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문학석사 학위논문

The (Im)possibility of Transgression

— Bataille and Poetic Language —

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– Bataille and Poetic Language –

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Abstract

The (Im)possibility of Transgression:
Bataille and Poetic Language

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This thesis focuses on the writings on poetry by Georges Bataille. His attitude toward poetry is complex and ambivalent: while his writings concerning poetry are widely represented in his works, one of his books was titled *Hatred of Poetry* when it was first published. However, this hatred should not be taken at face value. Bataille did not hesitate to republish the book under a new name *The Impossible* because he had an idea about poetry that he desperately wanted to communicate. To identify and investigate that idea, this thesis aims to diachronically read Bataille's writings and articulate their meaning and significance.

Chapter 1 will examine the dispute between Surrealism and Bataille around what poetry is, which forms a historical and bibliographic background of Bataille's "hatred of poetry." Unlike Surrealism, which considers poetry as a breakthrough evoking the subliminal power of the human mind to transform the world, Bataille remains vigilant about the possible degeneration of the heterogeneity evoked by poetry into a standard

of the homogeneous, while, simultaneously, recognizing the possibility that poetry might function as an access to a heterogeneous world that we may have to encounter head-on. Chapter 2 will observe Bataille's argument on the status and the role of poetry that is different from that of the Surrealists while examining the relationship between Bataille's notion of nonknowledge (non-savoir) and poetry. According to Bataille, poetry, which is akin to sacrifice and expenditure, can indirectly evoke nonknowledge; however, it is not sufficient to positively reveal nonknowledge by itself. Instead, poetry can only negate itself as soon as it attains expression, thereby showing the rift between itself and nonknowledge. Chapter 3 will argue that "To Be Orestes," which is a shared text in the two editions of Bataille's book, i.e., *Hatred of Poetry* and *The Impossible*, expresses his perspective that poetry is a dead end and a detour toward the instance of nonknowledge. This chapter also tries a general critique based on Foucault's and Sollers' commentaries on prohibition and transgression. Prohibition and transgression are in collusion: oppositional but interdependent relationship with each other. Given this, this thesis contends that the inevitable rift between poetry and nonknowledge is the condition for poetry to undergo a continuous self-renewal.

Bataille's thought on poetry has yet to gain a significant attention in Korea. However, the consistency exhibited in Bataille's works in developing his thought could be useful to gain a more sophisticated understanding of

the coherence throughout his philosophy of transgression. In addition, given that Bataille has alluded that poetry and visual arts are in common, a study on poetry in Bataille would provide a reference to situate Bataille's thinking into aesthetical context and further expand it into a discussion in the general art theory.

Keywords : Georges Bataille, poetry, heterogeneity, nonknowledge, the impossible, transgression

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List of Abbreviations

The following is a list of major works by Bataille, used throughout this thesis.

All other references appear in the footnotes.

- VE* “*Visions of Excess.*” ed. Allan Stoekl. trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.
- IE* “Inner Experience.” trans. Stuart Kendall. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014.
- AS1* “*The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy.* Vol. 1, *Consumption.*” trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1991.
- AS2/3* “*The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy.* Vol. 2, *The History of Eroticism*; Vol. 3, *Sovereignty.*” trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1993.
- E* “*Erotism: Death and Sensuality.*” trans. Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986.
- I* “*The Impossible.*” trans. Robert Hurley. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1991.

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Introduction

This thesis seeks to articulate the status and significance of poetry or, more specifically, poetic language *vis-à-vis* the *oeuvre* of Georges Bataille. In what follows, I will gather Bataille's fragmentary writings on poetic language to situate them clearly in the context of his writing. This work of situating these writings will help understand that poetry and Bataille's broader concerns are interdependent as it develops over time. Clarifying what significance this interdependency might have in epistemology and language philosophy, one could use this understanding as the cornerstone of another broader subject, that of his theory of art and aesthetics.

It is not easy to get a sense of the place and importance of poetry in the context of Bataille's work compared to those of other prominent concepts. To enumerate and explain the concepts or themes that will also be examined in this thesis: there is *expenditure*, which could be construed in opposition with the capitalist accumulation; there is *sacrifice*, in which beings who/which have become objects in the profane utilitarian order are taken out of such order and returned to the sacred realm, where they may recover the intimacy of their beings; there is *nonknowledge*, which could be described as a thorough experience of encountering with the unknowable and the consequent breakdown of knowledge. One may first seek to try to understand each of these terms based on distinct

categories (economic, religious, and epistemological ones).¹ In contrast, the particles of Bataille's ideas about poetry are disseminated across his corpus, making it challenging to recognize them as a whole. Even if one gathers them all in one place, one would see that they appear enigmatic and even unsystematic since Bataille tends to employ as many terms as cited above (nonknowledge, expenditure and sacrifice) from period to period to express his ideas on poetry or the poetic language.² Another factor preventing us from grasping the status of poetry is that Bataille's attitude toward it appears complex, ambivalent and sometimes inconsistent even in the same decade. For example, Bataille seems to have been both distrustful and dismissive of poetry in the 1930s because he attempted to critically engage with Surrealism revealing his views on the limits of

¹ However, it is necessary to remember that such "concepts" in Bataille's works extend over the boundaries of these disciplines that one often hastily assigns to them and displace their prerequisites (e.g., production and accumulation of wealth, bliss in the future, and knowledge). The disruptiveness of these terms vis-à-vis the closedness of disciplines often compels us to rethink or cross the boundaries of those categories to understand them more intimately, thereby making Bataille himself and his works unclassifiable.

² Though in most cases Bataille uses and prefers the straightforward term, "poetry," I think it is a good idea to be explicit about the ambiguity in terms of the word "poetry." This is because Bataille seems to have occasionally desired to designate both an institutionalized, specific genre or a form of writing and something broader than that on other occasions, as we shall see throughout this thesis. When Bataille uses the adjective, "poetic," it sometimes designates objects different from poetry that have characteristics pertaining to poetry (e.g., "It is true that the effect, even were it of a sacrifice of a king, is only ever poetic: a man is put to death; no slave is liberated. One even aggravates the state of things by adding a murder to the acts of servitude." (*IE*, 135)). Sometimes, Bataille conjoins the same adjective with other nouns than poetry to refer to poetry in its specific example (e.g., "poetic concoction", "poetic verbiage" to refer Surrealist poetry) ultimately prompting the reader to think about what poetry in general ought to be like.

its revolutionary nature. However, in an essay called “The Notion of Expenditure” in 1933, he suggests that poetry is synonymous with expenditure and its meaning is close to sacrifice. Given that the two concepts are pivotal in Bataille’s unorthodox economics or overall philosophy, the analogy as such would not have taken place if he had considered poetry or the poetic language as an insignificant matter.

The same analogy is even maintained in *Inner Experience*, Bataille’s important but difficult-to-classify book published in 1943, without an exhaustive justification or explanation. In this book, Bataille tries to conceive the potential capability of poetry, articulating the relationship between it and what he construes to be constitutively outside of knowledge. According to him, one can access what exceeds incorporation into the epistemological frame thanks to the deliberate aberration from the ordinary syntax and word association in poetry. However, he repeatedly warns the limits of poetry. Since the images brought out by poetic words still have to do with and rely on signification, the poetic words are not commensurate with the excessive but are in danger of retaining and recovering meaning.

Four years later, in 1947, Bataille wrote an anthology titled, *The Hatred of Poetry (La haine de la poésie)*, intention of which he mysteriously describes in the Introduction of the republished version of the same book in 1962: : “*true poetry was reached only by hatred. Poetry had no powerful meaning except in the*

violence of revolt” (I, 10). One ought to be patient in judging Bataille’s hostility or “hatred” toward poetry because Bataille does not stop at the point of defining undesirable poetry but instead strives to take that hatred as a force within all poetry to exceed what it itself is. In this sense, hatred is not about plainly denouncing poetry and perhaps not even about keeping others from writing or reading poetry. That is, hatred is something that should not just be taken at face value. Indeed, Bataille devoted his last moments to ameliorating *The Hatred of Poetry* into *The Impossible* (*L’Impossible*, 1962) by modifying the title and the order of chapters. Soon after the quote above, Bataille confesses that the early title has fallen short of eliciting proper understanding. He refers to another notion of “the impossible,” saying: “*poetry attains this violence [of revolt] only by evoking the impossible*” (I, 10), to make up for the shortcoming.

Previous studies have tried to approach this state of affairs and Bataille’s writing about poetry in many ways. Elisabeth Arnould-Bloomfield conducts a study focusing on sacrifice as the trope of poetry in Bataille’s book *Inner Experience* and investigates how poetry exceeds that trope.³ A book-length treatise by Marie-Christine Lala is dedicated to a profound analysis of Bataille’s final assertions on poetry as these are contained in *The Impossible*, focusing on

³ Elisabeth Arnould-Bloomfield, *L’extase de la poesie: la contestation de la littérature dans l’oeuvre de Georges Bataille*, San Diego: University of California Press, 2000).

demonstrating that the problematic run-through of Bataille's writings is freedom grafted onto the nucleus of Bataille's notion of the "impossible." This study reveals that Bataille's writing is radically contrary to any will to classify and distinguish a literary genre.⁴ As we can see, even though they have shown that Bataille's writing of poetry is important despite, or even because of its difficulty, these studies respectively focused on different works of Bataille. As the main concept varies in Bataille, work by work, the objects of the researchers' explanation varied henceforth, which might lead one to lose sight of their coherence that the seeming contradiction about the capabilities of poetry does not incapacitate but actually fuels poetry to exceed itself.

I hope to contribute to this deepening of understanding of the significance of poetry as the previous studies have done. However, my specific aim is to configure Bataille's fragmentary notes and writing on poetry together, thereby elucidating that the seeming antinomy or aporia of poetry Bataille keeps talking about is the thrust behind his thought as a whole which culminate in the "philosophy" of transgression. I contend poetry is worth examining in Bataille since it is acutely and exemplarily linked with all his phases of "thought," particularly with what he himself regards as a human exigency. Reciprocally, those different terms Bataille employs to confront this exigency provide a good

⁴ Marie-Christine Lala, *Georges Bataille: Poète du réel*, Berne: Peter Lang, 2010)

way into poetry in Bataille's works. Poetry's link with those terms will help deal with the seeming contradictions of poetry in Bataille's works as producing a "productive" tension rather than a paralyzing one. Therefore, I am concerned with systematically situating poetry within the broader themes of Bataille's works by diachronically accounting for his ideas across all the various phases into which his writing can be divided. I aim to view poetry in this thesis as an essential instance of Bataille's broader themes and use this view as a way to track their development.

Bataille sporadically writes about the potential of poetry while using suggestively "poetic" forms of language. It is first required to detour through Bataille's questioning of the very use and role of language itself, in its broadest sense, to understand what this means. Bataille sees language as the very form or possibility of articulating ideas and producing or even enabling thought in the first place, rather than just a simple tool to represent ideas about the world: it constructs our relation to what is given according to its structures, which further enable basic, agreed-upon norms and expectations. However, if one can know things only in and through language, it could then be said that knowledge can only process the world in a certain way. Language is characterized by articulation; it breaks down or divides what we experience into particles and then lets them coalesce into units or bits that can be made a part of a larger structure. Then, language does not become commensurate with the reality *per se* and can be

described even as something that shapes what we *know* as reality in a way similar to Kant's transcendental structures. More precisely, knowledge is inherently limited to what can be formed through the structures of language and is opposed to what does not and cannot be subjected to the forms and syntheses of the mind and language.⁵ To object to this restriction, one may have to start by confronting it head-on and approaching what exceeds it. Nevertheless, how can one approach, that is, think, speak, or write about the limits and the beyond of knowledge when there is no other way than to take the medium of language because the language is precisely what conditions thought and knowledge? This problem is linked to the transgressive use of language in Bataille and is also directly related to the way Bataille himself employs language in his writing about poetry; therefore, one cannot detract from it.

If the primary or basic principle of language lies in communication and the production of knowledge, a deviation from that very principle would be potentially transgressive to the most significant degree. When poetry could be characterized as a deviation of that sort, it would be the privileged or perhaps the

⁵ As I have intimated, this problem has something in common with that of Kant – if knowing is always already, in a sense, a re-forming and restructuring of things, we can in no way know things “in-themselves,” and this would mean that knowledge cannot be absolute or complete. Knowledge is opposed to what does not and cannot be subjected to the forms and syntheses of the mind. However, the problematics of Kant and Bataille are different in that Kant does not thematize language, while Bataille's problematic is framed not in terms of the structures of the mind but those of language. One might even say that language shapes the categories of the mind.

most exemplary instance of transgression because poetry itself is language and so works most closely with what it transgresses. Suggestively, Bataille states in *Inner Experience*: “literature being nothing if it is not poetry, poetry being the opposite of its name, literary language ... is the perversion of language a little more even than eroticism is the perversion of sexual functions.” (*IE*, 150) I argue that Bataille is suggesting here that we would have to see poetry much more broadly than the traditional notion allows and that, perhaps, all transgressive language is poetic to some extent. This awareness intertwines poetry with his global, intentional rejection of building up any self-identical, homogeneous system, whether philosophical or literary, that runs through his entire career.

To better understand the relationship of poetry or poetic language to transgression, the first chapter of this thesis will examine Bataille’s early concept of poetry, which is reflected in his conflict with Surrealism. This approach is taken because the stakes and primary orientation of Bataille’s reflections on poetry begin to be determined through the critique and theoretical analysis of where Surrealism seems to fail. Bataille’s early interest in what poetry can potentially do forms a seed for his conception of transgression. His idea of poetry as subversive or transgressive appears even before the very term “transgression” emerges in his writing.⁶ I intend to show that Bataille’s attention to poetry as

⁶ The English/French word transgression is from a Latin compound, *transgredi*

transgression is not a transient one-off interest and that he repeatedly tries to express and develop this idea throughout his life. In this regard, one can validly consider his conflict with Surrealism as the prototype of his views on poetry's transgressive power since it includes his reflections on how Surrealist poetry failed to achieve the desired result of producing revolt. Tracking the development of Bataille's thinking on poetry approximates tracking that of transgression and, therefore, will allow us not only to gain a firmer grasp of the role of poetry in Bataille's work but also of the broader significance of his work as a whole.

In the following two chapters, I will deal with Bataille's "theory" of poetry in his books *Inner Experience* and *The Impossible*, respectively. In Chapter 2, I will try to link Bataille's argument of the inevitable structural limit of knowledge – that constitution of knowledge is attributable to the exclusion of the heterogeneous – to his description of nonknowledge and poetry. Making this link will allow us to scrutinize the figure of poetry as expenditure and sacrifice and ponder what poetry means to Bataille in such a context. This investigation will further allow us to infer that Bataille's work as a whole is inscribed in the general frame of investigating and returning to a kind of negativity that serves no purpose and is unproductive. Bataille's commentary on the establishment of the system of

(originally *trans-* 'across' + *gradi* 'go'), meaning going beyond or stepping across. Bataille uses the verb "*transgresser*" in 1937 for the first time in his work and the nominal form "*transgression*" is included in his perhaps most well-known work written in 1957, *Erotism*, to designate one of the poles between which humanity oscillates.

knowledge would allow us to see that poetry enables us to constitute a coherent and transparent system from the outside by its exclusion and that it threatens to divulge that something exceeds subsumption into the positivity of meaning and knowledge. Given the analogy of poetry and sacrifice and the attempt to overcome that very sacrifice, Bataille seems to have reconsidered poetry more positively yet without defining it conclusively.

Such a gesture is repeated in the final text of *The Impossible*, “To Be Orestes,” the meaning and significance of which Chapter 3 will try to address. Bataille’s writings on poetry exhibit the limits of poetic language in its inability to substantiate what exceeds those very limits. This playing-out of the limits can be read in line with reinscribing them, only to exceed them once again. Analogously, we will explore Foucault and Sollers’ commentaries on Bataille, focusing on transgression, and observe that transgression is an incessant act of putting prohibition into question to reinscribe it not as a simple restriction but as the condition to continue. Likewise, Bataille’s writings on poetry play out and exhibit the limits of poetic language in its inability to substantiate what exceeds those very limits. This playing-out of the limits can be read in line with reinscribing the limits only to once again exceed them, and to that extent. In sum, I will demonstrate, from Bataille’s writings, that poetry could be said to be transgressive.

Chapter 1. The Confrontation with Surrealism

As I mentioned in the Introduction, Bataille had a complex and ambivalent view of poetry: he seemingly hates it sometimes and evaluates it positively on the other. I contend that this ambivalence is equivalent to the paradox of developing a philosophy of transgression. On the one hand, the philosophy of transgression talks about the limits of language and thought and contends that it is required to step out from and disrupt the space of language: language cannot adequately and exhaustively describe something that exceeds it. On the other hand, the philosophy itself must have recourse to language even while thinking and talking about its limits. To embrace the paradox of leaning on language even while speaking or thinking about its limits develops an open end as well as a dead end concerning the totality of the philosophy of transgression. It would be like a dead-end in that it seems to invalidate the thinking that regards language as being at our disposal. On the other hand, it would be like an open end, too, because it allows us to regard language as a horizon beyond which we can imagine something we never used to dare to encounter directly. To understand every aspect of this ambivalent possibility, I will first deal with what Bataille calls his *hatred* of poetry.

I argue that sharpening the understanding about where in Surrealism Bataille's point of reference was and pointing out the controversy between him

and Surrealism outline the issues concerning poetry that occupied him. In this, I inherit Sylvain Santi's view that one can only learn Bataille's hatred of and shifting relation to poetry within the context of his recognition of and disappointment toward Surrealism.⁷ Santi's point that Bataille had placed singular importance on Surrealism and envisage poetry exclusively from the Surrealist attempts also seems correct. Indeed, refraining from directly calling the Surrealists by their names, Bataille uses the modifier *poetic* instead in a negative manner, relating it widely with Western culture's pervasive "idealistic" tendency. After the more explicitly polemical engagement with André Breton in 1929, he reveals an awareness that the Surrealists' practice has left something to be desired. From then on, he would articulate how Surrealist poems and their formulation of poetry fail, then try to differentiate his writing from those of the Surrealists.⁸

⁷ Sylvain Sainti, *Georges Bataille, à l'extrémité fuyante de la poésie* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), p. 17. Bataille's relationship to Surrealism, whose modality tends to differ by time, is thus not a problem easily reducible to one or two words and there is no universal agreement on whether Bataille was simply hostile or sympathetic to Surrealism. One could immediately refer to Bataille's own remark in an interview with Madeleine Chapsal that there was "a certain absurdity" that characterizes his relationship with Surrealism. He also confessed in the same interview of having had the idea of "writing a book which would bear on the first page of the cover *Surrealism is Dead* and on the other side, *Long Live Surrealism*." See also Madeleine Chapsal, *Les Écrivains en personne*, (Paris, Unions Générale d'Éditions, 1973), p. 27.

⁸ One important proof of the influence of Surrealism concerning poetry in Bataille's works is the fact that the first few passages of "To Be Orestes" – the text constitutive of both *Hatred of Poetry* and *The Impossible* and composed with Bataille's final assertions about poetry – were initially planned to be called "Abstract History of Surrealism." Even

In section 1, I will try to put the purported goal of this thesis into practice by examining the Surrealists' *Manifestoes*. Surrealism's significance is being an artistic movement and a revolt aimed at recovering the totality of human existence simultaneously. The latter significance is inspired by the fact that the Surrealist doctrine pursued widening the human sphere into the irrational, which is often oppressed by reason, through art and poetry. Further, if Surrealism is counted as an exceptive movement, it is because Surrealism discovered poetry's value not in its narrowly communicative force, carrying knowledge and didacticism, but in its disruptiveness to everyday communication. This disruptiveness is valuable because it provides more truthful knowledge about which one may try to transform the everyday life.

