

POETRY AND ECSTASY: THINKING BODILY WITH HEIDEGGER AND
BATAILLE

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This essay explores the possibilities for thinking of the body as a site of exposure to and commingling with the world. I begin with Martin Heidegger's engagement with the question of poetry as an encounter with the non-conceptual dimension of experience (earth). I then show how the disclosure of this non-conceptual dimension of experience in poetry requires an irreducibly bodily form of thought and experience.

In the second chapter, I turn to the work of Georges Bataille in order to explore the bodily experiences and meditative practices he developed in the decades around and during World War II. First, I examine his writings concerning eroticism and laughter to show how these bodily experiences exceed conceptual determination and explanation. Lastly, I look at Bataille's appropriation of medieval mystic Angela of Foligno's practice of stigmatic meditation as a discipline of bodily exposure.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: I KNOW THAT IS POETRY

Since I was a teenager, I have memorized my favorite poems. I can't say precisely when or why I began to do this, but it has become an important habit of mine over the past decade or so. Some poems lend themselves to it more than others, but I never know whether I will be able to memorize a poem until I read it aloud, and I am only able to memorize a poem by repeatedly reading increasingly long passages aloud. Audible recitation is, for me, inseparable from memorization. At a first glance this is a curious habit, a neat parlor trick by which I can entertain myself; indeed, it has often served me well in office waiting rooms and in long lines to be able to retreat into the cache of poetry I carry with me. Additionally, it is a quite useful skill for an academic, both in writing and in conversation.

In the memorization and recitation of poems, however, there is another altogether different experience, divorced from entertainment and utility. I have never been able to name it exactly, but there is a way in which memorizing and reciting a poem allows me to *sink into it*, to feel the timbre, rhythm, and texture of the words as they leave the tongue. In this dual process, I can no longer treat line breaks, parentheses, and ellipses as merely grammatical or formal concerns; reciting the poem reveals that line breaks, ellipses, and parentheticals can make or break a poem, putting its visual structure and spoken rhythm in play with one another. In short, memorizing and reciting poetry allows me to experience the poem *as a poem*, to give myself over to the shape, color, and texture of the words rather than only the interpretation of their meaning. In reading aloud, I never feel

in control of the poem, but rather in motion with it, and in certain instances, exposed to it. In the latter instance, I realize that I do not know *how* to recite the poem, and it feels as if I have failed to measure up to the words. Whether I feel exposed or exalted, however, I often recall the Emily Dickinson quote that a high school English teacher of mine would often recite to us:

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me,
I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were
taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there
any other way? (Dickinson).

Years later, I must confess that I still know no other way. In short, I have come to understand memorization and recitation as a practice of reading with my body—with my tongue and my throat. This bodily reading reveals another aspect of language than that of signification and reference. Indeed, it reveals another aspect of experience than that organized by projects and meaning.

This essay takes up this experience and tries to pursue this seemingly ephemeral dimension. Using the work of Martin Heidegger and Georges Bataille, I hope to offer two exemplary moments in which the body's involvement in experience and thought becomes clear and undeniable: poetry and ecstasy. To take these experiences seriously is to accept that human experience, indeed human being, is a concrete spatio-temporal occurrence, and not the subsumption of sense-data under concepts in the service of knowledge production. In poetry and ecstasy, we find ourselves exposed and comingled with the world rather than presiding over it or observing and manipulating it from a scientifically

objective remove; these experiences refer us to the textural, non-conceptual aspect of experience that resists our attempts to control, calculate, and render it useful.

Starting with Heidegger's engagement with the question of the body in the *Zollikon Seminars*, I use Heidegger's distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* to develop a thinking of the body as an irreducible aspect of human experience and not an object of study or an extension of subjectivity. From there, I examine Heidegger's turn towards poetry in the 1930s and 40s in order to examine the link between his thinking of poetry and earth. This brings out this "self-secluding" dimension of being that poetry brings forth without breaking-open—the non-disclosive aspect of language and experience that does not contribute anything to conceptual knowledge. My contention is that this earthly dimension of experience cannot be thought without the body's involvement.

