacy, loss, and non-selective – excessive – accumulation within the systems they describe, at least in principle, thus making all expenditure, in principle, productive. Both fundamentally base their analysis of human practices on the idea of consumption or productive (or accountable) expenditure, rather than on taking into account sovereign practices. These are assumed to be irreducible by general economy and the engagement with them defines sovereignty, the primary concern of general economy, making it the science of sovereignty. Bataille's 'sovereignty' is expressly juxtaposed by him to the Hegelian mastery [*Herrschaft*], although it may also be seen as an ambivalent displacement of the latter, especially as concerns death and sacrifice.<sup>19</sup> Bataille writes:

The science of relating the object of thought to sovereign moments in fact is only a *general economy* which envisages the meaning of these objects in relation to each other and finally in relation to the loss of meaning. The question of this *general economy* is situated on the level of *political economy*, but the science designated by this name is only a restricted economy – restricted to commercial values. In question is the essential problem for the science dealing with the use of wealth. The *general economy*, in the first place, makes apparent that *excesses of energy are produced, which by definition cannot be utilized. The excessive energy can only be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without any meaning.* This useless, senseless loss is sovereignty [emphasis added].<sup>20</sup>

Sovereignty, thus, relates (here seemingly 'thermodynamically', but ultimately epistemologically 'quantum-mechanically') to the irreducible loss of meaning, which is also always excessive, in particular with respect to any possibility of containing it by presence, consciousness, and meaning. It is experienced or felt (in unknowledge) as unmanifest and unmanifestable in manifest effects, of which we can speak, for example, those of the loss meaning, excessive expenditures, and so forth. We must, thus, be careful to distinguish sovereignty and general economy. The practice itself of the latter may, however, be 'sovereign', or a form of interior experience. Conversely, a given interior experience, such as Bataille's, may acquire aspects of scientific investigation, although his writings presenting it, such as *Inner Experience*, are different from the theoretical genre of *The Accursed Share*, *Theory of Religion* and related works.<sup>21</sup>

It is crucial that general economy entails a deployment of restricted economy. These relationships are irreducible insofar as general economy is the science of the relationships between what is accessible by restricted-economic means and what is inaccessible by any means, whether those of restricted or those of general economy.

The inaccessible itself can only manifest itself by means of particular configurations of effects, each of which effects is manifest within a restricted economic regime, without allowing itself to be comprehended by restricted-economic means, and thus establishing the relation to the incomprehensible, the unknowable, the inaccessible. Short of engaging with this interactive dynamic, one always ends up with a restricted economy, even in the name of excess, indeterminacy, loss of meaning, and so forth. These relationships also reflect richer and subtler relationships between various forms of human practice. According to Bataille: 'It is regrettable that the notions of "productive expenditure" and "nonproductive expenditure" have a basic value in all the developments of my book. But real life, composed of all sorts of expenditures, knows nothing of *purely* productive expenditure; in actuality it knows nothing of *purely* unproductive expenditure either'.<sup>22</sup> These complexities are often missed by Bataille's readers, which leads to misunderstandings of Bataille's thought as uncritically idealizing expenditure, loss, and so forth.

### III The General Economy of the Collective, the Dismemberment of the Body, and the Decoherence of Writing

Thus, paradoxically (or, again, so it may appear) Bataille's radical epistemology defines knowledge by the fact that it allows for and indeed entails that which is irreducibly unknowable, ultimately unknowable even as (absolutely) unknowable. At the same time, however, this unknowable is not something that is excluded from the domain or system subject to knowledge; it is not an *absolute* other of the system, but is irreducibly linked to it. Now, is there a 'model' of this situation, which would be rigorous and consistent, as opposed to leaving it in the domain of the imaginary, even if the latter allows for a form of interior experience, by analogy with certain mystical experiences, such as that of negative theology? If there is such a model, how can it be realized? Do in fact such situations exist in practice? The answer, as we have seen, is yes, since 'nature' itself, in the form of its ultimate constitution, compels us to develop such a model. Bataille and several others (Nietzsche, Blanchot, Levinas, Derrida, and de Man, among them) offer us an effective understanding of the human world – psychological, ethical, cultural, political, economic, or still other – in similar terms.

I shall now delineate this model more rigorously, formalizing and amplifying the key concepts of the preceding discussion. I shall then relate it to the general economy of the political collectivity and the dismemberment of the body in Bataille, and finally to the fragmentation of Bataille's own writing.