In section 2, I will examine Bataille's base materialism expressed in the early criticisms of Hegelian idealism around the 1920s in *Documents*, revisit the Bataille-Breton polemic and inquire into Bataille's criticisms of Surrealism after the polemic, as are crystalized into what Bataille himself calls heterology. Although the early criticisms are not directed to the Surrealists *per se* but to conventional literature, they nonetheless appear applicable to the Surrealists'

though such a subtitle did not appear when the text was published and consequently did not draw the attention of many researchers, it shows that Bataille was keeping Surrealism in mind even when he became certain about the role and status of poetry and that his engagement with Surrealism in the subject of poetry continued on for an extended period of time.

formula of surreality and their trust in the capacities of humans to spiritualize connotations therein. More profoundly, one can read Bataille's posthumously published essays (presumably written just after the polemic) as showing regret for the theoretical formulation of (i) surreality as the synthesis of reality and dream through "supra-rational" knowledge, and (ii) poetry as a channel to and an embodiment of surreality. Bataille thinks the tendency towards the "high" (elevation or nobleness) hidden behind the formulation leads to a partial, incorrect knowledge of the base and vile part of reality, to which poetry is originally supposed to provide access, but not by taking that part as the object of knowing. Bataille's precise point is that the Surrealists approach that part of reality by pursuing knowledge but fall short even of knowledge. He tries to articulate that there is something one cannot grasp in the same manner one uses to treat knowledge – by signification and explanation. This is because that part of reality itself remains something that is unknowable, and there is no other way than this very exclusion that finally constitutes knowledge. Therefore, Bataille would try to seek alternative to knowledge in an attempt to access it. That other way would be called nonknowledge, which we will investigate in Chapter 2.

1.1. The Blueprint of Surrealism and Poetry

Even though the Surrealist movement is known to have originated as a literary movement, what one cannot neglect is that it was never envisioned as a mere artistic school. Surrealism was premised on the belief in art's potential to transform human perception of reality and even reality itself, and, for this aim, art should not be considered an isolated, institutional sphere. For the Surrealists, art was primarily a state of mind and a way of being, and because they saw certain insufficiency of the day's understanding of reality, they conceived their movement as a means of perceiving what reality is or should be.⁹

Breton problematized the view that the real world is distinguished from the human mind and exists in and of itself, prior to and outside human consciousness. According to Breton, this view presupposes an untraversable gulf between matter and mind, between the inviolate object-world of the material "facts" and a disembodied consciousness controlled by a rational *cogito*.¹⁰ Under this view, humanity can either be the master and possessor of the world by reason or be subject of subordination to the material world. To avoid the latter, humanity must control anything that might hinder reason. However, according to Breton, reality

⁹ Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 80.

¹⁰ Michael Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 22.

can be more broadly grasped than it can be by reason, and the key is imagination. Imagination was synonymous with freedom for Breton when he wrote the *First Manifesto*. Here, freedom means that of imagination, and imagination is the faculty of the mind that reveals the infinite possibilities of the concrete world and simultaneously the beginning of the world where the mind can surpass the logical powers dominating day-to-day life and develop itself without hindrance. If one could live just as the mind has imagined, Breton would call it free.

On this basis, Breton criticizes positivistic reason for replacing the complexity of both reality and human perception of it with banality and thus restricting imagination. This criticism of positivistic reason found one of its grounds from what he considered the action of realist novels. Breton viewed that the notion of reality lurking in realist novels is impoverishing. Even though realist novels are usually taken as being defined by their attempt to represent reality as it “is,” realistic descriptions are for Breton only really “superimposed images taken from some stock catalogue” and “cliches.”¹¹ According to him, the self and the world are meant to correspond to one another, and it is art’s duty to discover and show the clues of this correspondence. However, attempts to describe reality as it “is” now are nothing but the proclamation of the lopsided triumph of the world against the self. By only representing the appearance of a limited character of the existing

¹¹ Breton, 1969, p. 7.

world and confusing it with the unlimited variety of reality, realist novels make the readers only recognize images of the existing world they are used to and be obedient to the logic and order inherent to it. Breton's contention in this regard is that the descriptions in the realist novel are deceptive in so far as they "describe one grape by the other, by all the others [...] to make a palatable grape", even though "in a cluster of grapes there are no two alike."¹² This deceptiveness is from "making the unknown known, classifiable."¹³ Even though the rational classification of things might be generally considered the first step of knowing and taking control, Breton seems to have perceived it as problematic insofar as it reduces the unknown or, to be more precise, limits reality to immobile actuality. To put the concern as such in terms of knowledge, one could say that making the unknown known or classifiable imparts only partial, incomplete knowledge of reality and prevents one from having proper knowledge of the possibility and human capacities of changing things for the better. This lack of knowledge is dangerous because it can amount to the subjugation of humans to the *status quo* without any hope of engaging with and changing it actively.

Breton wanted Surrealist practice to embrace the totality of existence and liberate the mind's capacities by rejecting the complacent preoccupation with the

¹² Breton, 1969, p. 8.

¹³ *Loc. cit.*

tangible and the known and opposing realist novels' restrictive and reductive action. Freud and Hegel became Breton's milestones in this regard: on the one hand, the Surrealists were indebted to Freud with their insight that the unconscious is the area of extraterritorial jurisdiction of the law of noncontradiction dominating conscious and rational thought, and the elasticity of the reality of the unconscious would endow humans with the fuller significance of life; on the other hand, the Surrealists inherited a belief in the inner unity of contradictory conditions or phenomena from Hegel. Hegel's definition of knowledge as the linking of thoughts with their objects also clarified the Surrealists' notion of the human world.¹⁴ The Surrealists inferred from Hegel that true understanding of existence relies on knowing the interrelation of the subjective and the objective as the concrete manifestations of reality.¹⁵ However, the Surrealists considered that Hegel had dissolved genuine social problems in the ether of pure thought instead of seeking a concrete dialectic in social relations and upheavals and psychic conflicts within individuals.¹⁶ Thus, unlike Hegel, who considered real things as a degree of realization of the absolute idea, the Surrealists put priority on the concrete over the abstract, on the matter over

¹⁴ Anna Balakian, *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1972), p. 135.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁶ Bruce Baugh, *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge), p. 55.

thought, and contend that the ideal is not an independent concept but a result of mental transposition and translation of the *material world*. One might call this prioritization Surrealism's materialism, and it is ultimately meant to surpass the series of dualisms between spirit and matter or subjectivity and objectivity and show the interdependency and relation of the terms.

For the aim described above, Breton wants to explore all those mental phenomena having to do with the unconscious and repressed desires; they were the key to the secret affinity between the self and the universe in his view. He thinks that once those unexplored regions of the mind are brought to light and suppressed psychological data by methodical examination is reached, one can free the object and the subject, in turn, from the limits of rational cognition and the boundaries of the consciousness. The emancipation will provide an instance for the coincidental encounter of both object and subject where the parts of reality concealed until then will lift their heads and participate in recovering the entirety of reality.¹⁷ Then, one will attain a state of truth not interrupted by the limits of “real” life, and the web of relationships underlying the structure of the world will appear. Since such a possibility is, for Breton, a matter of fact, he expressed the belief in “the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are

¹⁷ 브르통, 『초현실주의 선언』, 역자 해설, p. 27.

seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*.”¹⁸ There, the mind will reveal that the “opposites” (such as mind/matter, consciousness/unconsciousness, the abstract/the concrete, the reality principle/the pleasure principle) are, in fact, bound by indestructible analogous relations.

One could understand that the aim of automatism, which is synonymous with Surrealism itself in the *First Manifesto*, lies in this context of the attempt to excavate clues to evoke the entirety of human ability, emancipate humans, and thereby fundamentally change the world. Producing images would be counted as a part of the practice of automatism because Breton deems them the touchstone of unmediated elements contrary to reason, the crystal of an individual’s psychic experiences, and inner representations of ideas. It is because images are not distinct from language, nor is language characterized only by its signifying capacity. Instead, the Surrealists consider language able to convey images present in mind, which is a first step to realizing them in concrete forms. All arts are a matter of evoking and making images present or even producing previously non-existent realities and, to such an extent, are intertwined with one another.

Nevertheless, one can observe that Surrealists’ practice in the 1920s was still mediated primarily by language. The Surrealists’ priority was the work of language that aims at and relies on language reformation. The “Introduction to the

¹⁸ Breton, 1969, p. 14. Emphasis in original.

Discourse on the Paucity of Reality” (1924), written before the *First Manifesto*, says that the meagerness of the power of enunciation is responsible for the world’s mediocrity and, importantly for our purposes, that the rank of the reality of the poetic image is not inferior when compared to that of ordinary language.¹⁹ Later, in the *First Manifesto*, Breton implies that combining two sorts of words makes images come across the mind like a flash. The more arbitrary and aleatory the combination is, the more difficult it is “to translate into practical language,” the more vivid or “poetic” the images it brings out.²⁰ In “Surrealist Situation of the Object” (1936), Breton makes it even more evident that poetry’s role and function must be qualitatively different from those of prose, stressing that he wants to “dig the trench that separated poetry from prose even deeper.” According to Breton, the image, which in his view is synonymous with metaphor, was poetry’s only tool.²¹

The Surrealists aim to cause a linguistic disruption of the ordinary, practical associations of things and consider that disruption as giving access to a psychic reality. They wanted to exteriorize “the actual functioning of thought ... in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral

¹⁹ Breton, ‘Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality,’ trans. Richard Sieburth and Jennifer Gordon, *October*, 69 (1994), pp. 133-144.

²⁰ Breton, 1969, p. 38.

²¹ Breton, “Surrealist Situation of the Object” in 1969, p. 268.

concern.”²² Cited below are some examples Breton cites in the *First Manifesto*:

[...]

A church stood dazzling as a bell. (PHILIPPE SOUPAULT)

In Rose Selavy's sleep there is a dwarf issued from a well who comes to eat her bread at night. (ROBERT DESNOS)

On the bridge the dew with the head of a tabby cat lulls itself to sleep. (ANDRÉ BRETON)

A little to the left, in my firmament foretold, I see – but it's doubtless but a mist of blood and murder – the gleaming glass of liberty's disturbances. (LOUIS ARAGON)

In the forest aflame

The lions were fresh. (ROBERT VITRAC)²³

The concrete relationship between poetry and the language of automatism would require another full-length thesis; nonetheless, what Breton theorizes as poetic images appear not to differ so dramatically from those which he categorizes as Surrealist ones since the latter too are constituted by the combination of different sorts of realities and are illustrating the unexpected aspect of the human thought.²⁴ If language operates typically in the realm of the

²² To be precise, what Breton suggested as the definition and motto of Surrealism is as follows: “SURREALISM, *n.* Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern. / *ENCYCLOPEDIA. Philosophy.* Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life [...]” Breton, *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²³ Breton, 1969, pp. 38-39.

²⁴ I point out that while the Surrealists pursued a transformation of themselves into an

already known and settled order, as Breton pointed out above, another use of language will seem to liberate words from the old semantic values and liquidate the old associations. Such a use of language is what Breton qualifies by the word *poetic*, and the word serves as another measure connoting valuation and does not mean, again, just an institutional practice. In “Surrealist Situation of the Object” mentioned above, Breton explains that the poet’s task is to “recapture the concrete vitality that logical habits of thought are about to cause him to lose.”²⁵ Here, we could refer back to Breton’s perception of realist images as “superimposed images taken from some stock catalogue” while recognizing that images can also break the mold of imagination and shatter the belief in immobility of reality. Then, what matters is the quality of images; being marvelous could count as a desirable quality. Compared to “superimposed images” taken from a catalogue – that is, images that have lost their vitality – marvelous images would be of “the concrete vitality” of things. Therefore, Breton says, “the marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful.”²⁶ Moreover, since automatism is synonymous with Surrealism,

enregistering apparatus of the unconscious desires, they could not help but tolerate even the minimal intervention of the conscious will in order not to be totally submerged in insanity.

²⁵ “Surrealist Situation of the Object,” *Loc. Cit.*

²⁶ Breton, 1969, p.13

automatism's aim as the linguistic approximation of distant realities²⁷ would be to revive the vitality of things. Then, one could say that the words "poetry" and "automatism" denote a remarkably similar act of language, that is, to create the marvelous.

That one can understand this poetic act of the language as a matter of knowledge is crucial, and Breton himself seems to have done so. This assumption is based on Breton's proclamation that poetry "teaches" – according to him, poetry is instructive of "being master of [oneself]," and this mastery is about "maintain[ing] the body of ... desires ... in a state of anarchy."²⁸ This association could sound a bit strange since mastery seems to have nothing to do with anarchy. However, we should not understand being master of oneself here as having something to do with self-restraint. Instead, being master of oneself and maintaining the body of desires in a state of anarchy, when connected together, means wanting more and not being satisfied with the *status quo* that is maintained, on the contrary, by clinging to the regulative or perhaps repressive rationality. Thanks to poetry, one would come to discover – and, importantly, desire – the freedom and accordance of the object and the subject through imagination, while the two are restrained and discordant in the reality taken in the

²⁷ We can refer to Breton's example in "Surrealist Situation of the Object," which he has taken from Isidore Ducasse, also known as Lautréamont: "*As beautiful as the fortuitous meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table.*"

²⁸ Breton, 1969, p. 18.

narrow, positivistic sense. Again, while considering the object and the subject must be consistent and free, the Surrealists deemed them under control of the limits of rational cognition and the boundaries of the consciousness.

Further, to the extent that the knowledge of poetry was imagined not to be about escaping from reality but striving to *realize* what the mind had imagined, it would be possible to say that poetry was identified with knowledge as a necessary precondition of action and even with action itself. Such an idea is hinted in Breton's call to "take the trouble to *practice* poetry"²⁹ to disrupt the limit of everyday life and broaden the sphere of life. In the *Second Manifesto* (here is also where Breton brutally reproaches Bataille, an engagement to which we shall return), Breton tried to mediate between the practicing of poetry and the world's transformation by presenting a point of the mind where "life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions"³⁰ as the causal link between these two incidents.

Later in the 1930s, Breton attempted to actualize his blueprint through association with the Communists, although the alliance was short-lived. While class emancipation was the supreme end for art according to the Communists, the

²⁹ Breton, 1969, p. 18. Emphasis in original.

³⁰ Breton, 1969, pp. 123-124.

autonomy of art and poetry was something Breton could not renounce for any political pretext, even revolution. Nonetheless, even after the alliance ended, Breton espoused the belief in the revolutionary potential of poetry. He rejected the subordination of poetry and art to political programs and kept claiming the importance of showing a thorough rebellious in the creative dimension because what he considers the arts' revolutionary power derives precisely from their autonomy. Suggesting Rimbaud as the example, Breton stated that the rebellious spirit of the poet and the attitude of the revolutionary activist could accord with one another: "[Rimbaud's] whole will to change the world radically, a will that no one ever took farther than he did, was suddenly channeled, was immediately offered up to become one with the workers' will to emancipation."³¹

So far, I have tried to summarize the history and contentions of Surrealism to show Surrealism's main tactic and methodology: to delve into what is repressed by reason and thereby free thought from "any control exercised by reason." Breton and his fellows considered poetry central to this end because they accorded it with a "truer" knowledge of the world and the self. Through such knowledge, one can recuperate the potentiality of the human mind and thereby desire and thus realize what is unrealized yet. However, one can still wonder if knowledge, rational and "extra-rational," can only be linked to freedom and

³¹ Breton, "Political Position of Surrealism," in 1969, p. 219.

capability. Could this Surrealist knowledge not remain attached to and reproducing existing traditional hierarchical values, despite their desire for a revolution against idealism? Bataille's perspective on the Surrealist movement and his grounds for criticizing it, which we will investigate in the next section, are linked to this question.

1.2. Bataille's Critique of Surrealism and Poetry

When Surrealism was at its height in the 1920s, Bataille was the leader among the editors of the journal *Documents*. Although *Documents* was conceived initially as an art magazine, its coverage widened to include popular culture, archeology, and innovative and non-conformist uses of ethnographic materials, in large part to disassemble idealist categories and hierarchical values.³² Bataille wanted to produce contrary evidence to the legitimacy of any origins of human ideals in the series of articles he wrote and published in *Documents*. A significant fact is that he appears to have observed certain complicity between Surrealism and idealism in the notion of surreality itself. Although expressed indirectly and implicitly at first, Bataille's target in particular seems to be the Surrealists' pretense of having

³² Falasca-Zamponi, "Sociology and Ethnography" in *Georges Bataille: Key Concepts*, eds. Mark Hewson and Marcus Coelen, (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 41.

formulated materialism as an alternative to Hegelian idealism since, in the end, it falls back into the idealism from which they contend to break free.³³ As we will soon see, Bataille's view of the Surrealists is that they wrongfully prioritized their concepts over concrete and material reality, which they initially promised to reform, and that this is already being informed by their direction of movement to resolve contradictions of the opposites into reality *above* reality (*surreality*).

For example, in "Human Face" (September 1929), Bataille implies how the imposition of coherence on human nature has tended to skip and flatten various features of humanness as crudeness or irregularity. This flattening may remind us of Breton's metaphor of grapes, criticizing the realistic notion of reality that falsely represents or even reduces the potentiality of the latent, variable aspects of the world. However, on a deeper level, "Human Face" might be read as implying a criticism of the Surrealist explanations that it is necessary or even imperative to resolve oppositions through the mediation of the mind and that such resolution is what humans desire as a concrete content of the freedom of the mind. Bataille's basic premise is that the mind does not assure, as Breton contends, the continuity of human nature and the universe. What follows is that the Surrealists' explanations are not materialist enough. He rejects systematicity and emphasizes

³³ Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the Gift* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press) p. 49.

that system, hierarchy, and servility are inseparable because system connotes hierarchy, which demands the inferior to submit themselves to the superior: “[t]here is really no difference between humility, of the slightest degree, before the SYSTEM - which is to say, before the Idea - and the fear of God.”³⁴

As an alternative, Bataille evokes what he calls *base materialism*, a series of attempts to unblinkingly stare at matter and conceive it “as an *active principle*” itself (VE, 47, emphasis original). In Bataille’s view, this base materialism is “a materialism not implying an ontology, not implying that matter is the thing-in-itself” (*Loc.cit.*). As implied in base materialism, matter is not a stable substance or the hidden support of the world to which we can break through. If it itself is instead an active principle, it is something one cannot control and master by any given principle – whether political, cultural, theoretical, or otherwise.

Bataille’s explanation of base matter is made clear in “The Big Toe” (November 1929), where he mentions base matter as what enables the oppositional system of the “high” (the elevated, the ideal) and the “low” (matter). The high or ideal is not high in and of itself because it structures the low as repugnant and vile, itself as elevated and pure. In this sense, the high cannot ever be as pure as it would desire, nor can it survive on its own, because it is founded

³⁴ Georges Bataille, “Human Face” trans. Anette Michelson in *October*, Vol. 36, Georges Bataille: Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Un-Knowing (Spring 1986), pp. 17-21(19).

by and dependent on the low as what is opposed to it, in fact, as its origin. In other words, their relationship is not dichotomous but interdependent. Thus, it follows that the highness of the high and the lowness of the low are not traits inherently given to them from the beginning but rather relational and comparative ones. Manifesting that the high needs the low because the latter founds the former, base matter is what undercuts the very opposition from outside, escaping dialectical synthesis. Instead, it is active resistance, an overt, incessant, persistent insult to a system culminating in human dignity and any attempt to idealize it, whose impact cannot be limited to the strictly political sphere and instead reaches into the broader domain of theory.³⁵

While one could read these essays as a criticism of the Surrealists' tendency toward the high, they could also be interpreted as a criticism of Surrealists' presumption that images can be more faithful to reality and therefore commensurate with it than an idea. For example, in "The Language of Flowers" (July 1929), Bataille questions the association between the image of flowers and the notion of beauty. Convention links the former to the latter and makes this association appear natural. However, in Bataille's view, flowers do not have anything to do with beauty considering the following: they cannot grow in height

³⁵ Benjamin Noys, "Georges Bataille's Base Materialism", *Cultural Values* 2, no.4 (1998), p. 501-502.

if they are not rooted in the dirt; they are nothing but the “hairy sexual organs” (VE, 12) of plants with dirty traces of pollen and diabolic stamen in the corolla. The association of flowers to beauty can only occur because one excludes those obnoxious but necessary organs to the plant’s survival and reproduction as they idealize the flower.