For Heidegger, however, the strife between earth and world does not *only* characterize poetry, but is rather the truth of being as such; the work of poetry is to establish a site for encountering this truth. There is an earthly and a worldly dimension to all beings, but in our everyday involvements, we cover over the earthly dimension of being and see beings as equipment or objects, defined in terms of their relevance and utility for the achievement of projects. Further, we lose sight of the active, verbal dimension of being and see only these *objects*; we encounter beings as objects rather than concrete occurrences of *being*. It is this preoccupation with beings rather than being that gives rise to the idea that humans are subjects that stand over and against objects. In poetry, however, we are *given over to* the occurrence of the truth of being. We find ourselves not as the masters of language who express truth in propositions, but as the

inhabitants of a language and a truth that exceed us: “In the everydayness of Dasein, we are expelled from poetry, cast blind, lame, and deaf upon the shore, and neither see nor hear nor feel the surge of the waves in the sea” (*HH* 24). Poetry has the power to open us to these surging waves and to establish a space where we can encounter the strife of earth and world.

I then turn to the work of Georges Bataille, especially the so-called “confessional” or “mystical” writings of the 1940s, to further develop the possibility of thinking and writing with the body. Though my goal in this essay is not to enact a point by point comparison, Heidegger and Bataille share a thinking that takes human experience, indeed human existence, as caught up in a “movement that exceeds it” (*AS* 26). As we saw, for Heidegger, this movement precedes the human, and the calling of the human is to bear witness to and preserve this fundamental occurrence of being.

Like Heidegger, Bataille sees the non-disclosive aspect of language as crucial to an understanding of the truth of being. Bataille, however, sees poetry as only a necessary but insufficient moment that can lead us to a more radical experience of being exceeded: ecstasy. For Bataille ecstasy is not an exceptional or entertaining state, but is rather the very truth of human existence: “Oneself is not the subject isolating itself from the world, but a place of communication, of fusion of subject and object” (*IE* 16). To succumb to ecstasy is to give oneself over to this excessive occurrence, which reveals nothing but the “naked fact” of being (*IE* 35). This naked fact is not presence or facticity, but the singular movement of creation and destruction that creates galaxies, humans, and mountains, only to dissolve them once again.

Bataille names two bodily experiences—laughter and eroticism—as effusions of this ecstatic truth. In both of these cases, I will show how the body becomes a site for this truth’s occurrence. In the erotic, one loses one’s particularity through the communication of pleasure with one or more partners in a non-productive expenditure of energy. Laughter irrupts into and interrupts discourse, affirming the cosmic absurdity of being human, of being “neither God nor an oyster” (*USN* 103).

Finally, I examine the bodily practice of meditation that Bataille develops following the Christian mystic Angela of Foligno. This practice, I argue, is not a method *sensu stricto*, but rather a bodily discipline of exposure by which Bataille opens himself to the bodily occurrence of ecstasy. Through an entangling of thought with bodily pleasure and pain, Bataille develops a way of thinking and writing that cannot be separated from the body’s non-disclosive, ecstatic comingling with and exposure to the world.

What I find in the memorization and recitation of poetry, then, is neither the body of science, the body of everyday projects and concerns, nor even the discursive body of socio-historical subjectivity. Rather, I find the body transformed into a site for the disclosure of that which has no secret to disclose. In the conclusion, I offer a few brief remarks on the potential of this poetic-ecstatic body to transform philosophy as well, blurring the boundary between thought and poetry, philosophy and bodily practice.

CHAPTER II

HEIDEGGER'S EARTHLY POETIZING

Before proceeding it will be helpful to make a few remarks about my reading of Heidegger. Heidegger's thinking presents an especially difficult task for anyone wishing to engage it, and even more so for anyone wishing to write "about" it or use it as an opening to think something beyond it. Heidegger never saw his thinking as a "system" in the traditional sense that word carries in German philosophy. Near the end of his life, Heidegger wrote a kind of maxim (*Leitspruch*) for the *Gesamtausgabe* on the first page of the first volume of the massive collection: "*Wege—nicht werke*" (GA1:437). Ways, not works. Heidegger's writings do not present discrete and self-contained *answers* to questions that can be fit together into a larger picture; they "question along a way" (CP 6). To question along a way is not to build a system, but to follow the paths opened by the question wherever they lead. It means allowing the question to show the way rather than assuming that something as complicated and obscure as the question of being will give rise to a neat, logically consistent metaphysical system of conditions, existents, concepts, and deductions. This is not to say that Heidegger's thought does not have certain ground notes to which it constantly returns or that his texts are not rigorously interconnected, but rather Heidegger's thought cannot be reduced to an apparatus for the production of concepts or a collection of technical terminology. Heidegger calls us to see being as fundamentally question-worthy and thought as the faithful questioning thereof; being is not a riddle to solve, but a mystery to question.