The complexities and implications of the concept defining this model are many and far-reaching. The initial configuration defining it is, however, simple: the representation of the 'collective' may, in certain circumstances, be subject to organization and law; that of the 'individual' is irreducibly lawless. To allow for this double requirement, the efficacy of this configuration cannot be seen as either individual or collective, and ultimately cannot be assigned any available or even conceivable attributes.



The above formulation does not merely mean that formalization or law in this case does not apply in certain exceptional situations. Instead, *every individual* entity (element, case, or event) that belongs to the law-governed ('organized') collectivities in question is itself not subject to the law involved, or to law in general. More accurately, one should speak of *what is 'seen' (is phenomenal) or represented as such an entity or such a collectivity*. For, while law here does apply only at the level of certain collective, rather than individual, effects, both types of effects, lawful and lawless, are *manifest*, materially or phenomenally. That is, when involved, material strata of such effects may, at least, be treated as available to phenomenalization, representation, conceptualization, and so forth. By contrast, the ultimate *efficacy* of these effects cannot, in principle, be so treated, although it may be considered as material, if we reconceive 'matter' accordingly. It is inaccessible not only to organization and law, but to any representation, phenomenalization, and so forth. It is inaccessible by any means that are or will ever be available to us; any conception of it is, and may always be, impossible, ultimately even that of the impossibility of conceiving it; and all conceivable terms are provisional and ultimately inadequate, including, 'efficacy' or 'ultimate'. Nor, however, can it be seen in terms of independent properties, relations, or laws, which, while unavailable, would define a certain material entity that would exist in itself and by itself, while, in certain circumstances, giving rise to the (available) effects in question. Instead, it must be seen as 'reciprocal' with and indeed indivisible from its effects, as Bataille indeed says ('Il est nécessaire de noter à cet égard une réciprocité'). It can never be, in practice and in principle, conceived as isolated, separate from them, and, according to Bataille, it cannot be meaningfully spoken of 'independently of its effects'.<sup>23</sup> Nor, however, can it be seen as fully 'continuous' with these effects. All individuality or, conversely, collectivity in question appears (in either sense) only within the manifest strata of such indivisible configurations. These configurations, however, also contain the inaccessible strata that cannot be isolated and hence cannot *appear*, either as accessible or even as 'inaccessible'. It is irreducibly inaccessible and yet, indeed as a corollary, equally irreducibly indissociable from that (part of the overall configuration) which is accessible – is subject to phenomenal representation, conception, knowledge, and so forth. Thus, the general-economic epistemology does not imply that nothing exists that gives rise to the effects in question, but only that their efficacy or the corresponding 'materiality' (which also designates something which exists when we are not there to interact with it) is inconceivable in any terms. Naturally, 'existence' or 'nonexistence', too, are among such terms, as are the possibility or impossibility to 'conceive' of it, or 'possibility' or 'impossibility', or 'it' and 'is'.

In these circumstances, then, classical (we may have no other) organization and laws apply only to collectivities, but in general not to individual elements comprising such collectivities, or at least to the ultimate individual elements of that type. I am not saying that they fully describe such collectivities, since, as follows from the preceding discussion, how the 'workings' of the efficacy just considered make lawless individual elements 'conspire' to assemble into lawful collectivities is ultimately inconceivable as well. Accordingly, the (lawless) individual effects in question can no longer be seen as a part of a whole, so that both are comprehended by the same law, or by a correlated set of laws, as they would be in restricted-economic systems. Individuality



becomes not only uniqueness but also singularity – manifest lawlessness in relation to a given law, or to law in general.

The preceding elaborations outline the ‘formal’ structure of general-economic collectivities (of whatever kind), which, reciprocally, requires a radical reconsideration of our understanding of organization and law, whether in their formal, theological, ethical, or legal sense, or in the heterogeneous interaction of all these. Such collectivities are considered by Bataille throughout his work, specifically in the three volumes of *The Accursed Share*, which undertakes an extraordinary, if (especially in unfinished Volumes 2 and 3) uneven and too sketchy, analysis of the contemporary political systems – capitalist and communist – up to 1960. Accordingly, fascism, Soviet communism, and American capitalism are given a special role. Bataille’s analysis would require some adjustment and updating. Much, however, remains applicable and as yet barely developed, in particular to the role of eroticism (Volume 2) and the significance of Nietzsche’s ideas (which subject closes Volume 3), in spite of the massive investigation of both subjects, both in general and in recent discussions of Bataille. Crucially, while the examples given above may appear to be (restricted-economic) cases of purely productive expenditure and nonsovereignty, in fact, as Bataille shows, they entail a complex functioning and the efficacy of sovereignty throughout, and, correlatively, a complex interplay of individual and collective configurations. Bataille’s central politico-economic question in Volume 3, remains as pertinent as ever: ‘We should finally ask ourselves, then, whether this world, communist or bourgeois, which gives primacy to accumulation is not obliged, in some form, to deny and suppress (at least attempt to) what there is within us that is not reducible to a mean, what is sovereign’.<sup>24</sup>