Similarly, in “The Big Toe,” Bataille points out that humanity is preoccupied with the heavens and heavenly things. In his view, although it is not usually considered as much of an epitome of a human body as the head, the big toe is, in fact, “[t]he most *human* part of the human body” (VE, 20; emphasis in original). This identification is because unless the big toe comes into line with other toes and abandons the function of clinging to branches, characteristic of the anthropoid apes, humans would not have acquired the ability to stand stably and upright. Nonetheless, humans tend toward the high and ignore what is base, despite its necessity. They think of their feet as dirty on the pretext that they are in the mud.

One thing to note is that Bataille’s intention is not to deny the potentiality of images to contain some “truth,” given that he uses various images himself to support his claim. He suggests “[o]pening [our] eyes wide ... before a big toe” (VE, 23) and imagining “the impossible and fantastic vision of roots swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin” (VE, 13). These lines are equivalent to rejecting the upward movement of the mind that idealizes

the beauty of flowers and engaging instead in the downward movement that represents a fundamental relationship to sensual and material reality. Claiming that humans are to be seduced not only by “elegant and correct forms” but by degeneration and those things that are “radically opposed to that caused by light and ideal beauty” (*VE*, 23), he desires to open up a path to confront the disturbing and repellent parts of human instinct that are nonetheless real, even undeniably an all-too-human trait to ignore. However, it is not to force one to cease to walk erect and wallow in the mud. Instead of creating a new set of inverted values, base materialism invites the readers to reconsider the fixed set of values that made the oppositional system itself of the high and the low, the pure and the impure and seized humanity, even if it can be no more than undoing our usual prejudices and presuppositions.

So far, there are more similarities between Bataille and the Surrealists than one might have expected. First, both wanted to critically engage with what has thus far been considered real or rational. Second, both contend that rationality denies its contiguity or dependency on the irrational. Finally, both believe that images can destroy habitual prejudices projected onto reality. Given this, we could say that at least part of Bataille’s awareness overlaps with Surrealism, and he would later indeed evaluate Surrealism positively on some occasions.³⁶ What

³⁶ Indeed, Bataille and Breton would even form a common front against fascism in 1935

Bataille recognizes as his point of divergence from Surrealism lies in his perception of the direction the movement ought to take. As we have investigated above, Bataille regards the Surrealist images as based on the belief of humanity's potency to spiritualize, which tends toward the "high." This tendency to spiritualize is clearly at a distance from the materiality of the foul and the filthy, which Bataille considered observable only *down on the base*, and, therefore, is opposite to their claim that they conceive of human existence as inevitably materialist; on the contrary, Bataille's imagery such as the big toe, swarming roots, and decomposing soil, has without any interest in making them rise "higher." His concern is that upward movement might sterilize what is at the base – that which, therefore, is genuinely *subversive* of reality.

and even though this annexation did not last for longer than a year, the antagonism between Bataille and Surrealism does tend to be diluted after this. For example, in 1942, Breton identifies Bataille in his "Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto or Not" as one of "the boldest and most lucid of our time," (see André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p.287) and four years later, Bataille, on his part, describes Surrealism as a "*genuinely virile opposition – nothing conciliatory, nothing divine – to all accepted limits, a rigorous will to insubordination*," (See Bataille, "On the Subject of Slumbers" (*AM*, 49), emphasis in original) and declares in a footnote as follows: "although surrealism may seem dead, in spite of the confectionery and poverty of the work in which it has ended (if we put to one side the question of Communism), *in terms of mankind's interrogation of itself, there is surrealism and nothing*" (see Bataille, "On the Subject of Slumbers", footnote 2 in (*AM*, 51), emphasis in original). Also, in the interview with Chapsal, Bataille states that he recognizes Surrealism as "touching the essential," which is "a rage ... against the state of existing things." (See Madeleine Chapsal, *Les Écrivains en personne*, p. 27) Given all this, despite the fact that Bataille and Surrealism moved in an opposite direction, I think Bataille was perfectly accurate about the logical conclusion of the movement, while not at all belittling the significance.

Perhaps because of this difference, Breton decided on a preemptive strike and spared almost six pages at the end of the *Second Manifesto* to attack Bataille using the most hostile rhetoric possible, plainly denouncing Bataille's position in the *Documents* essays we examined above. According to Breton, Bataille's precise misfortune is to reason about matter; claiming to do away with all ideals or ideology and sticking to *base matter*, Bataille's attempt can itself "only take an ideological turn"³⁷ because what he does is only to turn matter into an idea contrary to his intent.³⁸ We will be returning to what this criticism might mean at the end of this chapter.

The hostility became visible and mutual when Bataille responded to Breton's name-calling by publishing, with many ex-Surrealists, the pamphlet *Un Cadavre* [A Corpse] to bury Breton on 15 January 1930, just a month after the publication of the *Second Manifesto*. Bataille's contribution to the pamphlet was an essay, "*Un lion châtré*" [A Castrated Lion], which refers to Breton as the "*old aesthete and false revolutionary with the head of Christ*" and an "old religious windbag."³⁹ Although this essay thus appears as more of an *ad hominem* attack, two other

³⁷ Breton, 1969, p. 184.

³⁸ Skimming Breton's actual sentences in a full length will be of use for the sake of the later examination of what this sort of criticism might mean:

(*Loc. cit.* Emphasis in original)

³⁹ Bataille, "A Castrated Lion" (1929), in (*AM*, 28). Emphasis in original.

posthumously published essays, “The Old Mole and the prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* [superman] and *Surrealist*” (hereafter “The Old Mole”) and “The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades)” (hereafter “The Use Value of Sade”) contain more substantial criticisms of Surrealism.

These texts are particularly worthy of attention because there Bataille attempts to take a step further than the plain denouncement of the Surrealist movement. It becomes apparent that one cannot confine the reason for the schism between Bataille and Surrealism to Surrealism’s pursuit of an “ideal” despite its supposed materialism: real, practical, and political impotence of Surrealism’s supposed subversion is that which Bataille is increasingly challenging. Indeed, when he moves on to define the causes of the impotence and consider its consequences, Bataille’s later conception of poetry’s political and even transgressive power starts to germinate. In other words, we can begin to see a particular development taking shape in Bataille’s view of the place and importance of poetry in his overall philosophy. The view is that poetry’s potential to act against the dominant order can be realized only in so far as one succeeds in dealing properly with poetry’s ambivalence: in case they succeed, poetry can be a point of access to the unmasterable remainder of the systems of appropriation; if not, they will submit poetry to the control of such a system.

In “The Old Mole,” Bataille seems to be conducting a political interpretation of his base materialism to stress the shortcomings of the Surrealist revolt. The

revolution for which the Surrealists strive falls short because it is at best a bourgeois or petit-bourgeois pseudo-revolution subjugated to bourgeois ethics. According to him, the Surrealists suffer from an “Icarian complex.” (VE, 37) By referring to the legend of Icarus, who tried to leave the earth and ascend to the sun on wings fashioned out of feathers and wax, Bataille suggests that the Surrealists are vainly sticking to the ideal beyond the contingent, material world and denying their dependence on it. Thus, they are doomed to fail and fall back to earth just like Icarus. Bataille tries to explain this in terms of sentiments: the Surrealists are trying to oppose their class due to their guilty feelings toward the lower strata of society, but they do not know that the power of agitation or the disruptive force they pursue remains tied to the lower stratum of society and its affect. Their very representation of their revolution as a “redemptive light rising *above* [“*sur*”] the world, *above* classes, the overflowing of spiritual elevation and Lamartinian bliss” (VE, 34) only lays bare their elitism and regressive drive. Surrealism’s limit is that their revolution’s spirit is founded on the bourgeois value system and, even worse, reproduces the latter. He even diagnoses that Surrealist work does not proceed further than a mere expression of the desire to be immediately punished and play the role of martyr.

Moreover, just as Breton has summoned Marx as his authority and

condemned Bataille as an “excrement-philosopher,”⁴⁰ Bataille, for his part, tries to oppose the figure of the old mole – which is mentioned in Hamlet and cited by Marx to refer to the subversive and necessary force of the proletariat – with the figure of the eagle, which represents the elevated, transcendent prefix *sur*: unlike the eagle soaring above the material order, the old mole burrows under “decomposed soil repugnant to the delicate nose of the utopians.” (VE, 35) Again, by a series of metaphorical images, Bataille sought to claim that “the movements of the human heart, introducing with historical upheavals their immense disorder and their greedy vulgarity, are produced only within the proletariat, in the submerged masses dedicated to measureless agitation.” (VE, 36) Without knowing this and by assigning the debased a higher metaphysical or “ethereal” (VE, 39) value, the Surrealists can only end up with the “transformations of Icarian reflexes into a pathetic-comic and gratuitous literature” (VE, 40), in other words, merely with a pure literary activism. Refuting Breton’s invocation of the power of the “*idea* against the bestiality of all beings and all things,” Bataille insists that “[t]he earth is base, world is world”⁴¹ and then suggests that Surrealism is doomed to end up a purely literary enterprise without any

⁴⁰ Breton, 1969, p. 135, in a footnote.

⁴¹ This phrase is an echo of the conclusion of the *Second Manifesto* of Surrealism where the poet is illustrated as prophetic of the freedom to come, the seed of which humans already has in themselves. Breton says that the Surrealists will be vanquished “only if the world is the world.” See Breton, 1969, p. 187.

revolutionary potency: “[i]n human terms no baseness values, at present, the rage of refined literati, lovers of an accursed poetry; what cannot move the heart of a ditchdigger already has the existence of shadows.” (*VE*, 43)

The meaning of the warning – that the Surrealists’ movement would be nothing but a failed agitation insofar as it fails to extend its domain over that of pure literature – is further explained in “The Use Value of Sade.”⁴² There, Bataille criticizes the Surrealists’ orientation toward elevation or sublimation, which he deemed implied in the use of prefix *sur-*, which qualifies their movement and their setting of the *idea* “against the bestiality of all things.” Bataille also comments that the consequent impotence of the Surrealists takes the form of contemplation on the way they treat the marquis. It is a well-known fact that the Surrealists admired Sade and wanted to follow in his footsteps: they perceived his novels founded on the revolutionary spirit to subvert common sense

⁴² The title insinuates Bataille’s introduction of the opposition between use value and exchange value into his explanation. In a capitalist society, the means of production is owned by the capitalist and most people, who are wage workers, must buy things with their wages to satisfy their needs. To take commodity form or, put it simply, be able to be bought and sold, things should be not just useful but exchangeable. This becomes possible because the quantitative, abstract equivalence of value, i.e., exchange value mediates different use values. According to Bataille, a wage worker “accumulates in order to spend,” (*VE*, 99) to satisfy primary needs, whereas the capitalist system culminating in exchange value violently condemns material needs and desires and adapts humanity to “fabrication, rational consumption, and the conservation of products” to perpetuate itself. (*VE*, 97) Also see Pierre Lamarche, “The Use Value of G. A. M. V. Bataille” in *Reading Bataille Now*, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 54-69 (57-58).

and the morals of the day, although in a completely different form from that of Enlightenment discourses of the 18th Century literature and philosophy. They found the significance of the anarchist violence of his writings in the poetic emancipation of the human mind and wanted to put that idea forward as the value and *raison d'être* of their movement, as is well illustrated in Breton's praise of Sade in the *First Manifesto* for being "Surrealist in Sadism."⁴³

According to Bataille, however, the Surrealists' gesture is far from a proper evaluation of Sade. The Surrealists only assimilate what they consider as Sade's significance and "cover [him] with honors," turning him into an idealized figure or even a source of sublimated aesthetic experience. However, the very gesture forces Sade's actual being to be subjected, in the end, to expulsion or excretion. We can grasp this logic through Bataille's notion of heterology, a neologism meaning the "science of what is completely other," in other words, of the heterogeneous. For Bataille, the word *heterogeneous* means whatever any normative system of thought and values excludes as an unassimilable waste product because it is consumptive and destructive to the very system. Analogous to establishing the logic of base materialism, Bataille points out that the definitions of the heterogeneous and the homogeneous operate not on a dichotomous logic but are set relationally and that their domains are open to one

⁴³ Breton, 1969, p. 26.

another. Just as base matter is an irreducible and ineliminable third term enabling the opposition of the low and the high from the outset, the heterogeneous cannot be removed no matter how hard one tries to reduce it and demands us to confront itself as is, i.e., as non-logical difference.

In order to understand how all this work concretely, let us return to Bataille's critique of the Surrealistic reception of Sade. Sade's violence is originally a radical other or an inconceivable waste of the Enlightenment discourses: unlimitedly affirming and showing the sway of the vulgar materialist impulses of desire overwhelming life, Sade urges us to go deep *down*, beneath the empty formalities and vanities. Since Sade's aspect of thinking resists any reduction into aesthete glossaries, absorbing him into such glossaries and equating the aspect of his thinking with the inspiration of anarchist freedom on the spiritual and artistic plane would excrete what in Sade is other to the Enlightenment tradition as mere waste rather than a necessary component of his thought. Sade becomes no longer a perverted, odious man or the author of a body of deranged works. Instead, one would render him a sole literary phenomenon "exempt from all practical application" (VE, 93), and the domains he described are thus placed "outside of and above all reality" of historical practice in the 18th Century. According to Bataille, what the Surrealists have done to Sade is tantamount to the emasculation of the marquis. The more they suppress and sublimate the violence of Sade, the more this violent Sade and the vile or base part of him will take on excremental

value as a *ganz anderes* [a foreign body]. (VE, 93-94)

Here, we could remind ourselves again of the Surrealists setting forth the synthetic reconciliation between the contraries, which is the content of what they proclaim to be genuine knowledge of the self and the world. Bataille assesses that the Surrealists do so by attributing the most immaterial values to sexuality, insanity, and the unconscious—in other words, they poeticize and beautify these things: sublimation involves “excreting” the base or vulgar aspect or materiality of those things. Because they are the inconceivable remainder of sublimation, and yet simultaneously the indispensable core of those heterogeneous elements, the process prevents the Surrealists from knowing them in their facticity.

In sum, Bataille’s criticisms of Surrealism as crystalized in his base materialism and heterology seem to provide insights into the sublimating tendency of the Surrealists’ conception against what he calls the base and the heterogeneous. While Bataille’s criticism is threefold, we will investigate only two of them for the time being: first, the Surrealists’ endeavors to shed light on the suppressed psychological realms (such as the unconscious, dreams and desires) do not lead to saving these from suppression. This failed attempt of making those realms exempt from suppression is rooted in the fact that the Surrealists remained tied to the problem of knowledge. They believed that they could transcribe the voice of the unconscious and thereby dissolve the contradicted state of dream and reality into a higher reality that can be known.

However, these attempts are problematic in that they take what cannot be approached by knowing as an object of knowing. Second, the Surrealists remained tied even to the suppressive mechanism of the existing value system. Even though they could have known—although hazily—that what is devalued then as irrational, foul, and filthy has revolutionary potential, they could not shake off their tendency toward elevation and spirituality. As a result, the Surrealists' conception of these things ends up, paradoxically, preventing us from approaching them in their actual materiality (the “inferior vulgar reality”).

Then, what do all these have to do with poetry?

For our interest, observing Bataille's use of the word *poetry* or *the poetic* and pondering what poetry has to do with all these would be instructive. Bataille tends to associate the word poetic with negative phrases in the discussed texts. For example, he associates it with “concoctions that are ... nothing but a diversion” in the “Big Toe” (*VE*, 23), and he uses it to modify “verbiage” (*VE*, 92) in “The Use Value of Sade.” The word diversion is at the antipode of his general contention that one must meet reality's disturbing and essential aspects. Further, the word verbiage does not seem to neutrally mean a long and eloquent speech because Bataille associates it with the “inability to express oneself in a simple and categorical way,” accompanying “a pretentious hypocrisy” (*Loc. Cit.*) Then, what the word poetic has to do with and how does it work in these phrases?

Without any concrete examples provided by Bataille, one might regard in

terms of those usages as if he is parsimonious about all poetry and problematizing it. Michel Surya, an author of the most widely acknowledged biography of Bataille and a commentator on his work, provides us with an understanding of poetry that might as well been Bataille's own: "poetry was and remained hateful [for Bataille] when it cherished the fine words, subtle impressions, lyrical sparks, sentimental naivety, nonsense, image for its own sake, rhetoric as reality, everything that might help it make the world a kinder, fairer and more innocent place. In a word, any poetry – and perhaps in Bataille's eyes this meant almost *all* poetry – that pleaded for an ideal or, worse still, for the absolute, that 'disgusting, inhuman word' [...]." ⁴⁴ However, we must be more cautious in treating and articulating what poetry was for Bataille, and, more significantly, how the word *poetic* is used alongside the word *literary*. At the place discussed above, Bataille treats the words, *poetic* and *literary*, fairly equivalently, and this is not a coincidence when considering that he would later say, "literature being nothing if it is not poetry [...]" (*IE*, 150), which we will later take a closer look in the following chapters. In "The Use Value of Sade," he also says the following:

Poetry at first glance seems to remain valuable as a method of mental projection (in that it permits one to accede to an entirely heterogeneous world). But it is only too easy to see that it is hardly less debased than religion. It has almost always been at the mercy of the great historical systems of appropriation. And insofar as it can be developed autonomously, this autonomy leads it onto the path of a total poetic conception of the world, which ends at any one of a

⁴⁴ Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, London and New York: Verso, 2002, p. 322.

number of aesthetic homogeneities. The practical unreality of the heterogeneous elements it sets in motion is, in fact, an indispensable condition for the continuation of heterogeneity: starting from the moment when this unreality immediately constitutes itself as a superior reality, whose mission is to eliminate (or degrade) inferior vulgar reality, poetry is reduced to playing the role of the standard of things, and, in opposition, the worst vulgarity takes on an ever stronger excremental value. (*VE*, 97)

This quote shows Bataille's central concern of poetry in the earliest day and may reveal that the problem is not poetry itself. Bataille's answer as to what happens if poetry is, or is considered and practiced as, a channel of the "ideal" is inextricable with his thoughts about to what degree Surrealism succeeds and fails in handling poetry's ambiguous capacities. His thinking of the degree Surrealism fails or succeeds in doing so is related to the third layer of his criticism. Even though art was a way of being and not an institutional practice and poetry was an instructor of life rather than a simple genre for the Surrealists, they could not reconsider the role of these things fundamentally. They set them apart from the action of the existing system prioritizing the immaterial; they thus used poetry to assign the most immaterial values to those mentioned, the consequence of which Surrealism unintentionally reproduced the art form they had initially criticized. Isolated from the reality of the contingent, material world, their works were incorporated into existing (bourgeois) art hardened to conventional institutional practice or genre.

Similar to what the Surrealists had originally imagined, poetry as understood by Bataille was a hinge between daily and non-daily reality rather than a fixed,

standardized genre or institutional practice. Bataille says that poetry can potentially access the entirely heterogeneous world in balance with the “inferior vulgar reality” that the existing system devalues, and the practice of automatism could have been one example – apart from its intention to elevation. However, attempts to portray the heterogeneous elements as beautiful or perhaps marvelous might be aligned with the appropriation of the heterogeneous to the ideal, submit poetry under the sway of “the great historical systems of appropriation” and turn it into “any one of a number of aesthetic homogeneities” “reduced to playing the role of the standard of things” (*VE*, 97) as we have seen above in the Surrealists’ reading of Sade. This reduction is tantamount to the debasement and excretion of the “worst vulgarity,” resulting in poetry losing its truly subversive force.

Impeded by the systems of appropriation and thus unintentionally tracking impurities and erasing asperities, poetry might delude humanity into thinking that they confront and indulge in their instincts when what they really do is to evade them continually, which leads to the failure to produce real revolution or transgression. Worse, there remains a danger in which poetry, far from being free, becomes an instrument of oppressive authority, sanitizing the reality to better muzzle desire – the exact opposite of what Surrealist poetry has wanted and claimed to be.