One of the guiding threads of this questioning is the insight that *being* is a verb and not a noun. It is crucial to keep in view that Heidegger does not think of being as “fundament,” or “substance” but rather as an occurrence: be-ing is the way in which beings *are*. This verbal, evental quality of being informs and guides Heidegger’s thinking. As we will see, even “truth” and “world” are not qualities of propositions or totalities of existents, but occurrences, *happenings (Geschehen)*. The consequences of this shift in thinking are tectonic and a failure to attend to the importance of this quality of Heidegger’s thought will result in the very metaphysical reification Heidegger’s thinking attempts to undo.

Thinking “questions along a way” (*CP* 6). Though it is neither system nor doctrine, it must allow itself to be guided by a sensitivity and receptivity to the occurrence of being. The job of the philosopher is not to “make sense” or systematize this occurrence into a perfectly logical machine that applies concepts to experience, but rather to remain faithful to being, to *allow being to speak*, in this case to allow being to speak through the body. The guiding question of my reading of Heidegger, then, is not “what is the body?” but rather, “how is the body involved in our experience of being’s occurrence?”

The Zollikon Seminars

Heidegger’s most direct engagement with the question of the body occurs in the *Zollikon Seminars*, a series of seminars and lectures given to a group of psychologists and

psychoanalysts studying with Dr. Medard Boss.¹ Though the entirety of the seminars is not devoted to the problem of the body, it is nonetheless a central theme. In one seminar, Dr. Boss poses Sartre's objection to Heidegger's lack of explicit engagement with the body. Heidegger's response is telling: "I can only counter Sartre's reproach by stating that the bodily [*das Leibliche*] is the most difficult [to understand] and that I was unable to say more at the time" (292). The starting point of such an engagement, for Heidegger, lies in the distinction between the body as a material object (*der Körper*) and the body as the "lived" body of phenomenological experience (*der Leib*). Indeed, Heidegger defends this essential distinction against critics such as Sartre:

One often hears...that there is something wrong with the distinction between a corporeal thing [*der Körper*] and a lived body [*der Leib*]. That is raised, for instance, because the French have no word whatsoever for the lived body, but only a term for a corporeal thing, namely *le corps* (116).

So what is this essential distinction between the corporeal thing and the lived body? Whereas French has only a word for a corporeal thing—*le corps*—German has two distinct words for the body: *der Körper* and *der Leib*. *Körper* names the body as an object, a corporeal thing that can be studied and explained according to the physical laws of causality. *Körper* is the objectified, scientific approach to the body. A surgeon, for

¹ For more on the history of Zollikon Seminars, the personal relationship between Boss and Heidegger, and the relation of the seminars to psychoanalysis, see Richardson, "Heidegger Among the Doctors" in *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993).

example, operates on *Körper*. *Körper* is the body considered as a material object, which is to say that *Körper* is measurable and essentially quantifiable. One encounters *der Körper* in the “natural world,” wherein “space is discovered non-circumspectfully by just looking at it, [and] the regions of the surrounding world get neutralized to pure dimensions” (BT 112). *Leib*, by contrast, is the body in the sense of space-making and being-in-the-world. It is “a domain of that nonobjectifiable, optically invisible capacity to receive-perceive” (ZS 293). *Leib*, for Heidegger, is nonobjectifiable because it does not name a “thing” that could be made into an “object,” but the *bodily way* in which we exist. The surgeon may operate on a *Körper*, but he does so through *Leib* as the bodily aspect of being-in-the-world.