This question is irreducibly linked to the general-economic relationships between the individual and the collective. This may well be especially (but not exclusively) so in the economical-legal-political or indeed geopolitical landscape of the twentieth century, from Ford’s assembly lines, Stalin’s collectivization and industrialization, Hitler’s enormous machine (all these have obvious military implications) to any number of more recent – postmodern – politico-economic (or legal and cultural) phenomena. The list would be long and banal, short of a proper treatment of each case, which cannot be undertaken here. Instead, I would like to consider the economy of (the dismemberment) of the body in Bataille. It may be seen as his initial approach to and deployment of the logic and epistemology under discussion. It reemerges with its ultimate force in his post-war works, such as *The Tears of Eros*.<sup>25</sup>

This economy is impossible to miss, beginning with the titles of his short essays, naming parts of the body, such as ‘The Solar Anus’, ‘Eye’, ‘The Big Toe’, ‘Mouth’, or ‘Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh’ (all in *Visions of Excess*). The problematic itself never leaves Bataille’s text, but the treatment acquires a much greater epistemological subtlety. The vision of the human body that emerges in these essays is similar to that of Empedocles, who, as one stage of his cosmology, envisions ‘faces without necks, arms ... without shoulders, unattached, and eyes ... alone, in need of foreheads’.<sup>26</sup> The violent end that famously befell him (he committed suicide by jumping into a volcano) adds poignancy to the parallel. One shudders to think of and especially visualize the self-mutilation involved,

although, Bataille, on many occasions, offers to and demands from our vision nothing less shattering.

Such a vision may be aestheticized or Oedipalized insofar as, according to de Man, it is seen as possible only by first 'severing', formally or (naively) psychoanalytically, the parts from 'the organic unity of the body'.<sup>27</sup> Something altogether different takes place in Bataille, although psychoanalytic economies, both Freudian and Lacanian, are deployed in the process. Divested of organic or otherwise restricted-economic unities – physical, biological, psychoanalytical, erotic, political, conceptual or linguistic – in which 'parts' are related within a whole, or rather divested of our grounding them in such unities, parts are placed within a much broader, global (but untotizable) play of forces. The general-economic placement of eroticism is correlative and part of this process.<sup>28</sup> In terms of general economy, such parts are singularized away from the organic unity of the body, divested of any lawfulness, and are instead placed within nonclassical forms of circulation and laws, in which the body (any given body and the concept) is radically refigured in turn.

This process can be traced in all earlier essays just mentioned, in relation to any given body-part they discuss – each is always (re)globalized as part of an untotizable body, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, 'a body without organs', upon which sovereignty is general-economically inscribed. One can also trace throughout a radical materiality in this inscription – physical, politico-economic, or linguistic. The process is more aesthetically or psychoanalytically (or surrealistically) standard in earlier texts, such as 'Eye' or 'The Big Toe', although the role of political sovereignty is irreducible in both essays. By the time of 'Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh' (1930), preceded by such political-economic essay as 'Materialism' and 'The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* and *Surrealist*', the case becomes nearly general-economic. In the process classical concepts such as eros, death, sacrifice, gift, and so forth are reinscribed accordingly.