We can infer from this argument that Bataille, in the 1930s, was in between the recognition of the heterogeneous as opposed to conceptual assimilation and

the desire to conceptualize the destructive force as a political engine, nonetheless. We can refer to Breton's counterattack to Bataille that Bataille himself can only take an ideological turn, although he insists on rejecting all ideology. Indeed, Bataille's dilemma is that he is at once arguing for the concepts that disrupt the traditional philosophical oppositions and destabilize all foundations and *using* these concepts himself to develop into cornerstones of a radical libertarian Marxism. As seen in "The Old Mole," when qualifying the base and the heterogeneous as exclusively proletarian property, Bataille risks returning to their stable, ontological interpretation and turning them into another inverted value instead of the existing ones.⁴⁵ In the next chapter, we will see him further refining his attempt by radically questioning the limits of knowledge and conceptuality and linking such an act with poetry. As we will see in Chapter 2, Bataille would sophisticate his strategy of refusing stable systems by showing that the distinction between the inside and the outside of the system of knowledge is not transcendental or definitive. The seemingly all-comprehensive movement of the dialectic is not an exception: it is enabled by excluding those exceeding the system's closure, among which Bataille counts poetry as one example. However, if the exclusion itself is what *founds* the system, simply maintaining that poetry is the radical other of the dialectic would not entirely dispose of any grounds for

⁴⁵ Noys, "Georges Bataille's Base Materialism", p. 507.

forming up the system. Then, how would Bataille formulate poetry as a remainder that lies outside the system and a reminder of what refuses incorporation into knowledge?

Chapter 2. Poetry and Nonknowledge

To refuse the hierarchical ontological value system and assure the reconstruction of the relationship between the high (the “ideal”) and the low (matter), Bataille considers what constructs and identifies them as high and low in the first place. According to him, neither the low nor the high represent lowness or highness in and of itself. Their identities as low or high are not natural, inherent properties but are attributes acquired through a differential relationship. This explanation involves another explanation of the systems of appropriation. While the systems seem to form identities through measure and regularity, what enables the construction of identities is instead the exclusion of what is other, i.e., the heterogeneous.

Given that the heterogeneous is a waste product resisting the formation of identities, the chief editor of *Documents* aims at the rigid examination of it as the key to resisting the systems. With this ambition, he estimates Surrealism as a failed agitation remaining purely a literary verbiage lacking political potency. According to him, the Surrealists attempted to assimilate the heterogeneous in a pretext for poetic revolution, ending up, however, reproducing the old traditional system preferring the mind over matter which they claimed to refute. This criticism is based on his desire to secure the disruptiveness of the heterogeneous.

However, due to the attempt to translate it into the jargon of existing

political discourse and utilize it as a revolutionary power of libertarian Marxism, Bataille, in the 1930s, is risking turning the heterogeneous into its own value and isolating its disruptive capacity into theoretical political sphere even though the influence reaches beyond politics. Then how would the “philosopher” of transgression refine his approach? How would it be possible to maintain and represent the significance of the heterogeneous *as is* without falling into an old metaphysical structure? We could try to think about the answer to this question by returning to his propping up poetry as a threshold to the heterogeneous and try to link this consciousness to his later attempt in the 1940s to postulate what he calls “nonknowledge.”⁴⁶

It will be instructive to refer to *Inner Experience* to try to understand nonknowledge because the book introduces the term as the principle and domicile of inner experience.⁴⁷ One thing to remember is that nonknowledge is different from knowledge, as it is connoted in how the word is coined (*nonknowledge*). How would nonknowledge be said to be different from knowledge?

⁴⁶ The term “non-savoir” has been variously translated as nonknowledge (Kendall), non-knowledge (Boldt-Irons), unknowing (Hurley) etc. In this thesis I generally use “nonknowledge.”

⁴⁷ The expression “inner experience” first appeared in 1924, in an essay entitled “Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh,” and it becomes an object of exploration in earnest in *Inner Experience*. *Inner Experience* is the first philosophical treatise that Bataille published in his name, and it is at the same time the first volume of what he conceived as the *Atheological Summa*, which starts from Judeo-Christian basic doctrines only in order to subvert them and resonates with the absence of God.

Knowledge is enabled and based on language, which mediates meaning and guarantees its transmissibility. If language would lead to signification and thus to a certain meaning one is to know, Bataille's linguistic attempts to communicate nonknowledge would always *have to* fail to achieve signification. Otherwise, they will end up referring to what is not it, that is, those things already known.

However, since language conditions and enables thought, the thinking of nonknowledge would inevitably have recourse to it. Then, what should be asked is the kind of linguistic expression that, at least, approximates nonknowledge.

One can think of the significance of (the) language in *Inner Experience* to describe inner experience throughout the book. Indeed, Bataille retains language as a cause and core instance of inner experience by employing language disruptively in the writing of *Inner Experience*. By "disruptive," I mean that he tries to provide definitions of inner experience only to display their instability; he attempts to find as many different tones and coinages that best suit inner experience as possible, and to the extent permitted to him, only coming to expose inevitable split between words and what they are meant to designate. This seemingly disordered and incongruous way of proceeding with writing causes the language to crystallize into a quicksand of meaning around which new words are continuously brought about and get liquidated. He says, for example, that inner experience is "a journey to the end of the possible of man" (*IE*, 14); it is "linked to the necessity, for the mind, of questioning everything – without any

conceivable respite or rest” (*IE*, “notes,” 216); it is also “ecstasy” (*IE*, 19), negative project (*IE*, 29), “the opposite of action, nothing more.” (*IE*, 51) However, any words composing the descriptions are far from being definitive in the relentless succession of words, and this indefiniteness causes reading that can never be completed.

Moreover, *Inner Experience* is a heterogeneous text rather than a complete, univocal discourse: it includes autobiographical narratives and argument, analysis, and exegesis, not forgetting different jargons of religion, philosophy and other discourses. Here, we could remind that Bataille has suggested poetry as access to the heterogeneous. The sporadic and seemingly illogical style of *Inner Experience*, its metaphorical, symbolic, polysemic language, is something one might call widely poetic. One of its tributaries leads indeed to the paradox of developing a general theory of poetry or, to be more exact, affirming the relationship between poetry and nonknowledge: suppose poetry has to do with nonknowledge – that is, what is other to knowledge – and theory is about providing knowledge; then, how does Bataille’s “poetics” address this relation, without reducing or fixing the plane of what poetry is into a knowledge of some kind?

To answer the question above step by step, one needs to begin with inner experience and nonknowledge. In the first part, we will try to approach nonknowledge *via* Bataille’s distinction between mystical experience and inner

experience. This distinction will help one understand that the author wants to distinguish nonknowledge from certainty. The second part will consider knowledge as a system generative to meaning and nonknowledge as constitutive of knowledge – but only from the “outside.” In the last section, we will return to Bataille’s colliding descriptions of poetry and try to deal with the difficulty of positively affirming the relationship between poetry and nonknowledge. Bataille’s attitude toward poetry reflected in his expressions appears to remain deeply enigmatic and inconsistent. This characteristic is due to the painful awareness before the prison of utility, teleology and discursivity, whose hegemony the author thinks we could only contest.

To begin to grasp what Bataille will come to mean by transgression, I think Bataille’s repeated mention of contestation and its relationship to poetry requires attention. Bataille says this after he explains the immorality of poetry and thus the affinity of poetry to sacrifice: “in the desire for an inaccessible unknown, which at all costs we must situate beyond reach, I arrive at this feverish contestation of poetry – where, I believe, I will contest myself with others. But of poetry, I have first put forward only a narrow form – the simple holocaust of words. I will now give it a more vast and vague horizon [...]” Exploring the limits of poetry or the niche between poetry and the unknown, Bataille would take poetry as an essential instance of transgression, which is (im)possible. We will look closely at Bataille’s elaboration of transgression and its possibility in Chapter 3.

2.1. Nonknowledge as Refusal of Salvation

Bataille's general goal in writing *Inner Experience* can be inferred from one of the most reiterated themes in the book, which is the inevitability of what he calls the "project." Project corresponds to humans' tendency to submit experience to any value or authority affixed to it in advance and from without. Occupied with the concern or care for the future and in favor of projected goals and future results, humans envisage the present only proleptically and come to postpone immediate existence. The author refers to this tendency as the "putting off of existence until later" (*IE*, 51). Myeonghwan Jeong summarizes that Bataille's project results from the following three desires: salvation, humanity's completion on the historical plane, and discourse. Each of the desires influences humanity to justify asceticism that sacrifices the instant for the bliss of the afterlife, stigmatize the unproductive (e.g., poetry, laughter, and ecstasy) by prioritizing work, and consider language as a vehicle of knowledge and truth.⁴⁸ Bataille conceives inner experience as opposed to the actions of project, which is not without ambiguity, however: "[p]rinciple of inner experience: to get out through a project of the realm of project." (*IE*, 52)

The analogy and distinction of inner experience and mystical experience are

⁴⁸ 정명환, 「사르트르의 낮의 철학과 바타유의 밤의 사상」, 『현대의 위기와 인간』, (서울: 민음사, 2008), p. 77.

worth examining because they hint at figuring out what this paradoxical project to get out of the realm of project *through a project* really is. There is a proximity between the two experiences, as Bataille suggests by starting the main text of *Inner Experience* as follows: “[b]y *inner experience*, I understand what one usually calls *mystical experience*: states of ecstasy, of ravishment, at least of meditated emotion.” (*IE*, 9: italics Bataille’s) In other words, inner experience and mystical experience coincide on the level of pathos – meaning that the subject of the experience submits to the same ecstasy and ravishment.⁴⁹

However, Bataille expresses his sense of distance from the term mystical and thus ultimately differentiates inner experience from mystical experience. Bataille poses a question as follows, in an introductory passage of *Inner Experience*, written when the book was just published:

Can one not free from its [inner experience’s] religious antecedents the possibility of mystical experience, which remains open, no matter how it seems, for the nonbeliever? Free it from the asceticism of dogma and from the atmosphere of religions? Free it in a word from mysticism – to the point of linking it to the nudity of ignorance? (*IE*, “Notes,” 211)

If formulated, inner experience could be described as “mystical experience minus religiosity.” The religiosity consists of what Bataille calls the confessional dimension, which has ecclesiastical connotations of the intimacy between humanity and God (or the One). In the typical mystical narrative, the subject, as a

⁴⁹ Peter Tracey Connor, “Georges Bataille and the Poetry of Mysticism”, Ph.D. diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 1991), p. 93.

privileged knowing, comes to recover the intimacy with God by recognizing their state of oblivion due to Sin and confessing their ignorance. In so far as directed toward knowledge of any kind, even if such knowledge is about dissipating ignorance, experience comes to a particularly prescribed meaning as the point of a supposed origin and attachment that may justify the experience, “authority,” as Bataille puts it, which in the case of mystical experience is salvation.

However, since “salvation ... is the most odious of subterfuges” (*IE*, 19), Bataille wants something entirely different in connection with inner experience. Rather than being given a specific end and guidance to lead experience to a prescribed goal, Bataille has told us that the instance of inner experience has a pseudo-auto-teleologic nature being itself its “sole authority and value,” not having anything other than itself:

I wanted experience to lead me where it was leading, not to some end given in advance. And I say at once that it does not lead to a harbor (but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense). I wanted nonknowledge itself to be the principle [...] this experience born of nonknowledge, remains there decidedly. (*IE*, 9)

Here is where Bataille employs the word nonknowledge for the first time to refer to it as a principle and domicile of inner experience. Bataille says that inner experience takes nonknowledge as its principle because inner experience is the experience experienced for itself. What seems evident from the quote is that inner experience lacks any telos, particularly any knowledge. Being “a contestation of knowledge” (*IE*, 19), inner experience does not reveal something like a secret

meaning or guarantee any delusional or fearful authenticity that one should follow and submit to. Bataille has explained: “[e]xperience reveals nothing and cannot be the basis of belief or set out from it,” “[e]xperience is questioning (testing), in fever and anguish, what man knows of the facts of being.” (*IE*, 9) To undergo inner experience would mean to get “totally laid bare by proceeding without trickery to the unknown.” (*IE*, 11) What Bataille means by trickery (or “subterfuges”) seems to be alterable with what he calls “categories of understanding” the examples of which he provides cover “God, the absolute, the depth of the world.” (*IE*, 10) Bataille calls them so because as soon as one attempts to express the unknown into words, words would immediately refer to something known, even though the referent itself exceeds knowledge and any knowledgeable expression. Then, what matters is how to name what is not known, and we will try to ponder how this could be done in the final section of this chapter.

Based on our investigation thus far, Bataille seems to be repeatedly questioning and stripping off any assurance and certainty that we might have of experience, in general, to go through a particular experience called *inner* experience. Even while referring to experience without an article and thus appearing to denote all experience, Bataille orients himself toward *the* experience that amounts to radical and restless disorientation, question, and unrest, which ultimately are avoided in mystical experience stationed in an absolute, definite

meaning that is salvation. If the meaning as such is what gives mystical experience an authority, inner experience becomes authoritative precisely when questioning (“contesting”) any meaning that founds authority attributed from without. Bataille says: “I contest in the name of contestation what experience itself is (the will to go to the end of the possible). Experience, its authority, its method cannot be distinguished from contestation.” (*IE*, 19) Referentially noting, Bataille sets forth expressions such as “(a journey to) the end of the possible of man” (*IE*, 14) or “the extremity of the possible” (*IE*, 45) to refer to inner experience. He later explains the end or extremity as the “point at which despite the unintelligible position that he has within being, a man, having stripped himself of delusion and fear, advances so far that one cannot conceive of a possibility of going further.” (*IE*, 45) When the verb “contest” is synonymous with another verb “question,” the earlier quote where Bataille asks us to “contest/question” even what experience itself would amount to a demand to question everything possible including the very authority of inner experience and encounter with ignorance without an answer. Thus, Bataille says:

The extremity of the possible assumes laughter, ecstasy, terrified approach to death; assumes error, nausea, incessant agitation of the possible and the impossible, and in the end, however, shattered, by degrees, slowly wanted, the state of supplication, its absorption in despair. (*IE*, 45)

While salvation is a matter of a definite meaning that justifies the experience of the mystics (“mystical experience”) and is ultimately about knowing *the*

answer that cannot be another, inner experience is different from salvation because inner experience is an encounter with or an immersion in a radical ignorance without exit. Thus, becoming involved with inner experience would be similar to engaging with a point where all that we think we know dissipates. Inner experience is an invitation to confront the painful awareness of the absence of anything to assure the meaning of life instead of having the assurance of existence.

Here, we can also refer to Bataille's essay, written just a year after *Inner Experience*, called "Is Literature Useful?" There, Bataille says that poetry should not serve any ideal, whatever it may be. If it does serve an ideal, that is, if it is reduced to a utility, this could only mean "to treat human beings as human material."⁵⁰ Poetry is said to be linked to the essential part of humanity that cannot be in any way reduced to utility, a point similar to the claim that inner experience has no other goal and aim than itself. The distinction invoked here between poetry and utility is about treating humans as more than mere means, about not reducing them to means to an end. Bataille attempts to investigate the possibility of poetry from a distinct perspective than its politico-social utility, to give an account of the status and role of poetry based precisely on its lack of

⁵⁰ Bataille, *Œuvres Complètes*, Vol. XI, p. 12.

utility. This could help conceive poetry's value in itself, not associated with an end affixed to it from without.

Since the invitation in *Inner Experience* is about rejecting the idea of fulfillment in terms of knowledge, it amounts to acknowledging a kind of wound to the model of an enclosed or closable system comprehending everything within, a model such as that of Hegel. Coincidentally, as we shall see, Bataille mentions that poetry is something which is excluded from the Hegelian system and, further, that this very exclusion is coextensive with the establishment of the system as such.

2.2. Nonknowledge as Refusal of Completion

In this section and the next, I will try to deal with the things which provide relief from the dizzying absence of the assurance of meaning and how Bataille rejects them. Bataille's "philosophy" of nonknowledge emerged in opposition to Hegel's system of absolute knowledge.⁵¹ In the middle of a set of aphorisms titled "Torture," Bataille imagines Hegel turning away from the extremity he had just attained:

Hegel, I imagine, touched the extremity. He was still young and thought he was

⁵¹ Nonetheless, it is to be pointed out that what Bataille understood as Hegelian philosophy follows what Alexandre Kojève has shown in the *Introduction à la Lecture de Hegel*. See James Luchte in David P. Nichols et al. *Van Gogh among the Philosophers: Painting, Thinking, Being*, (London: Lexington Books, 2018), p. 206.

going mad. I even imagine that he elaborated the system to escape [...]. In the end, Hegel arrives at *satisfaction*, turns his back on extremity. [...] (IE, 48)

We can refer to Hegel's explanation of history's dialectical movement in the

Phenomenology of Spirit here. Its merits and demerits are that history takes up a specific meaning.⁵² Bataille's critique against Hegel's explanation is that one could read the dialectical movement, in principle, as the process of appropriation or *aneignen* of the world – which appears as a contradiction as human spirit pits itself against itself – as what is identical to spirit. Indeed, observing the opposition between humanity and the world, Hegel forecasts the reconciliation as predestined; he does so in a belief that the mind and external world are like head and tail of the same coin – the external world is the extension of the mind.⁵³

Hegel says: “[t]his last embodiment of spirit – spirit which at once gives its complete and true content the form of self, and thereby realises its notion, and in

⁵² A brief examination of Hegel's system would help understand the meaning of the quote and the stakes of nonknowledge more concretely. In Hegel, the content of Absolute Knowledge is Absolute Spirit, whose story to relate with itself to surpass alienation is History: although equated with Absolute Spirit, humans are estranged from the world due to a contradiction between humans' inner nature and the exterior world. However, Hegel's theory presents a solution: the reconciliation of the self and nature, mind and matter by the factor of reason, according to which History passes through a countless series of dialectical contradictions. This means that the movement of History is that of opposing and then mediating itself to itself in recollecting or reminiscing the previous instances. At the end of such reconciliation, there will be an increase of self-knowledge of spirit, and once spirit acquires self-consciousness and autonomy, there will be total, unlimited consciousness – peace and freedom, in other words. N. Jayalalan, *Comprehensive Modern Political Analysis* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002), p. 223.

⁵³ Jayalalan, *Ibid.*

so doing remains within its own notion – this is *Absolute Knowledge*.”⁵⁴

Believing that the instance of negativity is to be sublated into the process of Absolute Spirit’s acquisition of infinite consciousness about itself, negativity turns into a yet-unsublated positivity.

This criticism does not claim that the totality of the system lacks inside something which one should have considered, but instead argues that there exists something that exceeds and refuses the incorporation into the system – just like the accursed share refuses to be assimilated in economy and puts it into danger. In a series of works in 1947 called *The Accursed Share*, Bataille suggests calling any economy that mainly deals with the exchange of utile things “restricted” and any economy pivoting around the consumption of excess without reserve “general.” On the one hand, restricted economy is what we usually understand by the word “economy.” We tend to understand the process of economizing as the same as controlling or limiting loss: we try to push away consumption that does not lead to production (expenditure). On the other hand, general economy is an economy modelled on the terrestrial current of energy. According to Bataille, “[t]he origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy – wealth – without any return. The sun gives without ever receiving.”

⁵⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955), p. 797. Recited from Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* (London, Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 78.

(*ASI*, 28) The energy generated by the sun is always more than necessary. After the breaking point of culmination is thus attained, “it [the excess] must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.” (*ASI*, 21). If a society is devoted to assimilating the excess that must be lost unprofitably – in other words, if restricted economy prevails in a society – the violent and explosive consumption of excess is nonetheless inevitable regardless of our notice or acceptance: the more we repress consumption of the excess, the more violently (or, “catastrophically”) it will burst out as global catastrophe such as war, harming us “like an unbroken animal that cannot be trained” (*ASI*, 24). Therefore, Bataille calls the excess “the accursed share.” Here, there seems to be a shift to the necessity of general economy.