One way to begin thinking the difference between *Körper* and *Leib* is in their limits. *Körper* begins and ends at the skin: “I am seated here at the table, and fill this space enclosed by my epidermis” (ZS 112). This space may change drastically over the course of a lifetime, but it is *essentially* measurable. One can quantitatively calculate the “volume” of *Körper*, because measurability belongs to the essence of *Körper* as a material object.

The limit of *Leib*, however, “is the horizon of being within which I sojourn” (ZS 113). The limits of *Leib* are in no way “measurable” like the limits of *Körper*, because the limits of *Leib* are the limits of my being-bodily. Heidegger puts it rather poignantly when he notes that *Leib* moves not within physical space, but within “the depth opened up in each case of my being-in-the-world” (ZS 107). So what is this depth within which *Leib* moves? Heidegger gives several phenomenological examples in order to clarify the space

within which *Leib* moves. One of the most helpful is the example of making-present. He dwells on the idea of making-present the Zurich train station: “While making-present we are at Zurich’s train station itself. Making-present has the character of being-at...more precisely, of our being-at the station” (ZS 90).

First of all, one must resist the conflation of making-present with either imagining or recalling. The differentiation between recalling and making-present is somewhat obvious: I can make-present a place I have never been or even a place that does not actually exist (as in literature or film). “Imagining,” however, implies that one is at a place “merely in thought,” which obscures the bodily aspect of making-present:

If we interpret [making-present] in this way [as occurring “merely in thought”]...then we misinterpret the phenomenon of making-present so thoroughly that we substitute an entirely different phenomenon for it...we replace it with the phenomenon of imaginary representation (ZS 91-2).

So in contradistinction to imagining or recalling, making-present is a bodily experience of being-at a place: “This ‘being-at’ is usually characterized by the bodily perception of things physically present. But our being here can also engage itself in being with things not present physically” (ZS 94). The making-present occurs in a bodily (*leiblich*) way because it occurs in Dasein’s capacity for “making-space” (ZS 19). This spatiality, however, is not the quantitative geometric space of material-locatedness. It is to be understood, rather, “in terms of my own...involvements with things...that I ‘bring near’ in my daily activities” (Aho 34). In other words, Dasein’s bodily nearness is determined by its concerned encounters with beings in the world; I am nearest to the

hammer when I am using it, though this nearness disappears if I continue holding it while making-present a train station in Zurich. While making-present the Zurich train station, the train station is nearer to my lived body (*Leib*) than the physical surroundings of my corporeal, objectified body (*Körper*).

The making-space of *Leib* is the way in which the body is involved in Dasein's way of being as being-in-the-world: "Spatiality can be discovered only on the basis of world; indeed, space co-constitutes the world in accordance with the essential spatiality of Dasein itself with regard to its fundamental being-in-the-world" (BT 113). Here, world bespeaks the network of "significance and referential relationships" that allows us to experience occurrences and other beings as *meaningful*, rather than as "objects" encountered in a vacuum and made meaningful through the application of concepts (Boss 366). As we saw above, Dasein's being-in-the-world means that its spatial character is not based on locatedness in measurable space but in its "circumspect dealings" (BT 80). This means *Leib*—as the bodily dimension of being-in-the-world—is the bodily way in which one understands a hammer by picking it up and using it without having to define it conceptually. Indeed, "circumspect being-in-the-world *is* spatial" (BT 110, emphasis added). As opposed to measurable distance, the worldly distance of *Leib* is "understood in the context of familiar accessibility, where equipment is 'near' or 'far' in terms of being 'to hand,' available for use" (Aho 34).

Bodily being, then, occurs "wherever the senses are involved," but only insofar as the senses are engaged in the understanding of being, i.e. in Dasein's being-in-the-world (ZS 245). This can occur when one makes-present a foreign land as well as in the

“sensory design of a painting by an artist” (ZS 245). In this way *Leib* is involved in the “receptive/perceptive relatedness to something which addresses us from out of the openness of our world, from out of that openness as which we exist” (ZS 293). *Leib* is the receptive/perceptive way in which “something addresses us,” in our spatial being-in-the-world. In the world, we are *addressed* or *called* by various phenomena; we are not volitional subjects who encounter objects (or, in a more complicated example, other subjects) and decide to use them, conquer them, defeat them, etc. Our being-in-the-world means that innerworldly beings address us, appear to us, and become present to us; we, in turn, respond to these addresses.