Bataille's approach may, finally, enable us to make better sense of the still continuing cultural circulation of Van Gogh's famous severed ear, both the irreducible singularity of the event and yet the possibility of its functioning within broader lawful configurations, while retaining its singularity there. (Van Gogh's ear is linked by Bataille to a cut off finger of another mutilator, Gaston F., embroidery designer, and Prometheus's famous liver, as part of a gigantic general-economic circulation.) But, as we have seen, it can only do so by allowing the deeper efficacy of this event to remain inaccessible and hence unexplainable. This circulation was initiated in a rather direct sense – 'the monstrous ear sent in its envelope', as, we might add, a *gift*, to Paul Gauguin – by Van Gogh himself, perhaps already aware (Duchamp certainly was) of this dynamic, at least in (as extending) the aesthetic domain.<sup>29</sup> Both gift and sacrifice, and their relationships, and the singularity of their event (one of Bataille's major concerns) or singularity of art, say, Van Gogh's painting of Gauguin's chair), all become shifted into a different circulation.<sup>30</sup> Both Van Gogh and Bataille would link these (as singular elements within a nonclassical organization) rather than, say, see the painting as anything governed by any form of, in de Man's terms, aesthetic ideology. (The painting itself needs to be rethought in terms of an analogous organization of singularities.) Van Gogh's ear belongs to and circulates in the global,

geopolitical, economy of the world. Bataille's analysis may help us to understand the nature of this belonging and of this circulation of, among other things, body parts, or of this economy. In *The Accursed Share* this – always untotizable – globalization reaches the scale of the whole planet, ultimately more radically than in Deleuze and Guattari's analysis in *Anti-Oedipus*, itself indebted to Bataille.<sup>31</sup>

I conclude by returning to the fragmentary structure of Bataille's own text, which has been often commented upon and celebrated, but rarely understood. I would argue that the main reason for this is that the economy of organization here considered is not taken into account. At stake is not only the singularity and nonclassical cohesiveness of more conventionally fragmentary units, such as Nietzsche-like mini-essays or aphorisms, found throughout Bataille's text, but a more radical fragmentation or, in de Man's terms, dismemberment. According to de Man (who writes on Kant): 'to the dismemberment of the body *corresponds* a dismemberment of language, as meaning-producing tropes are replaced by the fragmentation of sentences and propositions into discrete words, or the fragmentation of words into syllables or finally letters' [emphasis added].<sup>32</sup>

One, thus, encounters the workings of radical materiality, or/as singularity, both in the world and in the text. It would, however, be a mistake to see both as mirroring or mapping each other. Certainly, one should not view Bataille's mini-essays on the particular body parts as reflecting the fragmentation of the body, which, besides, must be seen in general-economic rather than simply fragmented terms. Instead, insofar as one wants or can approach the world by way of a text, the dismemberment or decoherence of language or of our conceptual formations manifests the irreducible inaccessibility of the 'world', or 'life', or the 'body' (if these words can apply). The original 'parts' or 'limbs' are, in de Man's terms, already allegories, derived from the classical view, and hence as supplementary as the (organized) body itself. A more radical dis-articulation, mutilation, disfiguration of the (un)body is at stake – at the level of effects. The efficacy of these effects is, again, inaccessible in any way, anymore by means of disarticulation than by means of articulation. Thus, nonclassical workings of fragmentary organization become enacted in Bataille's texts. On the one hand, there is a certain 'collective' or 'general' semantic field within which fragments, figures, and smaller linguistic or conceptual units function and which they obey. On the other hand, once rigorously considered individually, these units can no longer be fully, and indeed for the most part, subsumed by such a meaning or a coherent configuration of meanings. They begin to decohere in this sense and at the limit each acquires irreducible singularity. This decoherence defines the functioning of all key linguistic and conceptual units there. They, in their untotizable totality, cannot be contained by classical structures of reading, which is not to say that their organization (or the organization of singularities within each fragment) has no meaning or cannot be read. Quite the contrary, their organization has rich and complex meaning and order, more meaning and order than any classical organization, or reading, is able to offer.

'This', to end with Blanchot, 'should therefore be impressed upon anyone who might read these pages thinking they are infused with unhappiness. And what is more, let him try to imagine the hand that is writing them: if he saw this hand, then perhaps



reading would become a serious task for him'.<sup>33</sup> Bataille's echoes: 'I do not dispute the factor of consciousness without which I would not be writing, but the hand that writes is *dying* and through its death in store evades the limits accepted as it writes (accepted by the writing hand, rejected by the dying hand).<sup>34</sup> This hand (either one), the hand of writing or of death (and they might be the same) is already severed from the body, just as, 'the monstrous ear [of Vincent Van Gogh] sent in its envelope', of which Bataille speaks. This ear, Bataille adds, 'brusquely leaves the magic circle where the rites of liberation [are] stupidly aborted. It leaves along with the tongue of Anaxarchus of Abdera, bit off and spat bloody in the face of the tyrant Nicocreon, and with the tongue of Zenon of Eleus, spat in the face of Demylos ... both of these philosophers having been subjected to atrocious tortures, the first crushed while still alive in a mortar'.<sup>35</sup> Let these tongues and these violent ends be imagined by anyone who thinks that philosophy, or literature, is an affair of the mind, rather than of the violence, including ethical and political, of the body, always already dismembered and put into a global, geopolitical, general-economic circulation. If they could see those tongues, then perhaps reading would become a serious task for them. Blanchot's, too, is the final(?) sentence, ultimately a severed, sacrificed fragment, excluded from the final(?) version, of the work entitled *L'Arrêt de Mort* – the death sentence, the radically, irreducibly material event of radical, irreducible singularity in life and writing.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.15. For the French originals of the works here cited see Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970–1988) 12 vols.