Similarly, if the system appears purposeful and charged with meaning, it might have restricted or locked out what was deemed excessive in terms of the system-then-to-be. In Bataille’s view, since Hegel conceived the movement of reason as returning to and becoming identical with itself, he had to cut off “the excess”, calling it abstract, for the sake of preventing the laceration of what is construed to be reason’s sound negation, a move which Bataille thinks amounts to the suppression of what refuses assimilation into the dialectical system. Bataille regards Hegel as exporting or suppressing negativity’s excessiveness or unlimitedness as non-dialectical difference. Now, if the circulation of Absolute Knowledge cannot actually be completed, then one could say the final synthesis

(or the closure of the system Hegel aimed to accomplish) is broken; if the synthesis cannot be completed, then neither can History; if something exceeds Absolute Knowledge, then Absolute Knowledge is not absolute but a subordinate truth, relative to what surpasses it.⁵⁵ So Bataille says that “*circular, absolute knowledge is definitive nonknowledge*” in “Post-Scriptum” (*IE*, 110). A few pages later, Bataille aims to expose something resistant to the synthetic necessity of the *Aufhebung*, the “reality” of project: poetry, laughter, and ecstasy.

Even within the (incessant) completed circle, nonknowledge is end and knowledge means. To the extent that it takes itself for an end, it sinks into the blind spot. But poetry, laughter, ecstasy are not means for other things. In the ‘system,’ poetry, laughter, ecstasy are nothing, Hegel hastily rids himself of them: he knows no other end than knowledge. His immense fatigue is linked in my eyes to horror of the blind spot. (*IE*, 113)

Bataille suggests that Hegel had a goal to complete humanity with knowledge. If Hegel did regard that History is charged with purposiveness that humanity can have knowledge about, the existence of the phenomena that serves no purpose must have been nothing but a nuisance. Bataille suggests Hegel thus got rid of poetry, laughter, and ecstasy since they have nothing to do with any aims and far less so with knowledge.⁵⁶ Alluding to the structure of the eye,

⁵⁵ Bruce, *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 90.

⁵⁶ In fact, Hegel has dealt with poetry in his aesthetic theory. However, relative to what he perceives to be the principle of History, i.e., the actualization of Absolute Spirit, poetry for Hegel is still a matter of knowledge: “poetry has been and is still the most universal and widespread teacher of the human race. For to teach and to learn is to know and experience what is ... Man exists conformably to the law of his existence only when he knows what he is and what his surroundings are: he must know what the powers are

Bataille explains this elimination as issued from a fear of encountering the finitude of understanding. The blind spot in the eye is an ironic point on which the image of things cannot be formed despite the optic nerves coinciding there; we can say that vision is both enabled and made imperfect by the existence of the blind spot. Likewise, Bataille explains that understanding has a blind spot since humanity's faculty of reason cannot place itself outside its finitizing operation. Therefore, existence exceeds understanding. Instead of reducing existence to what is known and "demand[ing] that the known be the goal of existence" (*IE*, 112), Bataille suggests enduring the dilation of the blind spot or the intrusion of the "night," risking knowledge to get lost in it. It is to reject being complacent with the restricted, fabricated insurance of the closure of the system of knowledge and actively engage in the bare experience, slipping from the known toward the unknown.

Nonknowledge, being a wound aborting the closure of the system, is first and foremost the return of unlimited or unemployed negativity that breaks down reason's restricted negation and is not subordinated to the concern or care for the future. If Bataille is to object Hegel and resist the incorporation by and in the self-

which drive and direct him, and it is such a knowledge that poetry provides in its original and substantive form." (*A: III*, 240/972–973) He accounts that poetry is "the absolute and true art of the spirit and its expression as spirit, since everything that consciousness conceives and shapes spiritually within its own inner being speech alone can adopt, express, and bring before our imagination." (*A: II* 261/626)

identical system, turning unlimited negativity into a limited one, nonknowledge should not be the antithesis of Absolute Knowledge. Nor is nonknowledge beyond Absolute Knowledge, for then it should be concerned with something that is *yet* not known. To refer to Roberto Esposito, it is not simply a virgin terrain that is to be touched and extended by knowledge, nor is something that might reveal itself finally as a truth-content identical to some “higher” knowledge that is yet to come.⁵⁷ Esposito suggests that, even though every attempt to present nonknowledge is bound to fail, we could provisionally consider nonknowledge as “knowledge’s being encountered with and exposed to what denies and negates it.”⁵⁸

Here, we could start asking what the role of poetry or the poetic plays for Bataille and how he addresses his thoughts concerning poetry or the poetic, especially concerning this inexpressibility. If one takes Bataille’s account that poetry is one of the things Hegel deliberately “got rid of” or placed outside of the system of knowledge in order to close the system, and that this closure is said to distance us from radical negativity of experience, I think one could place the poetic on the very edge of the delimitation of knowledge and nonknowledge in such a way as to affirm it as proof of the essential insufficiency of the system to

⁵⁷ Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans, Timothy Campbell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 115.

⁵⁸ Esposito, p. 119.

contain everything. However, even if this is true, how should one express and communicate this idea when we have no other means but language to express ourselves and communicate? Indeed, what will the philosophical status be of any poetic utterance of such an idea? What is its relationship to the “idea” of knowledge or nonknowledge?

2.3. Engendering and Endangering Communication: Poetry as Sacrifice

We now have much evidence to regard nonknowledge as the content of inner experience. However, one cannot circumvent the problem of communication if we are to follow Bataille because he supposes inner experience to be an experience of being with other beings, that is, of ecstatic communication. He says: “*a singular experience [...] where anguish and ecstasy take shape. / Such an experience is not ineffable [...]*” (*IE*, 4); even, “inner experience is ecstasy, ecstasy is, it seems, communication.” (*IE*, 19) Even though Bataille himself proclaims that “it is sufficient that a single individual reaches the extremity,” he immediately adds: “still there must remain, between him and the others – who avoid him – a link. Without this there would only be a strangeness, not the extremity of the possible.” (*IE*, 44) This statement means that even if a single individual sufficed to attain the extremity, such experience must not be alien to

others or to one's fellow beings. Besides, even the most intimate thought does not revert exclusively to anyone in particular, since language supposes the existence of the other no less than it being the common form and condition of thought thanks to which we can all think, write, and speak. Therefore, Bataille comments on the necessary work of discourse, which he equates with the being of the reader, and which is also the very reason for him to try to address inner experience in spite of all the difficulties inherent in so doing:

The *third*, the companion, the reader who acts upon me, is discourse. Or again, the reader is discourse, it is he who speaks in me, who maintains in me the living discourse of his address. And undoubtedly, discourse is project, but it is nevertheless still this *other*, the reader, who animates me and who already forgets me (kills me), without whose present insistence I could do nothing, would have no inner experience. Not that in moments of violence – of misfortune – I don't forget him, as he himself forgets me – but I tolerate in myself the action of the project in that it is a link with this obscure *other*, sharing my anguish, my torture, desiring my torture as much as I desire his. (*IE*, 65)

We could remind ourselves of the principle of inner experience discussed above, which is to oppose the action of project through a breakthrough that itself is another project. To tolerate the existence of the other is to tolerate the action of a project or discourse as a breakthrough of a project ("the reader is discourse ... discourse is project"). It is to maintain a vital link with the other, preventing inner experience itself from becoming volatile. This demand to maintain a link means, after all, that nonknowledge must first be put into language if one wants to think and communicate the instant of nonknowledge. This is because, according to Bataille, language is the very link between beings and even between one and

his/herself: “[b]eing is in man mediated by words, which can only give themselves arbitrarily as ‘autonomous being’ and profoundly as ‘being in relation to.’” (*IE*, 86)

However, if Bataille intends to *communicate* nonknowledge and therefore ecstasy in the sense of an activity involving subjects forming the two poles of sender and receiver and a message that will be transmitted from the former to the latter, he cannot elude falling into a paradox. Bataille defines the instant within which inner experience occurs as something that overflows the range of our intellectual, conceptual understanding.⁵⁹ Then, what does it mean to say that the *raison d’être* of *Inner Experience* is the proper treatment of inner experience and communication of nonknowledge? How can one speak or write about inner experience without falsifying it, how can one render or rather leave it palpable?

This question is to end up with an answer that any expression can only fail to convey the blinding incandescence of the experience lived from the inside. Because language necessarily depends on conceptuality, it does not correspond to nonknowledge, which, again, is something that defies all thought and signification. More profoundly, as soon as language takes anything as its object of expression, it becomes a means to such an aim, whereas nonknowledge escapes

⁵⁹ Bataille briefly describes in the third volume of *The Accursed Share* (entitled “Sovereignty”), that we cannot possess and hold the instant central to *expérience vécue* [lived experience] by knowledge but can only instantiate it retrospectively. See *AS2/3*, p. 202.

all teleology. Therefore, any positive description of nonknowledge would be impossible. Nonknowledge cannot be thought of apart from some tautological reliance on inner experience, nor can it be captured in a positive formula. Worse, we do not have any bright prospects, even for poetic solutions, since when it comes to poetry, Bataille starts with the statement that poetry is not entirely free of the realm of the known because “[t]he poetic is the familiar dissolving into the strange and dissolving ourselves with it. It never dispossesses us entirely because the words, the dissolved images, are charged with emotions already experienced, pinned to objects that link them to the known.” (*IE*, 11) Bataille also has set poetry as insufficient to lead us toward the extremity: “[i]f poetry expresses it [the extremity], it is distinct from it: to the point of not being poetic, for if poetry has it as an object, it does not reach it. When the extremity is there, the means that serve to reach it are no longer there.” (*IE*, 55).

Then, does this mean that the communication of nonknowledge cannot take place at all, even in poetry? In order to answer this, we must first ask what communication means for Bataille.

Referring to the earlier part of *Inner Experience*, what Bataille conceives as communication seems somewhat different from what the above questions would suggest. Since communication is what comes before and conditions the constitution of existence (“*communication is a fact that is in no way added to human existence, but constitutes it.*” *IE*, 31), dwelling only upon oneself as the

metaphysical subject is in principle hardly possible. Communication, in this sense, is not an additional activity of the subject and, as such, dismantles what one might conceive of as the usual premise of the subject in communication. Subjects do not exist prior to the activity, nor are they entirely in possession of their faculties. Rather than retreating into a self-sufficient subject as “oneself,” Bataille’s orientation is toward the bursting out or dispossession of the self. He conceives the limit of being as constituting an opening to the outside rather than encircling the subject. The subject’s being is not contained but spilt outside of itself, resulting in ecstatic self-loss and contact with what is other. However, how does Bataille put all this into language? I would like to contend that Bataille’s strategy to put his orientation into practice is to feign to assign an “essential” character to poetry and then immediately divest it of that character. This gesture is an *intaglio* of nonknowledge – instead of a series of positive and tangible formula for what cannot in fact be known, Bataille pushes even his own expression to implode into nonsense so as to show that even what he calls nonknowledge is far from encapsulating an “essence” of his thought.

The following sentences from “Notion of Expenditure” (1933) might provide an insight into how Bataille would first insist that poetry is “essential.” Having mentioned that sacrifice is “nothing other than the production of *sacred* things” (*VE*, 119, emphasis in original), Bataille equates poetry with it: “The term poetry, applied to the least degraded and least intellectualized forms of the expression of

a state of loss, can be considered synonymous with expenditure; it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss. Its meaning is therefore close to that of *sacrifice*.” (*VE*, 120, italics Bataille’s)⁶⁰

The point is that poetry is said to lead to (“slips toward”) the unknown. Bataille defines sacrifice as “madness, the renunciation of all knowledge, the fall into the void [...]” (*IE*, 81) Bataille also suggests, in the middle of the sixth passage of “Post-Scriptum,” that poetry is the “sacrifice in which words are victims,” in which “we tear words from these [efficacious] relationships [between man and things] in a delirium” (*IE*, 135). According to Bataille, if we are attached to the efficacious relationship of language, if language remains only as a useful instrument to judge and objectify things, we will not be free from the reign of utility which is a measure of the real order and, to such an extent, we will not be “human.” For a further explanation by Bataille, let us look at the following

⁶⁰ In the sentences that follow this quote, Bataille uses the word ‘poetry’ to indicate something different from what it usually signifies: he is interested in poetry, but only as is understood as a “residual element.” Such poetry can bring about some real consequences that “cease to be symbolic”, but “*for the rare human beings*” only. Then, what are the real consequences? Not surprisingly, they differ from the rosy prospect of being able to *utilize* the poetic force for the aim of changing the world. Poetry condemns *the poet* “to the most disappointing forms of activity, to misery, to despair, and to the pursuit of inconsistent shadows that provide nothing but vertigo or rage” and pushes the poet to choose “between the destiny of a reprobate, who is as profoundly separated from society as dejecta are from apparent life, and a renunciation whose price is a mediocre activity, subordinated to vulgar and superficial needs.” (*VE*, 120) The poet is compelled to renounce his welfare of ordinary life and to be a scapegoat. This sacrificial effect of poetry onto the poet seems to preview the sacrifice wherein the sacrificer is struck by the blow they strike on the victim, which we will explore soon.

paragraph:

When words like *horse* or *butter* enter into a poem, they do so detached from interested concerns. For as many times as the words *butter* and *horse* are put to practical ends, the use that poetry makes of them liberates human life from these ends. When the farm girl says *butter* or the stable boy says *horse*, they know butter, horse. The knowledge that they have of them even in a sense exhausts the idea of knowing, for they can make butter or lead a horse at will. Making, raising, using, perfect and even found knowledge (the essential links of knowledge are relations of practical efficacy; to know an object is, according to Janet, to know how to go about making it). But, on the contrary, *poetry leads from the known to the unknown*. It can do what neither the boy nor the girl can do, introduce a butter horse. In this way it places one before the unknowable. No doubt I have barely enunciated the words when the familiar images of horses and butter present themselves, but they are solicited only in order to die. In this poetry is sacrifice, the most accessible sacrifice. For if the use or abuse of words, to which the operations of work oblige us, takes place on the ideal, unreal level of language, the same is true of the sacrifice of words that is poetry. (IE, 136, italics Bataille's)

Bataille's example of *butter horse* and the death inherent in that poetic word could be regarded as a more detailed illustration of how poetry can provide access to the "entirely heterogeneous world" (VE, 97), as he mentioned in "The Use Value of Sade" (see Chapter 1) or "to the unknown" as in the quote above. The words *butter* and *horse* in a poem have little to do with the actual objects, butter and horse, because these words are meant to be liberated from practical ends and the referential context in which the girl and boy *know* them. The ordinary practical chain of language is broken, and the adherence of sign and referent is weakened in the image of the butter horse. One might even say that the referents of butter and horse are symbolically killed, leaving only the empty signs behind in the ruin of signification. In this sense, "the words ... are solicited only in order

to die, " meaning that the words are stripped bare of the relations of practical efficacy, which Bataille described as the links of knowledge. This putting to death of words thus leads us to the unknown. To put it differently, unlike most day-to-day uses of language that presuppose a kind of "horizon" of basic knowledge, poetry draws words out of the referential context in which we think we know things so that words cease to have apparent meanings, take on a more sensuous form and disrupt linear procession or logical sequence.

Considering that the earlier dispute with Surrealism took place around the question of whether poetry can resist the oppression of reason and thereby effectively engage in the subversion of the established order, Bataille's equation of poetry with sacrifice seems indeed "essential": as we know, Bataille outwardly expressed his dubiousness over the optimism about poetry in so far as such optimism formulates the prospect of poetry as a promise, as serving the ideal that is as vague as the "transformation of the world"; however, the equation of poetry with sacrifice could be seen as the extension of the logic that poetry is closely linked with those things which are rejected in the speculative economy of meanings, such as non-profitable loss and expenditure. Bataille explains this slightly differently later on in the text:

The level of morality is the level of the *project*. The opposite of project is sacrifice. Sacrifice falls into the forms of the project, but only in appearance (or to the extent of its decadence) ... Nothing in sacrifice is put off until later; sacrifice has the power to contest everything in the instant that it takes place, to summon everything, to render everything present. ... Sacrifice is immoral,

poetry is immoral. (*IE*, 137)

From this, we may understand why the linguistic sacrifice brought about in poetry is also explained to be different from project. If morality is understood as a repressive regulation of present deeds for a future recompense, sacrifice is immoral because it is only concerned with the present moment. Moreover, from the fact that Bataille later regards poetry as a modern substitute for sacrifice (“[a]mong diverse sacrifices, poetry is the only one whose fire we can maintain, renew.” (*IE*, 149)), we could infer that poetry is considered as equivalent to the instant of putting to death and is thus construed as immoral. One might contend that this is what poetry gives to be seen as nonknowledge.

However, the problem of formulating poetry’s role and status in and through language appears more complicated than it might first appear. Even if Bataille mentions poetry’s role as disrupting the stability of concepts and deviating from linear discursivity, this would not mean, again, that the relationship between poetry and nonknowledge can be established somewhat positively. For example, if poetry can be said to be able to directly designate or produce nonknowledge, this statement would be contradictory because Bataille has already pointed out, as we have seen above, that poetry tends to give a too familiar form to the unknown. After all, the images are inevitably tied with the known by the emotive dimension implied in words. Even in the delirium of tearing words away from the efficacious relationships between humans and things sustained by the tendency of

signs to refer to something, the relationship of possession is not entirely renounced – we still possess something. Bataille explains this as follows:

The poetic image, if it leads from the known to the unknown, attaches itself however to the known that gives it body, and even though it lacerates it and lacerates life in this laceration, maintains itself in it. Hence it follows that poetry is almost entirely poetry in decline, the enjoyment of images that are, it's true, drawn from the servile realm (poetic as well as noble, formal) but denied the inner ruin that is access to the unknown. Even profoundly ruined images are in the realm of possession. It is unfortunate to no longer possess anything but ruin, but this is not to no longer possess anything, it is to retain with one hand what the other gives. (*IE*, 148)

The poetic cannot escape from the desire for possession and enriches humanity in the register of possession.⁶¹ Therefore, “even though it lacerates [the known] and lacerates life in this laceration, [it nevertheless] maintains itself in it.” This point means that poetry will always lend itself to the recuperation of meaning and risk sliding back into knowledge without leading to the destruction that would accompany the destruction of its own meaning. This ambiguity is recognized and is already well expressed by Bataille before he talks about the immorality of poetry. Significantly, when emphasizing the nonsensicality of sacrifice or the putting to death of a victim, Bataille puts it as being *poetic*: “It is true that the effect, even were it of a sacrifice of a king, is only ever poetic: a man is put to death; no slave is liberated. One even aggravates the state of things by adding a murder to the acts of servitude.” (*IE*, 135) That the effect of sacrificial

⁶¹ Ffrench, *Ibid.*, p. 86.

death remains “poetic” connotes that poetry is only verbal, not leading to any fruitful change of the existing order of things. The destruction of poetry is limited to the ideal, unreal level because, again, poetry is still a language, even if poetry represents an exceptional or non-functional use of language.

As we have seen so far, Bataille seems first to evaluate poetry as something essential but still does not refrain from setting inevitable limits of the poetic. This seeming incongruence aborts the totality of his explanation and thereby justifies his demand on poetry to traverse everything, including itself.⁶² Having suggested a pseudo-definition of poetry as a simple holocaust of words, Bataille goes further, urging us to go “*beyond poetry*” (as was indicated on the band wrapped around the 1943 edition of *Inner Experience*). It is to expand the range of objects of poetic sacrifice: what is sacrificed should not be only the words and their usual associations as objects, but also, indeed, the poet as the subject of poetic language. The explanation goes like this: “[w]hat is essential is that on its own, the desire for poetry renders our misery intolerable: certain of the inability of the sacrifice of objects to truly liberate us, we often experience the necessity of going further, up to the sacrifice of the subject.” (*IE*, 149) At the center of this

⁶² I think, following Arnould-Bloomfield and Ffrench, it is in this context Bataille has tried to imagine a sacrifice in the second degree, where not only the victim but also the sacrificer and even the sacrifice itself are sacrificed. There are already a couple of works involving in-depth examination of sacrifice. See Arnould-Bloomfield, “Sacrifice,” in *Georges Bataille: Key Concepts*, eds. Mark Hewson and Marcus Coelen (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 106. See also, Ffrench, *Ibid.*, p. 85-93.

contention, Bataille places the figure of Rimbaud.⁶³ Rimbaud is known for his poetic genius and sudden, yet categorical, renouncement of literature at the early age of twenty-one. According to Bataille, “[w]hat Rimbaud sacrificed is not only poetry as object but the poet as subject.” (*IE*, “Notes,” 252) Again, what is immolated is language or poetry as object and the poet as subject of poetic language, and thus the experience of nonknowledge would seem to mean the dissipation, not only of the object but of the subject also. Apropos is Patrick Ffrench’s argument that, as far as sacrifice is *of* the subject, it will remain as a part of the *becoming a subject* of the subject as in the Hegelian dialectic of self-consciousness. If the subject persists, nothing is lost, and the sacrifice would be reincorporated into a discourse that appropriates it as an experience enriching the

⁶³ As Arnould-Bloomfield summarizes, Bataille also suggests two possibilities of mimesis of the Rimbaudian figure and they diverge on the matter of whether we should attribute meaning to Rimbaud’s choice to renounce writing or not, which is linked to the problem of onto-theological appropriation of the meaning of sacrificial death, of finitude. On the one hand, there are those who literally “admired” Rimbaud: they are the Surrealists, and they fail to follow Rimbaud to an extent that to admire is to “exemplif[y] its object to the point of immobilization”, to “decide upon its meaning and limit its power”. What Bataille calls “the simple holocaust of words” by the Surrealists feigns the faithful imitation of the sacrificial truth of the impossible: it pretends to reproduce Rimbaud’s sacrifice and to access to the singular and inimitable truth of Rimbaud’s renunciation; it literalizes the impossibility of sacrifice. Another figure Bataille suggests is that of Proust. The imitation of Rimbaud by Proust is an “imitation that is not really an imitation” but “the excess of imitation, of an impossible sacrifice.” What Proust performs is a “sacrifice to sacrifice”, is to “sacrifice sacrifice itself.” The sacrifice of sacrifice performs itself as impossibility to accentuate the meaning of Rimbaudian sacrifice. For a more detailed discussion, see Elisabeth Arnould-Bloomfield, “The Impossible Sacrifice of Poetry: Bataille and the Nancian Critique of Sacrifice”, *Diacritics*, Vol. 26, No.2, Georges Bataille: An occasion for Misunderstanding (Summer, 1996), pp. 86-96.

subject, which will lead to ascribing meaning to sacrifice and allowing it to reveal a hidden truth.⁶⁴ In contrast to this concern, the following sentences are suggestive since Bataille seems to anticipate from the beyond of poetry nothing like a nourishing truth but “ruins” instead:

“[t]he poetic genius is not a verbal gift ... it is the divination of ruins secretly anticipated, so that so many set things become undone, lose themselves, communicate.” (*IE*, 150)

The trope of ruins also appears in this passage:

If someone is satisfied by poetry, has no nostalgia to go further, he is free to imagine that one day everyone will know of his royalty and, having recognized themselves in him, commingled themselves with him ... But he can, if he wishes, go further. The world, the shadow of God, which the poet himself is, can suddenly seem to him to be marked by ruin. So much so that the unknown, the impossible that they are in the end, become visible. But then he will feel so alone that solitude will be like another death to him. (*IE*, 155)

Instead of setting poetry up as an embodiment of some sort of nonknowledge, Bataille seems to say poetry reveals nothing, which means that the event of inner experience cannot be communicated in itself as a revelatory truth because its inscription is always already doomed to failure. One cannot say that language can inscribe inner experience and transmit nonknowledge because such an inscription transforms them into what they are not. Even poetry is not strictly commensurate with nonknowledge because it is still a certain use of language after all and can be

⁶⁴ It is noteworthy that the subject Bataille mentions is not the initial victim but the sacrificer, who carried out sacrifice upon the victim as his or her object. The sacrifice eventually succumbs to the blow he/she strikes on the victim and becomes lost as subject, together with the victim: “the one who sacrifices is himself touched by the blow that he strikes, he succumbs and is lost with his victim.” (*IE*, 153). See also Ffrench, *Ibid.*, p. 87.

trapped back to the paradigm of knowledge and meaning, which inner experience allegedly perturbs. Neglecting that poetry cannot radically dispose of any trace of the known while setting it as a channel of nonknowledge is worrisome because it would amount to substantiating nonknowledge into a provisional knowable, thus restricting poetry's potential in another way to dictate "conceptually" on what it does. Worse, it would create an inversed totalizing system where nonknowledge comes to occupy a status of a new metaphysical substance alternative to Absolute Knowledge, and poetry would *serve* as an instrument of revealing it, despite Bataille wanting to deviate from affiliating any stable, ontological system and from suggesting poetry as a means to an end.

To summarize, the concern of poetry and Bataille's commentary on it lie in the possibility of undoing knowledge, but this is in no way to radically discard every knowledge and disparage it as nothing. They overlap with a particular thought/experience of the insufficiency of all assurances of knowledge, in contrast to most uses of language, especially those that bond with thinking to pursue knowledge. However, ironically, one is then compelled to imagine some other alternative that wrests off the thought of knowledge to pursue something else. Shifting away from any relation to knowledge and exposition and getting related to nonknowledge, poetry for Bataille would become provocative or transgressive. However, one would not be able to shift away from knowledge in itself a coherent, systematic and expository use of language because such use of

language concerns taking account of nonknowledge in order to “understand” it, which would risk limiting it to the “knowable.” Unless the speaking subject on nonknowledge is frank with this risk, the attempt will fall short of stepping outside of “philosophy.”

Bataille’s scrutinization of poetry’s potential, directly breaking right through the poetic and disclosing its limit, paradoxically illustrates poetry as possibly a form of language where the gap between what we know and what is becomes apparent. In that most uses of language that suppose and aim at the signification of the known renders this gap invisible, exposing it rather as the inevitable limit would be called transgressive, and this corresponds with the initial demand Bataille made about inner experience: that the method and authority of inner experience cannot be different from contesting even its own identity.

The seeming dead end of the explanation of the poetic capacities and the demand to go beyond poetry illustrate poetry as an attempt to pursue the aim to overturn the hegemony of knowledge and meaning, even if it is doomed to fail. I want to suggest that Bataille’s series of attempts at exposing the poetic as an aporia is for producing absence and opening language onto the rupture of meaning, so that the horizon where the radical heterogeneity of non-meaning could arise would come into view even just for a brief moment. For this aim, liberating language from its traditional duty of being a useful means of knowledge and social, discursive homogenization is required, and he tries to do

so by opening up a breach latent within the language. Bataille tries to visualize the accusation of language within language. Bataille's writing concerning poetry and the poetic is thus labyrinthine and even nauseous, driving the reader into an endless loop of questioning the language itself. This performance leads one to affirm poetry as the sign of its own impossibility – not to thwart any attempts to do poetry nor to declare them unworthy of doing it, but rather, precisely in so doing, to drive one to try again to deviate from being or at least appearing static and saturated with meaning, to face nonsense as it is, repeatedly. This interdependence of what seemingly obstructs one from doing something and the obstructed something is analogous to what Bataille recognizes as the relationship between prohibition and transgression. This will be more closely examined in the following chapter.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ According to Bataille, humans prevent the threat of the intrusion of violence into the world of work and into themselves, convicting and expulsing the violence of the unemployed negativity as inhuman and inutile. However, embracing the movement of transgression which is directed toward the condemned violence of unemployed negativity is necessary to understand humanity in its entirety, to take a full view of History and the totality of human existence. The explanation of this dynamics between prohibition and transgression will be dealt with more deeply in the following chapter since the idea is not fully developed when Bataille wrote *Inner Experience*. For examination of its development, see Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," trans. Jonathan Strauss, *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), 9-28, which is also relevant and in line with the conscious in the introduction of *The Impossible*. There, he seems to have wanted to propose that reason and violence mutually define themselves and humanness is the co-existence of both.

Chapter 3. Poetry and the (Im)possible

So far, we have followed Bataille's intellectual itinerary to see how poetry is related to the heterogeneous and nonknowledge. Bataille says the heterogeneous is a by- or a waste product left from the formation of identities; moreover, it is “even resolutely placed beyond the reach of scientific knowledge, which by definition is only applicable to homogeneous elements.” (VE, 97) Let us consider that the definition of the homogeneous relies on excluding the heterogeneous. Thus, we could say that the heterogeneous enables scientific knowledge from the outside and would also threaten such knowledge because it cannot be known scientifically. Bataille thus comes to meet a dilemma as follows: he wants to illuminate that the heterogeneous resists any attempts to assimilate it, including any program (political, philosophical, or otherwise); however, he nonetheless tries to conceptualize and utilize the heterogeneous as an engine of what he conceives as the subversion of the “existing order of things.”

Here, we could remind ourselves of Bataille's suggestion of poetry as that which can provide access to the heterogeneous and surmise that this access would not be by providing knowledge of some kind. Bataille's concern in the mid-1940s reflected in *Inner Experience* moves to what he calls nonknowledge, and one can link his paradoxical desires in the 1930s with the concern of nonknowledge through the mediation of Bataille's figuration of poetry. Implying the

heterogeneous as the counterevidence of the very idea of knowing things in itself and thus inducing to question the finitizing operation or limits of knowing and what is beyond it, Bataille suggests that poetry implies a movement leading from the known to the unknown. What seems essential and relevant here is twofold: first, Bataille has chosen to say something about poetry when dealing with nonknowledge; and second, even though Bataille later explicitly sets bounds to poetry that it cannot reach to the extreme that is nonknowledge, the writing of *Inner Experience* itself tends toward the “poetic.” At first, Bataille regards poetry as the modern equivalent of sacrifice, which is instantaneous. In line with the understanding that the moral is for awaiting future recompenses about projected goals, he contends that sacrifice is a matter of concentrating one’s being in an instant and, therefore, in a sense, immoral. Poetry concerns the instant and is immoral in that sense, which leads to a statement that it is a kind of sacrifice. It questions the usual, practical adhesion between words and things and pulls words out of the referential contexts in which we think we know things; compared to practical language presuming the daily order of things; this unusual use gives rise to an event of disruption where the linear procession of logic is ceased.

However, Bataille does not satisfy himself with “defining” poetry as the sacrifice of words. He even presents an analogy between actual sacrifice and poetry to put at risk what one might take as his initial justification of poetry. Saying sacrifice is “only ever poetic” means that sacrifice as that of objects is not

sufficient because it remains verbal in the sense of being nonreal, serving as minor destruction or loss ultimately to maintain the system's equilibrium and, at worst, even to aggravate the states of subordination enabled by the existing order. That connotes an insight that even being an unusual, disruptive form of language introducing a break in discourse, the very break poetry brings in is always at risk of being re-incorporated, turning into given knowledge. If so, it will mean that the disruption by poetry does not last but is only a transient one and that nonknowledge cannot be inscribed in language. Then, according to Bataille, is poetry incapable of accomplishing anything *significant*? This question raises another: even if language – which means even poetry – cannot incarnate nonknowledge within, is this as *devastating* a conclusion as it might first sound?

Trying to answer the question, in the first section of this chapter, I will examine some passages in Bataille's late work, *The Impossible*. This work contains two erotic proses like those for which Bataille is mainly known, some poems, and importantly, a difficult-to-classify piece of writing about poetry that seems to be itself (even though not in a conventional sense) in a *poetic form of language*. I will pay particular attention to a few sentences in this writing, which is titled "To Be Orestes." The sentences I would like to examine are the following: "*true poetry is outside laws. But poetry ultimately accepts poetry*" (I, 158); "*poetry that does not rise to the non-sense of poetry is only the hollowness of poetry; is only beautiful poetry.*" (I, 161)

Then, in the second section, I would like to explore Bataille's notion of transgression and its significance in order to put into words what his attempts not to turn away from radical non-meaning can possibly *mean* for us. I suggest it is instructive to read the notion of transgression that Bataille elaborates in *The Accursed Share* and *Erotism* to understand the seeming antinomy or aporia of Bataille's writing about the poetic. To do so, I will make use of Michel Foucault's "Preface to Transgression" and Phillippe Sollers' "The Roof." Their readings of Bataille are of use for two reasons: (i) they provide an insight into the collusion, which is not immediately apparent, between transgression and prohibition; and (ii) this idea of collusion would possibly explain and extend Bataille's view of language as guide and instance of raising a question concerning the division of discourse and poetry. Addressing that prohibition and transgression are not at a strict logical antipode, Foucault sees a possibility of what he calls "nondialectical philosophical language." What is significant is that he does so in Bataille's erotic novels rather than his more scholarly and theoretical form of writing in which many of his representative works such as *Erotism* is written. Endorsing the interdependence of prohibition and transgression just as Foucault, Sollers, on the other hand, links discourse with prohibition; according to him, discourse works as the non-contradictory link of semantic elements. To put it in other words, it could be said that one prohibits the contradictory link of semantic elements in order to produce orderly meaning. If prohibition and transgression are to be dependent to

one another and prohibition refers to certain action of language, there is room for also regarding poetry not simply as what we daily understand it to be, but as a kind of reaction taking place within language. Exploring transgression and prohibition and their relation to language would therefore help us try to delimit poetry as broader and better articulate its significance than it might initially be assumed.

3.1. Poetry as the Impossible: in the case of “To Be Orestes”

This section would try to read one of the components in a book that was initially titled *Hatred of Poetry* and later came to be known as *The Impossible*, “To Be Orestes,” because it contains Bataille’s final assertion around poetry as I mentioned above. Before embarking on a detailed reading of “To Be Orestes” and trying to bring out what it could mean, I think we can refer to the change in the text’s role, which will help us notice a vital characteristic of the text and take references outside of it. When the book was still titled *Hatred of Poetry*, “To Be Orestes” was the last piece of writing of the opening chapter, “The Oresteia,” meaning “Story of Orestes.” Orestes is originally a figure in Greek plays and myth, best known for his revenge on his mother for being involved in his father’s death, as described in the plays of Aeschylus and Sartre. However, Bataille’s

chapter has little to do with that tale. Instead, the Orestes that Bataille is referring to is only furtively implied once at the end of his text and seems rather to be a reflection of the Orestes of *Andromaque*, a play by Racine.

While Aeschylus' and Sartre's Orestes were the hero unafraid of his fate to challenge the taboo of matricide to do justice for his dead father and eventually becomes the bringer of the new era of justice as democratic and rational administration and jurisdiction in Athene, Racine's Orestes is illustrated as the victim of his unrequited and unreciprocated love, which is tragically ended by the sudden suicide of the person whom he loved. Compared to Aeschylus' heroic Orestes, Racine's Orestes is instead an advocate of irrational and self-destructive passion charging to a tragic, or rather, nonsensical end. In line with this difference, Bataille illustrates the Orestes just in front of his lover's, Hermione, death. Though Bataille does not explicitly mention or describe the aftermath, with some knowledge of the story of Racine, one can surmise that he is also very close to being insane.

Since "To Be Orestes" scarcely refers to the original and is far from representation, it appears enigmatic and is hard to abstract, but when it was followed by the rest of the component of the book, one could manage to try to disentangle what this book was really about: the writings in "The Oresteia" seemed to resonate with the original title, "*Hatred of Poetry*," especially because one of the reiterative themes of "To Be Orestes" is the disillusion of poetic

capacities. However, after Bataille modified the book into *The Impossible*, “The Oresteia” became the closing chapter and thus “To Be Orestes” became the final section of the entire book. At this point, it becomes difficult to understand what this ambiguous text can possibly mean. Although the same essay has not changed in content after Bataille modified the title from *Hatred of Poetry* to *The Impossible*, it no longer seems relevant to the rest of the text, appearing as a sort of excess. After two unconventional “narrative” chapters and a few poems. and when it appeared as if one could “refigure the coherence of the text in terms of poetry,” as Lala explains,⁶⁶ the contestation and denial of the power of poetry that is “To Be Orestes” came to shatter that hope. Then, why would Bataille want to maintain “To Be Orestes,” which might seem to hinder the coherence or integrity of the whole text?

In my view, one possible explanation has to do precisely with this excessive characteristic: “To Be Orestes” is a work done under the demand of the expenditure of signifiers⁶⁷ by which nothing but the dilemma or drama of nonknowledge is given to be seen. The text is packed with fragmentary, random, and contradictory assertions with little or no substantiation for any of its claims that they nearly appear as little more than aphorisms detached from one another.

⁶⁶ Marie-Christine Lala in Gill, p. 107.

⁶⁷ Lala provides an insight about the title of “To Be Orestes,” dividing the name of the hero into two particles (O-restes) to mean a zero remainder (*reste*, in French). Lala in Gill, p. 110.

One might consider that a coherent rendering of this highly fragmented piece of writing might cover up the incongruence that the text manifests, making it less powerful. However, if we pay enough attention to the heterogeneity that Bataille allows breaking right into his discourse about poetry itself, it will let us try to understand the discussion of nonknowledge and transgression in terms of poetry.

Having established in his earlier book the equation between sacrifice and poetry and then juxtaposed it with the statement that poetic sacrifice needs to be pushed further than what it primarily is, Bataille refuses to establish, after all, a system in which everything coheres and becomes meaningful. Rather, he seems to have wanted nonteleological writing, where accusing and squandering of meaning take place instead. The point of his attempts to nonteleological writing is to rebel against the homogeneous order of discourse, introduce the heterogeneous within this order, and illustrate the *effect* of nonknowledge.

This orientation towards the expenditure of meaning resonates with the motif of the excessiveness opening the text itself. Bataille first provides his story of the excessive and contingent nature of the human existence. Mentioning “nature’s excessive game”⁶⁸ that threatens to reduce humanity to a mere static given, he

⁶⁸ This image of the game communicates with an expression prevalent in Bataille’s unpublished notes contained in *Œuvres Complètes*, volume III, p. 537: *mettre en jeu* or “*la mise en jeu*”. It is described in the same draft as “*la seule issue contre la nature ... [the only exit opposed to nature]*”, which is already given and even determinate. Bataille seems to have wanted to imply that humanity would be able to contest nature by letting themselves be *mise en jeu* [put at stake/brought into the game]. However, the expression

then declares that humanity will get to be diminutive as far as they remain subordinated to the static and the determined. What makes us human is rather the rebelliousness of the heart toward the “law” or nature; it urges us to count on chance, take a leap of faith and become a “blind fall in the night,” just like a die that is cast and falls onto the carpet on the gaming table (*I*, 157).⁶⁹ We can augment these passages with a motif that we have already nuanced in Chapter 2 and the end of the last section of this chapter, that of the “night” and the chasm between language and experience. Referring to *Inner Experience*, especially on pages 32, 51, 103, 125, for example, one can recognize that the night is mentioned as a trope for nonknowledge and assume that the “*blind fall in the night*” would be commensurate with relinquishing the will to knowledge, which provides us with the “possibility of a far more intense contact with the world.”⁷⁰

Then, Bataille suddenly mentions what he takes to be poetry’s province (“A poet doesn’t justify – he doesn’t accept – nature completely. True poetry is outside laws”), which is immediately followed by a sense of worry (“But poetry ultimately accepts poetry”) (*I*, 158). Poetry’s “accepting poetry” is worrisome because it might turn poetry into its opposite, “the mediator of an acceptance [of

is removed in the final version of the text.

⁶⁹ Bataille does not put chance opposed to will nor align it with passivity. To affirm chance is to risk at will. See Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory After Hegel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 138.

⁷⁰ Bataille, “Un-knowing and its consequences”, in Botting & Wilson, p. 324.

the given world]” (I, 158), resulting in “the leap” held back and the given world justified and embellished. Hence, the author states that for refusing the static and the given and thus going to the end of the possible, one must discriminate the various possibilities by “*clear attention.*” (I, 158) Having an awareness of the limit of poetry would be in line with the aim and lead to what Bataille calls adding “*the luster of a failure to that of poetry*” (I, 161). Bataille then explicates that “*poetry that does not rise to the non-sense of poetry is only the hollowness of poetry; is only beautiful poetry.*” (I, 161)

Even though we are used to the custom of reading beauty as being linked to some meaning, Bataille says that the beauty of poetry is symptomatic of poetry’s incapability of confronting the extreme that is non-sense: poetry is ever hollow unless it is pushed until it meets head-on this very non-sense. Here, we could recognize an awareness that we have examined in Chapter 1. Specifically, in the 1930s Bataille regarded the Surrealist logic of the reconciliation of opposites as dangerous and reactionary. Nor did he equate human potentiality with such a possibility of reconciliation. Even later in the 1940s, when he reevaluated the Surrealist exigency as being backed up or fueled by “a rigorous will to insubordination” (AM, 49) and the “morality of revolt” (AM, 53) and raised advocacy of Surrealism against the reign of Sartrean Existentialism, which argues for the subordination of literature to action, he remained critical of the Surrealist thrust toward the resolution of contradiction. In Bataille’s view, poetry does not

gain power by reifying an ideal and promising something. If confirming ideal homogeneity and thereby helping society deny the material contradiction crossing it, poetry will only be an imaginary solution to contradictions, and its effect will be homogenizing after all – it will absorb the heterogeneous and translate the other into the language of the same. If the object of knowledge can only apply to the homogeneous and if poetry is the hinge to the heterogeneous, as we can recall, how would any writing about poetry address this without reducing poetry to a certain homogeneity, which poetry is not? How can we not denigrate poetry into this language of homogeneity?