<sup>2</sup> Bataille, G., *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, pp.15–16.

<sup>3</sup> I shall not explain quantum theory in detail here and permit myself to refer to my earlier works and references there, in particular, *Complementarity: Anti-epistemology After Bohr and Derrida* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) and 'Techno-Atoms: The Ultimate Constituents of Matter and the Technological Constitution of Phenomena in Quantum Physics', *Tekhnema* 5 (1999). The literature on Bataille is considerable, and the sparse references to it in this essay, determined by the particular set of contexts it engages, could hardly do justice to it. I find both Maurice Blanchot's and Jacques Derrida's encounters with Bataille the best treatments of Bataille available, and I am indebted to both.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Impossible*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (San Francisco: City Lights, 1991), p.9.

<sup>5</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, Leslie Anne Boldt (trans.) (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988). *Guilty*, Bruce Boone (trans.) (New York: Lapis, 1988); *On Nietzsche*, Bruce Boone (trans.) (New York: Paragon, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Following Heidegger and Derrida, ontotheology designates any form of determination, idealist or materialist, modeled on the theological determination in its positing a single agency, overt or hidden, which would govern nature, history, interpretation, and so forth.

<sup>7</sup> For Bohr's views see his essays in *The Philosophical Writings of Niels Bohr*, 3 vols (Woodbridge: Ox Bow Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p.46.

<sup>9</sup> Georges Bataille, 'Conférences sur le Non-Savoir', *Tel Quel* 10 (1962):5. This sentence is omitted from the text published in 'Conférences 1951–1953'.

<sup>10</sup> Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 8, p.219.

<sup>11</sup> This confluence may not be coincidental, even beyond the more general reasons indicated earlier. One of the figures involved in the discussion of Bataille's ideas in 'Conférences 1951–1953' was Georges Ambrosino, an atomic physicist, whom Bataille even credits with a partial co-authorship of the contemporary *Accursed Share* (*The Accursed Share: Volume 1*, Robert Hurley (trans.) [New York: Zone, 1988], p.191 n. 2).

<sup>12</sup> Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 8, pp.567–68, 592.

<sup>13</sup> Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 8, p.592.

<sup>14</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p.103.

<sup>15</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p.76.



<sup>16</sup> Quantum mechanics does use a form of calculus of probabilities in making its predictions. However, in Bohr's interpretation, this usage reflects the unknowable and unknowledge analogous to those at stake in Bataille. That this calculus works under these conditions is enigmatic, and an epistemological justification of this usage may be impossible.

<sup>17</sup> Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 8, pp.562–63, pp.564–67.

<sup>18</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, pp.76–84.

<sup>19</sup> See especially 'Hegel, la mort, et le sacrifice', *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 12, pp.326–345.

<sup>20</sup> Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, pp.215–16.

<sup>21</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volume 1 and The Accursed Share: Volume 2 and Volume 3*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Zone, 1991); Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Zone, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Volume 1, p.12.

<sup>23</sup> Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, pp.128–29.

<sup>24</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vols. 2 and 3, p.315.

<sup>25</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, Peter Connor (trans.) (San Francisco: City Lights, 1989), p.205–7.

<sup>26</sup> G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield (eds) *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.303.

<sup>27</sup> Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.88.

<sup>28</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, Mary Dalwood (trans.) (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986) and *The Tears of Eros* further elucidate this point.

<sup>29</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p.71.

<sup>30</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, pp.63–66.

<sup>31</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Robert Hurley et al. (trans.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

<sup>32</sup> Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, p.89.

<sup>33</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Death Sentence*, Lydia Davis (trans.) (New York: Station Hill, 1978), p.81.

<sup>34</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, p.268 n.1; translation modified.

<sup>35</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p.71.

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