A few lines below his enigmatic equation with beautiful poetry and the hollowness of poetry, after it finally seemed that the definitive ontological ascension of the status of poetry was possible, Bataille oddly smacks poetry to *fall*. Bataille says poetry is “*the simple evocation through words of inaccessible possibilities*” (I, 162). Even though the evocation that is poetry⁷¹ “*has the advantage over experience of richness and an endless facility,*” it “*distances one from experience*” (I, 162) and cannot be anything but, as mentioned above, a simple “*detour*” to escape the world of discourse. The detour leads to “*a kind of*

⁷¹ The word “evocation” echoes the point Bataille made in *Method of Meditation*, published in the same year as *The Hatred of Poetry*, that “in the end, poetry is only an *evocation*; poetry only changes the order or the words and *cannot change the world*. The sentiment of poetry is linked to the nostalgia to change more than the order of words, *the established order*. But the idea of a revolution *starting* with poetry leads to that of poetry *in the service* of a revolution.” See “Method of Meditation,” *IE*, 196, italics Bataille’s.

grave where the infinity of the possible was born from the death of the logical world,” but in that “*the possible that’s evoked is only unreal*” (I, 163), it remains “*a verbal transcendence of the world*” (I, 163). Even though poetry gives rise to non-sense through the “dice throw” of signifiers, the non-sense is always at the risk of being appropriated within the economy of meaning. In this, poetry cannot overturn discourse, knowledge, meaning, reason, or utility, nor can it establish itself as a new autocrat of truth. What is “good” for poetry or language in general about being pushed towards the extreme, to the point where it encounters its own limit, as Bataille suggests, is that, although the disgust may drive one mad, it is this madness from which experience begins to “emanate” (I, 162).

In an unpublished note on “To Be Orestes,”⁷² indeed, Bataille points out that poetry is one of the middle terms between the logical world and the experience of “the night.” Although poetry has the capacity of evoking the night, it can do so only through destroying and negating itself, just as all other terms should be destroyed and negated.

This flow could be disappointing for those who want to claim that poetry guarantees absolute and determinate freedom from the reign of reason and discursivity, and it might seem as if it automatically leads to the announcement of

⁷² Here is where some of the things that Bataille appears to have wanted to evoke are enumerated, among which is “The night” [*La nuit*], described here as a “simple experience of the void of poetry.” *Georges Bataille : Romans et récits*, p. 579 ; Georges Bataille, O.C, Vol. III, “Notes”, pp. 534-5.

bankruptcy. Nevertheless, that it is impossible to put poetry forward as a more essential and absolute language capable of addressing a truer meaning of some sort rather constitutes a condition and a constant necessity of poetry: poetry can be continued only on the condition that it cannot be done such. As we remember, Bataille tried to say that nonknowledge exceeds science itself. That nonknowledge knows how and when to exceed science and therefore would not be a nonknowledge if not for an absolute excess of all philosophy, sciences, and *epistemes*; to define it with figures taken from the dialectics of history of knowledge is *impossible*. Bataille asks how to resist the theological and appropriative seduction of words and how to avoid signification and utterance about the unknown to leave it as it be. However, even if the unknown is something that one cannot signify or conceptualize in the first place, such impossibility must be spoken; otherwise, it would always be deemed something one does not know yet, something that one can someday colonize by knowledge; the world of discourse has already become natural to us.

In short, poetry for Bataille and his writing on the subject is related to nonknowledge but not in the sense that they can achieve any substantial embodiment of nonknowledge by and in their expression. On the part of poetry, the expressions can, at their best, evoke the impossibility of incorporating nonknowledge in language; also, performing or thematizing this “failure” of poetry, Bataille manages to perform language in such a way as to push it into a

corner. Bataille uses language that undoes any coherent, systematic, and expository use of language by repeatedly performing the suggestion and cancellation of statements about poetic capacities. Thus, Bataille makes his statements resist forming a poetics as a totalistic and homogeneous system that can close itself. Bataille's analysis or critique of poetry takes as its constant the refusal to assign any essential characteristics to poetry. Rather than defining and conceptually dictating what the poetic is, rather than submitting it to discursive and social homogeneity, Bataille demands it to introduce within itself a break right at the moment of the fulfillment of poetry as a unitary notion. It is not to exhaust poetic capacities in a discourse – a poetics – that contains the final status of poetry but to torture the language to open to the point where it “negates itself as soon as it attains expression.”⁷³ Such a form of language, which has a self-annulling aspect, serves to betray (in the sense of both committing treachery and divulging) the discrepancy between language and what language seems to designate. The betrayal of this discrepancy is of use for affirming a heterogeneous instance within poetry – itself poetically. This performance brings language into question and evokes that we can only incessantly try to exceed present determination even if we will soon be caught again by the next one. As a result,

⁷³ Ffrench, *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* (London: Legenda, 2007), p. 89.

poetry is thus admittedly exhibited as being both a problematic and “productive” locus to visualize its “failure” not to lead to nonknowledge as the limits of language. Importantly, by all this, Bataille seems to want to make the reader disillusioned from an idea of the speaking or writing agent that is fluent in language to such an extent that he or she can seize control of language to produce orderly, persuasive meaning. This is even equivalent to what Bataille earlier referred to as the sacrifice of the subject in *Inner Experience* and what he alludes to by the figure of Orestes just ahead of going insane.

The “absence of exit”⁷⁴ that Bataille confesses frankly expresses the reality of the finitude of our existence as humans who can neither discard language, order and laws nor be fully in unity with these. Even though we cannot dispose of knowledge and language and would finally end up being in a society as dismembered beings between the idea and the real, we cannot be purely destined to be bound to that condition once and forever, as far as poetry becomes a constant self-subversion of meaning that cannot ever be accomplished, an undecidable movement of writing that incessantly puts even its own meaning into question. In this way, Bataille seems to want to show that poetry is not only to be construed as a language of the impossible (« [L]a poésie ... est le langage de l'impossible » III. 514) or as something about the impossible but is in itself the

⁷⁴ Bataille, *Œuvres Complètes*, III, p. 509.

impossible. (« justement la poésie est l'impossible » III. 519). To put it differently, poetry can become transgressive not just because it aspires towards the impossible absence of meaning, but because it acknowledges the impossibility of this aspiration and thereby turns into the sign of this impossibility.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Kevin Kennedy, *Towards an Aesthetic Sovereignty: Georges Bataille's Theory of Art and Literature*, p. 349.

3.2. The Impossible Poetry: Instigation into Transgression

I have tried in this chapter to understand of what significance poetry or the poetic for Bataille is, and I want to contend that it is of a radical questioning to the idea of any significance or value at all. Again, Bataille repeatedly argues that the poetic cannot truly subvert and implode the reign of the existing order of things. However, Bataille's idea must be differentiated from a defeatist claim that everything is pointless and not worth trying. Bataille strives to do something with such a question. The aim of the question is to exceed calculation and resist the premise that everything should be meaningful, that it must ultimately culminate to gain something or turn into nothing. I think here we can augment the theme of poetry in Bataille with other important themes in his work, those of transgression and prohibition, to try to comment on what Bataille consistently tries to do, both in general and with the poetic more specifically.

Bataille's thoughts about transgression germinated in the second volume of *The Accursed Share* titled "History of Eroticism" and concluded in *Erotism*. Some might have an impression of Bataille that he instigates the breaking of laws all the time for no good reason and therefore may be tempted to interpret it as if Bataille advises annihilating prohibition to promote transgression. However, this

understanding cannot be farther from the truth. When figuring transgression, Bataille places it in an interdependent yet unresolvable oppositional relationship with prohibition.

In the “History of Eroticism,” Bataille explains what primarily enables humans to distance themselves from nature or animals is the introduction of limits or prohibition in life, which means the regulation of violence for the sake of productivity and of preventing violence from intruding on the world of labor. According to him, productive, cognitive activity defining humanity on the same level of labor necessitates linguistic expression. The use of instruments is a primordial phase in human development and shows that humans intentionally and purposefully process materials; this purposeful processing of materials, the negation or transformation of nature, is the first outcome of the ability to reason; we as humans start to conceive ourselves as subjects and others as objects (or the other) from this point and language is invented to designate the things recognized. (AS2/3, 23)

Bataille emphasizes that prohibition and transgression are not conflicting terms but are inextricably linked and mutually conditioned due to their equiprimordiality. Prohibition and transgression both relate themselves with each of humans’ innate impulses. On the one hand, prohibition is about distancing humans and objects that provoke a sense of horror. The distance enables rational, logical consciousness and labor. On the other hand, transgression is about

approaching the object of prohibition *across* the taboos. Once the distinction and differentiation between humans and the object are secured, the object, which evoked horror and abhorrence, becomes more attractive due to the very existence of taboos imposed on it. What comes to kindle the desires to look into the face of those of the initially refused objects and what provokes a “new movement of refusal, of insubordination, of revolt” (AS2/3, 78) cannot be other than prohibition itself. Because of this, Bataille emphasizes that the movement of revolt or transgression is not really about radically disposing of prohibition, nor can it terminate prohibition: in “History of Eroticism,” he explicates that “transgression is not the absence of limits” (AS2/3, 342); in *Erotism*, “[t]ransgression is not the same as a back-to-nature movement; it suspends prohibition without suppressing it” (E, 36)⁷⁶; finally, even the subtitle of the first passage opening the whole chapter in the same book dedicated to transgression is: “[t]ransgression does not deny prohibition but transcends it and completes it.” (E, 63) This opposition of prohibition and transgression as a force behind human development also appears in many works of Bataille from the mid and late periods, for example, *Theory of Religion*, *Erotism*, and *Lascaux: Or the Birth of Art*.

In a text dedicated to Bataille, which is aptly titled “Preface to Transgression,”

⁷⁶ Bataille adds a footnote to this sentence stating: “There is no need to stress the Hegelian nature of this operation which corresponds with the dialectic phase described by the untranslatable German “*aufheben*”: transcend without suppressing.”

Foucault also emphasizes that transgression and prohibition are not dichotomized into black and white or the prohibited and the lawful.⁷⁷ He explains that transgression consummates prohibition by affirming and then going beyond prohibition, and prohibition encourages transgression and is maintained for the sake of transgression (a point also shared by Sollers, as we will see).⁷⁸

Foucault further argues that what makes Bataille's texts retain their textual values is their pursuit of the language of transgression that pertains to contemporary philosophy after Nietzsche, which breaks from idealist philosophy. According to Foucault, philosophy before Nietzsche is the philosophy of construction. It developed by supposing accordance between the preeminent philosophizing subject and wisdom and by having faith in the capabilities of language based on rationality and reason. Even though Foucault does not explicitly discuss Hegel, we can consider that Hegelian dialectic is about becoming the Subject of the subject and about reason endlessly negating and then returning to itself by incorporating previous instances of itself in itself. Hegel tells a story (as we recall from Chapter 2) that effectually constructs the belief in the knowing subject in that it is a story in which the subject is equated with Absolute Spirit acquires unlimited self-consciousness. Hegel's attempt to account for

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, "Preface to Transgression" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Ed. and Trans. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 34.

⁷⁸ Foucault, "Preface to Transgression", pp. 33-37.

History is about completing the system of knowledge. In this story, the subject is firmly lodged in and inhabits a language in which they are perfectly fluent: the language of the “play of contradiction and totality.”⁷⁹

On the contrary, contemporary philosophy’s work is to endlessly draw and overstep the limits of humanity and their language, which is linked to what Bataille wants to do: his work divests humanity of the substrate upon which the idea of the subject as “serene unity”⁸⁰ can stand firmly, by making language like the sands “that continually [break] down from the center.”⁸¹ Bataille mentions that Hegel deliberately “got rid of” or placed outside of the system of knowledge to close the system something exemplified by poetry, laughter, and ecstasy: the radical negativity of experience, from which this closure distances us. Bataille wants to expose that the seemingly all-comprehending movement of History recounted by Hegel in fact excludes anything destructive, and wants to cause disillusion about the omniscient subject. Bataille wants to show that the other or waste of the system inevitably threatens to disclose that it exceeds the system’s closure. Foucault says that once the limits of the rational language are themselves tested like this, one can envisage a possibility of a “nondialectical form of

⁷⁹ Foucault, “Preface”, p. 38.

⁸⁰ Foucault, “Preface”, p. 39.

⁸¹ Foucault, “Preface”, p. 39.

philosophical language.”⁸²

One cannot neglect that Foucault’s argument is mostly about Bataille’s erotic novels and does not mention poetry. Even though Foucault’s words might appear at first sight to still be alluding to a division between philosophical language and literary language, this division is not a strict one because where Foucault sees a possibility of “nondialectical philosophical language” is ultimately in Bataille’s *novels*. Indeed, in a research dedicated to Bataille’s notion of transgression, Jiyeon Cha, notes that the problem of transgression cannot be reduced into that of the distinction between discursive (or philosophical) language and literary (or poetic) language because the aim behind the problem of transgression is to explore how far language and reason can achieve expression.⁸³

Or, rather, Bataille repeatedly evaluates the idea of expressiveness of language and often refuses to link the characteristic with competence. One needs to remember what Bataille stated in *Inner Experience*: “in experience, the statement is nothing, if not a means and even, as much as a means, an obstacle; what counts is not the statement of the wind, it’s the wind.” (*IE*, 20) We are mired in the fissure between the notion of the wind (or the recognized, represented

⁸² Foucault, “Preface to Transgression”, p. 48.

⁸³ 차지연, 「조르주 바타유의 위반에 대하여 [On Georges Bataille’s transgression: Reading *Histoire de l’oeil* by Bataille and *Histoire de Juliette* by Sade]」, 기호학 연구, 한국기호학회, 2017 vol.51, p. 213.

wind) and the actual wind. Even though language serves us to have consciousness about the experience, it distances us from the actual experience at the same time.

Bataille later expresses this matter in further specificity in the conclusion of

Erotism:

We can never hope to attain a global view in one single supreme instant; language chops it into its component parts and connects them up into a coherent explanation. The analytic presentation makes it impossible for the successive stages to coalesce.

So language scatters the totality of all that touches us most closely even while it arranges it in order. Through language we can never grasp what matters to us, for it eludes us in the form of interdependent propositions, and no central whole to which each of these can be referred ever appears. Our attention remains fixed on this whole but we can never see it in the full light of day. A succession of propositions flickering off and on merely hides it from our gaze, and we are powerless to alter this. ("Conclusion," in *(E, 274)*)

In this quote, Bataille seems to denounce a mode of writing that is exposition for dividing and unfolding than grasping "the totality of all that touches us most closely." Even if the practical, functional use of language may seek to lay bridges between us and things and to cancel the rift between the "component parts ... [of] a coherent explanation" by abstracting, determining and putting in parallel the things, it cannot do away the distance between themselves and between us (the subject) and experience (the object) itself that enables analysis, isolation, and articulation of the object in the first place. Precisely because it tends to *mend up* the rift into nothing, it cannot help but become heterogeneous to the *shattering* nature of the experience of what exceeds the constitutional limits of knowledge. I think what Bataille calls discourse here and there could refer to this specific form

of writing which mires us into forgetting being insulated from the totality.

The point that transgression and prohibition are interdependent is also shared with Phillippe Sollers in his essay, “The Roof.” Here, Sollers encourages us to ask what the roof stands for, suggesting that the two slopes are each prohibition and transgression. What I would like to add to his insight is that, if prohibition and transgression are interdependent, and prohibition is made of the words as we shall soon see, this would mean that transgression would have to take place within language as well. As overviewed earlier, Sollers proposes that we understand what Bataille calls discourse as corresponding to “the noncontradictory linking of semantic elements [*l’enchaînement significatif non-contradictoire*], the necessarily unique meaning on which man’s identity as consciousness and work is founded.”⁸⁴ It is instructive to remind ourselves here of some points made in Chapters 1 and 2: one is that the establishment of the homogeneous relies on the exclusion of what resists being submitted to its formation (that is, the heterogeneous); the other is that knowing things inevitably relies on linguistic expression. If we try to lay a bridge between these two propositions, language could be said to be involved in knowing the homogeneous as being such, at the expense of reducing and excluding the heterogeneous. Indeed, the usual, practical

⁸⁴ Phillippe Sollers, “The Roof: Essay in Systematic Reading,” in *Writing and the Experience of Limits*, ed. David Hayman, trans. Philip Barnard, with David Hayman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 109-110.

use of language presupposes a distinction between what the word designates and what it does not to dash straight toward the referent in the process of signification. This operation of signs, and further, the knowledge in language could be called exclusive and, perhaps, prohibitive because they attach only to the target to establish signification and understanding. Mediated or expressed by words or language, prohibition effectuates the conception of subjects, for example, as rational and productive and accordingly enables the homogenization, consequent distinction, and employment of the subjects by excluding anything destructive to such constructions or exempting such from homogeneity. Perhaps this is why Sollers interprets a few lines below the quote that **“THE WORLD OF DISCOURSE IS PROHIBITIONS’ MODE OF BEING.”**⁸⁵ Sollers then comments that “‘man’ is able to come to grips with himself only through the *detour* of the forbidden [*L’interdit*] (of science), to the degree that he transgresses the world of discourse at one point, and that he makes of this inevitable *detour* the means by which he confronts his limits.”⁸⁶ What is this detour, and what does it have to do with the act of transgressing? What is being transgressed of this world of discourse?

Sollers does not explicitly tell us what is being transgressed. However, we can

⁸⁵ Sollers, “The Roof”, p. 110, emphasis Sollers.

⁸⁶ Sollers, “The Roof”, p. 111. Italics mine. Importantly, Bataille himself says in *The Impossible* that poetry is a *detour* of logical world, as we shall see in the next section.

try to remind that Bataille points out that language tends to mediate propositions to make them cohere into an organic explanation of things: the distance or the rift between propositions and, ultimately, between words and things must be cancelled. But what happens if the distance or rift of the parts we investigated above is not reclaimable? As we have seen, Bataille maintains language is a heterogeneous medium that cannot be accorded with human experience. Then it would follow that one cannot close the rift between experience and expression of whatever kind, no matter how hard one tries: it would be possible to think of the work of language as simultaneously two sides of a single linguistic production. When what cannot be rendered into being homogeneous evokes its existence, it would mean dislocating language's homogenizing function that ends up designating inevitable incomprehensiveness – in more than one sense of this word– of language and that of knowledge. If the incomprehensiveness of language and knowledge is being designated and told, even within language itself, this might be called defying the production of the homogeneous, which could be one aspect of what Bataille designates by the term transgression. This can be linked with the idea of transgression being a matter of repeating, cancelling, and affirming a certain distance between us and the objects of prohibition; in the first place, those things are prohibited because they horrify and disgust us to the point that it is impossible for us to maintain rationality.

Approaching the object of prohibition and thus cancelling such a distance or even

blurring the distinction of the subject and the object would sound destructive and catastrophic to the definition of humanity as rational animal. However, as we saw, since transgression is not at a strict logical antipode to prohibition but is a matter of appropriating it as the condition of the act of transgressing, it is linked to an endless questioning or (de)limitation of rationality. If it means the termination of prohibition, this would also imply that the possibility to transgress is disposed of altogether.

In the first place, the title of Sollers' essay echoes Bataille's set of aphorisms, which are titled, "The Temple Roof ("le toit du temple")," included in *The Impossible*, the book which, as I mentioned in the Introduction, was dedicated to the subject of poetry. Bataille's title itself is an echo of a biblical anecdote of Satan's temptation of Jesus, in which Satan demands that Jesus throw himself off the roof of the temple in Jerusalem to see if God saves him from falling to his death. In contrast to the ecclesiastical moral to be wary of pride and not to put God and his words under trial, the "I" in this aphorism "throws [himself] among the dead." This gesture is rebellious in its utmost intensity because it is about manifesting the disbelief in the authority of words and their identities to the omnipotent subject, even if this same gesture would inevitably cost the life of the "I." In addition, significantly, Bataille later remarks that poetry is "the negation of itself" "in every respect" because "it negates itself in conserving itself and

negates itself in surpassing itself.”⁸⁷

We could remind ourselves that Bataille has attributed to poetry as its only consistent property the negation or “hatred” of what poetry has been considered to be. Illustrating the hatred, a sign of poetry’s impossibility of being fixed to a certain essence, Bataille indeed performs and intensifies his idea of language as the paradoxical place where homogenizing takes place. This homogenization is always put at risk of being undone. Letting the works such as *Inner Experience* and *The Impossible* become heterogeneous corpus of writing rather than a univocal, coherent, and systematic discourse, the author brings poetry into the work as both an indispensable subject and some method to explore nonknowledge, only to be encountered with the incompetence of poetry. In *Inner Experience*, after stating the “insufficiency” of sacrifice in an analogy with poetry, Bataille emphasizes that poetry should not only put the words into sacrifice but must be coerced further so that the poet, the subject itself, is also sacrificed.

Again, I think this abrupt change in the frame of Bataille’s arguments concerning the effectuality of poetry (stating it and then immediately usurping that very statement) is a method of staging and performing his idea regarding

⁸⁷ « La poésie est de toutes les façons négation d’elle-même. Elle se nie en se conservant et se nie en se dépassant ». Bataille, *L’Impossible*, Oeuvres Complètes, vol. III (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 531, note 1.

poetry, to visualize poetry as both a problematic and productive location. Consider the tradition of philosophy and philosophical writing, which regards its primary aim as the production of meaning. It is also worth recalling that prohibition is a matter of securing the establishment of the subject and the object that can be separately identified and known. If transgression is in opposition to prohibition, the bottom line of transgression might be of running counter to this distinction and lead to the dissipation of both the subject and the object in non-meaning. If this can happen in language, it will amount to being the deviation from the tradition mentioned above at the *basest* level.

Bataille's works concerning poetry are themselves an example of transgression because they betray (in two senses of this word). To elaborate, they betray (commit treachery to) the immemorial faith in language as an unshakeable substratum on which the subject can produce a seamless totality of knowledge, and they also betray (divulge, reveal) that such faith is nothing but an effect of the dialectics as a specific form of writing.⁸⁸

Based on our examination of the possibilities and limits of poetry and after our reading of Bataille's statements around language and Sollers' "The Roof," we

⁸⁸ Jiyeon Cha points out that Bataille himself often plays on this double sense of the word "betray [*trahir*, in French]" in his works. See Jiyeon Cha. "La trahison chez Georges Bataille : l'homme souverain et la littérature," *Littératures*, Université Sorbonne Paris Cité, 2016, p. 7.

can link Foucault's discussion of transgression and prohibition with Bataille's and try to think about the significance of poetry. I want to illustrate that poetry can function as a mode of language, showing the rift between reality and language more dramatically / sensually, thereby incorporating the necessity of the transgression of language by itself. If, as the quote above from *Inner Experience* suggests, all literature is to some extent poetic, then recognizing poetry as designating this other function of language would seem to radicalize a point of view still endorsing the "belief" in "philosophical" language. This allows us to think language itself as the horizon where the radical heterogeneity of non-meaning could arise. Indeed, as we have seen above, when the rift between language and experience, or between knowledge and being, is clearly visualized and testified in language, that is, when the rift is not concealed but shown, it would connote the possibility, for language, of being disengaged from the service of seriousness and meaning; and the possibility, for us, would be of deviating from the space of social, discursive homogenization. This double act would explain why the world of poetry is said to be transgressive and further said to be opposed to and exceeding the everyday world consisting of consciousness, language and knowledge and compartmentalized with rules.⁸⁹ It may appear that

⁸⁹ 박준상, "에로티시즘과 두 종류의 언어", *Journal of pan-Korean Philosophical Society* 63, 2011.12, p. 381.

Bataille's writing is striving to find the idea about what makes poetry genuinely poetic; however, in truth, this turns out to be a mere appearance. I would like to contend that this abortive attempt of finding a coherent explanation or exposition of the poetic paradoxically makes his own writing poetic, at least by this definition. By depriving the notion poetry of any homogeneously identifiable unity, Bataille leads us to question the validity of the idea that one can reduce poetic essence to a level of knowledge.

Conclusion

In the preceding discussion, I have tried to investigate Bataille's writings on poetry and evaluate poetry's status and place regarding his work as a whole. In Chapter 1, I first tried to synthesize Bataille's early concerns of base materialism and heterology in the context of his contestation of idealism and Surrealism. I engaged in this synthetic reading to take it as a guiding thread to the issue of nonknowledge. In Chapter 2, I investigated the relationship between poetry and nonknowledge. It was necessary to understand that nonknowledge is a threefold rejection, in turn, that of salvation, completion of humanity, and an ordinary notion of communication. In the last section of the chapter, we encountered that it is impossible to positively affirm the relationship between any language, even poetic, and nonknowledge. Chapter 3 searched the crux of the relation between language and nonknowledge in the final component text of *The Impossible*. Bataille says that poetry has its limits: poetry cannot embody nonknowledge in its substance. However, this does not mean that there is no good in writing or reading poetry. It is rather that poetry renews itself in a relentless self-negation, which means poetry comes to affirm its limits and what surpasses such limits as a condition of its continuation. Based on this reading, I reflected on Foucault and Sollers' insight that it is nothing but prohibition that conditions and enables transgression. I tried to link prohibition with the dissimulation of the rift between

things and language and the consequent homogenization of the space of language. Then I contended that the deviation from the language space by the betrayal of the rift of language is a core and exemplary instance of transgression.

What can we learn from this study investigating Bataille's writing on poetry? I would like to argue that the significance of this thesis has few layers. First, one could extend the notion of poetry for Bataille and verify its importance in his writing. As observed in this thesis, Bataille's contention in "The Notion of Expenditure" and *Inner Experience* is that poetry is close to or equivalent to sacrifice or expenditure. Bataille says that poetry tends to function by drawing the "victim" – whether this victim is words used by the poet or even the subjectivity of the poet – away from the realm of the useful and then subjecting it to negation, whereas the lexical function of the discursive mode of language "aims to produce the closure of meaning in the substantial presence of Being."⁹⁰ One needs to consider that Bataille's problem comes to the fore in the critique of instrumental and production-oriented rationality and the affirmation of radical negativity that has nothing more to negate. In front of what he perceives as the repression of human negativity to make them serve the purpose of production, Bataille repeatedly suggests that humanity cannot be defined or identified solely based on the production of meaning and knowledge, that what is essential in humanity

⁹⁰ Christopher M. Gemberchak, *The Sunday of the Negative: Reading Bataille Reading Hegel* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 126.

exceeds the rational, discursive rendering, or translation. As Bataille was also a writer, the problem has been to relate such negativity to the practice of writing. In other words, it has been to question how writing, which seems itself close to the production of meaning and knowledge, can amount to their expenditure and how to link writing with unemployed negativity. This problematic is interesting because it aims to break the closure of the philosophical system and organically relate writing with lived experience. While gathering the whole of Bataille's fragmentary writings on poetry and comparing and contrasting them in this context, one can see that poetry is an important subject for Bataille even though these writings are composed with superficially distinctive and discontinuous terms.

Bataille's writings around poetry might seem malignant and appear to denigrate both poetry and the poetic because Bataille pushes his own argument to the point where the identity of poetry is put into play (*mettre en jeu*) at the very moment it appeared to be established in those writings. They could be said to squander the resources by which we think we know anything about poetry, for Bataille argues certain things and then subverts or contradicts what he said, and as a result, his writings refuse to provide any dogmatic certainty about poetry and usurp even the slightest certainty they may have provided. Given that this is what poetic language in a conventional sense would seem to never do, Bataille's writing runs counter to the very project of poetic language and makes form or

brings forth (*poiein*) a paradoxical poetic language that could be understood as expenditure. However, deliberating the “meaning” of the seeming incoherence of his writings, one could see that his way effectively shows how he defines the poetic. Since what is poetry is always being redefined in practice, the poetic seems to be in constant flux, representing a kind of “power” of language.

Following Bataille’s point that poetry is about evoking what cannot be known and approaching what we cannot do so with knowledge, those writings are poetic themselves because they seem to operate in a manner to prevent us from limiting poetry in a single definition or a set of axioms. Stressing that poetry should surpass the sacrifice of words to become that of the subject, Bataille pushes his initial refusal to identify poetry with the production of meaning and knowledge even further, to a refusal to attribute, in fact, any essence to poetry. To put it in terms of essence, one could say that the “essence” of poetry lies precisely in having no essence: for poetry to be itself, it should exceed itself. This demand to exceed itself is inspired by the fact that resisting or undoing the predetermination and fixation imposed by the appropriative, self-identical movement of speculation that encompasses all others as being identical to itself cannot be finished at any final point. When he says that “in every respect, poetry is the negation of itself. It negates itself in conserving itself and negates itself in surpassing itself”⁹¹ this

⁹¹ « La poésie est de toutes les façons négation d’elle-même. Elle se nie en se conservant et se nie en se dépassant ». Bataille, *L’Impossible*, Oeuvres Complètes, vol. III (Paris:

ultimately directs us to realize that revealing or reducing the ungraspable or non-discursive to the level of knowledge is impossible.

This thesis can be of use also in that it potentially brings up a radical philosophical question on language in general. As pointed above, Bataille's writings on poetry are dedicated to depriving any supposed identity of poetry. Nevertheless, they allow us to conceive of poetry in a certain manner in their refusal to submit poetry to any discursive homogeneity, because this refusal still takes place in language. If preventing its return to the intentional notion of the project and unchaining it from the concern for the moment of completion of a certain goal, poetry would perhaps be even less of an action than an event. This event would be of a trace made to appear at the limits of language: even if this trace never appears without disappearing at the same instant. Then, rather than concrete works to be done and potentially accumulated, it could be construed as synonymous with language's exposure or opening to what puts it at risk or exposition of its inadequacy to the unknown. That which puts language at risk is the untranslatable, unmasterable remainder or, rather, a non-signifying vanishing point of meaning within language, without which the transferring of all the meanings from one to the other would not be possible. Affirming the vanishing point mentioned above even momentarily, we could predict the understanding of

Gallimard, 1971), p. 531, note 1.

Bataille's attitude toward poetry—in particular, his contention about poetry is on the extension of the refusal to be concerned with producing meaning and knowledge. I wanted to show here that the problem of rendering nonknowledge palpable is imbricated with the contestation of literature or language itself, and this is the incongruence within his writings on poetry as transgression. All restricted or general determinations of poetry turn out to be “impossible” for Bataille, or at least he appears to constrain poetry so as to force it to abandon all its determinations to postulate nothing but its impossibility. Bataille denounces the pretension that poetry provides access to a more original and truer knowledge inaccessible by the discursive mode of language. This denouncement might seem to lead to poetry's declaration of the bankruptcy. However, paradoxically, it coincides with the idea, as proposed by Roberto Esposito, that nonknowledge “isn't a form of thought that is future, subsequent or superior to philosophy but its bare ‘non’” – that is, nonknowledge is simply a “no.”⁹² Language is made to expose, in itself, its potency as impotence or impotence as potency. Such display is to mark a point where we cannot proceed purportedly further and from that very point question why language is limited and how we could nevertheless be unrestrained by language. Through this questioning, we try over and over again to

⁹² Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 115.

transgress, to refuse any fixity imposed on a lived experience from the outside. Then, poetry could perhaps be the only *voix* [voice] or *voie* [path] granted to nonknowledge as the transgressive movement of thought, however inadequate it may be.

Another use of this thesis is to preliminarily understand Bataille's theory of art in general in terms of transgression. The inevitability or even necessity for poetry to exceed itself is what precisely coincides with transgression as the pursuit of the whole of negativity. The subject of poetry in Bataille is important because his writings on it seem to constitute a zone to (de)form a certain coherence in his work as a whole. Since Bataille doubts the idea that the expository, coherent, and systematic explanation of things can be integral and faithful to things, he tries, in a way *coherently*, to *scatter* the belief in such use of language, thereby making poetry an instance to think *over* – in more than one sense of this word – the boundaries of literature and philosophy by his enigmatic and themselves poetic writings on poetry. Again, Bataille's writings about poetry communicate what he thinks of the poetic, especially in the form of language that seem to be themselves "poetic." That Bataille's writings on poetry are poetic does not only mean that these writings are "literary" in the confined sense of the word. I want to contend here that the subject matter and how Bataille deals with it in language would exemplify what he conceives of as transgression and allow us to ponder what we can do with it. To such an extent, those poetic writings about

poetry are also “philosophical.” Therefore, one can even consider and, possibly, reconsider what the poetic and the philosophical are in the first place while investigating Bataille’s journey around poetry. The same journey would let us understand that the “use-value of Bataille” lies in travelling back and forth between the affirming and disrupting the boundaries of such realms.

Bataille’s reference to poetry is important also because Bataille only scarcely mentions art in his early writings. Regarding poetry as belonging to the general domain of art and given that Bataille agrees with Breton’s view that poetry and paintings are close in their capacities,⁹³ we could regard Bataille’s reference to and view on poetry as containing a prolegomenon of his view on art in general. If poetry and painting are close and coincide with each other to the point that it is

⁹³ Bataille’s precise wordings are the following: “For Breton, painting is the same thing as poetry, and painting exists only in so far as it is poetry. I am more or less in agreement with him.” These words are short and Bataille does not really mentions exactly of what point he agrees with Breton saying painting and poetry are in common. However, just before saying this, Bataille makes sure that poetry only concerns with the present moment but not the future. See Bataille, “Absence of Myth,” in (*AM*, 87). One can also find clues of what Bataille meant by his saying in in his other essays on poetry of Prévert, “From Stone Age to Jacques Prévert” where he mentions that “powerful emotions have always been expressed poetically.” This point overlaps with Breton’s “Political Position of Surrealism” in that Breton says that poetry and art “bring into play” “the power of emotion and the gift of expression.” This opens question about the relationship between transgression and emotion/expression and provides us with a room for regarding the matter of emotion/expression as a “production” of what exceeds, what resists reduction into linguistic propositions. Or this “production” could be rather called an “expenditure” in a sense that it illustrates emotion/expression exceeding the common measure of established interpretation. See Bataille, “From Stone Age to Jacques Prévert,” in (*AM*, 137) and Breton, “Political Position of Surrealism,” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p. 221 for each’s contention.

possible to say they are “more or less the same,” investigating Bataille’s thought on poetry might amount to investigating his view of art. This view of art also reflects Bataille’s thought about how to transgress by art and what the limits or conditions of this transgression are. If we consider poetry as transgression in and by language, the significance is as follows: Bataille says that prohibition is the condition of transgression, and transgression is responsible for prohibition’s subsistence.⁹⁴ Many forms of prohibition, from laws to daily apothegms, are mediated by language to regulate or restrain the human actions. Considering that we cannot break apart from the milieu that is language, transgression taking place in and by language is the most accessible one, and even, it could be deemed as transgression at the most fundamental level.

In sum, poetry as a transgression reveals the importance of poetry for Bataille while also revealing the need to rethink what “poetry” is, since it is itself a continual transgression of the limits of poetry. Even though converging into radical non-sense is impossible in terms of continuation and only possible in short terms, Bataille’s point is that one must continue revolting against linguistic space

⁹⁴ One important feature of the common logical structure throughout in Bataille’s discussion and contention of his concepts is that it pretends to depend on oppositional structure that prioritizes one term over the other while eventually leading to the disclosure of the fact that those oppositional terms are in fact mutually conditioning. I contend that Bataille’s way of developing his logic, refusing the resolution of the opposition of the terms through dialectical synthesis and thrusting this opposition to the extreme so that it results in bearing another opposition, is what is enough to be qualified by the word transgression.

nevertheless and no matter what. Just as poetry negates what it has just achieved in its expression by making visible its incompetency regarding the designation of nonknowledge (only to affirm the limits as the condition of the renewal), transgression is an endless negation that paradoxically leads to affirming prohibition as a point where we leap over repeatedly. This is what we can think of as the broader implication of Bataille's work as a whole, enabled by studying the paradoxical characteristics of poetry as these appear in Bataille's work. Moreover, making transgression of poetry even more transgressive is not just a matter for professional poets but an essential issue for humanity.

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초 록

본 연구는 조르주 바타유 Georges Bataille 의 시에 관한 글들에 주목한다. 시에 대한 그의 태도는 복잡하고 양가적이다. 그의 저작 가운데 시에 관한 글들이 산포해 있는 한편, 그의 단행본 중 하나의 제목은 처음 출판되었을 당시 『시의 증오』 이기도 했다. 그러나 이 증오는 단순히 받아들이는 증오가 아니다. 그가 해당 단행본을 『불가능』으로 개작하기까지 한 것은 그가 시에 대하여 절실하게 소통하고자 한 어떤 생각이 있었기 때문이다. 그것의 내용이 무엇인지 탐구하기 위해 본 연구는 위 글들을 통시적으로 독해해보고 그 의미와 의의를 추측해보고자 한다.

1 장에서는 “시의 증오”의 역사적이고 문헌적 배경이라고 할 수 있는, 초현실주의와 바타유의 시를 둘러싼 논쟁을 살핀다. 시를 인간 정신의 세계 변혁을 위한 잠재력을 일깨울 통로로 간주하는 초현실주의와 달리 바타유는 낮은 유물론과 이질학 논의를 통해 시가 우리가 직면해야 할 이질적인 세계의 통로로서 기능할 가능성을 인식하면서도, 시가 표상하는 이질성이 동질적인 것의 척도로 변질될 가능성을 경계한다. 2 장에서는 그의 비-지 non-savoir 개념과 시의 연관을 살피면서 시의 지위 및 역할에 대한, 초현실주의 논의와 구별되는 바타유의 논의를 관찰한다. 바타유에 따르면 시는 희생 제의와 낭비에 근접한 것으로 비-지를 간접적으로 환기할 수 있다. 그러나 시는 비-지를 그 자체 실정적으로 드러나 보이게 하는 데는 불충분하며, 시가 할 수 있는 최선은 표현에 이르자마자 스스로를 부정함으로써 자신과 비-지의 간극을 보여주는 것이다. 3 장에서는 『시의 증오』와 『불가능』에 수록된 바타유의 「오레스테스로 존재하기」가 시는 비-지라는 계기로의 막다른 우회로라는 그의 관점을 수행적으로 보여줌을 확인하고, 푸코 Foucault 와 솔레르스 Sollers 의 위반 및 금기에 대한 논의를 참고하여 총평을 시도한다. 위반과 금기는 대립하면서도 서로에 의존하고 서로의 논리적 전제가 되는 공모관계에 있다. 본연구는 이 점을 들어 시와 비-지의 불가피한 간극은 시를 늘 새로이 갱신하게 하는 조건임을 주장한다.

시에 대한 바타유의 사유는 아직 국내에서 주목받지 못한 주제이나, 그가 이를 전개하면서 보인 일관성은 그의 위반의 철학 전체를 꿰뚫는 일관성을 보다 정교하게 이해하는 데 효용이 있다. 또한 바타유는 시와 시각예술이 통하는 지점이 있음을 암시한 바 있어, 시에 관한 연구는 바타유의 사상을 미학적인 맥락에 위치시키고 더 나아가 예술론 일반의 논의로 확장시킬 수 있는 이정표를 제시할 것이다.

주요어 : 조르주 바타유, 시, 이질성, 비-지, 불가능, 위반
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