Things are given to us in the world, and we respond to them. To use Heidegger’s famous example, I encounter a hammer (within a network of references of usefulness); my understanding of being is not revealed in an ability to adequately describe the hammer with concepts, but rather in whether or not I pick it up and let it be relevant to the task of building shelter. It *appears to me*, and I either let it be what it is or not. My “understanding of being” has to do with my bodily involvement with the things around me, in two senses. The most obvious sense concerns the fact that my body interacts with the things around me in a manner that discloses my familiarity with their usefulness and relevance—I pick up the hammer and use it. In another sense, however, my using the hammer shows that it is “near” to me in the sense we outlined above; it shows that the hammer is near to me as something available for circumspect involvement. Andrew Mitchell describes “Dasein’s ‘existential’ space” as one determined by “utility and efficiency. Nearness is governed by utility” in a space “built for projects” (Mitchell 7). In

making-present the train station, we see that space is no way the physically present or quantifiable; it's nearness bespeaks *involvement* and being-in-relation rather than locatedness. This is the space of *Leib*, completely distinct from the quantitative space of *Körper*.

For Heidegger, then, the distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* is not one of degree: *Leib* is not a "thing" in the way *Körper* is a thing. *Leib* is the way in which we exist bodily in the world: "The body is only insofar as it is body-ing forth [*Der Leib ist nur insofern er leibt*]" (ZS 113). *Körper* never *uses* the hammer; to use something is to enter into a relation with that thing, and only *Leib* is the relational body of being-in-the-world. One might be able to describe the physiological processes of a prehensile hand gripping a hammer, but this is not the same thing as *using* that hammer, as *being-in-relation* with the hammer. What Heidegger indicates with the *Leib/Körper* distinction is precisely this difference between the bodily occurrence of our being-in-the-world (*Leib*) and the objectified material *thing* we call the body (*Körper*).

World

This understanding of *Leib*, however, limits itself to the everyday existential space of utility and relevance. Later Heidegger's thinking of spatiality will expand to include experiences no longer governed solely by the quotidian involvements of everyday being-in-the-world. The rather limited explanation of *Leib* in *The Zollikon Seminars* may have to do with the conditions of their delivery. The seminars were given in the 1950s and 60s, but to an audience only familiar with Heidegger's early works (namely, *Being*

and Time). By the 1950s, however, Heidegger's thought had shifted dramatically. In the 1930s, Heidegger's thought undergoes what scholars call "the turn" [*die Kehre*].² Though it is outside the scope of this discussion to dive deeply into the scholarship around the turn, it suffices to say that Heidegger's thought becomes less and less concerned with a descriptive phenomenology of the everyday and increasingly about probing the "originary" and "essential" occurrence of being.

During this period, Heidegger begins experimenting creatively with language in order to find new ways of thinking and writing that will speak the verbal, evental character of being rather than the metaphysical reification of subjects and objects. This often involves sentence constructions that lack a clear subject and instead describe "occurrences" [*Geschehen*]; the appropriation of older spellings and words (being [*sein*] is written with the archaic spelling *beyng* [*seyñ*]); and intricate wordplays that utilize German's system of root words and prefixes (to hear [*hören*] being is to belong [*gehören*] to being). This is not to say that there is no continuity between the early thought and the later works, but rather to point out that Heidegger's thought undergoes important shifts that require careful attention as he moves from a phenomenology of the everyday towards an ontology of the essential. References will still need to be drawn to the earlier work, but certain thoughts change quite significantly.

After the turn, for example, Heidegger's thinking of *world* changes dramatically. Heidegger moves away from thinking "world" in terms of everyday relations of

² I point out that *scholars* call it the "turn" [*die Kehre*] because the term link, the bond between Dasein and being in Heidegger's thought (Sheehan 82). See also Heidegger, *Die Technik und die Kehre* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2002).

significance and concern and begins probing after a more originary sense of world. That is to say, he begins pursuing a thinking of world that would ground the everyday world of meaningful encounters, but would also capture the more historical and epochal sense of worldhood. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger develops this more originary sense of the world:

“*World worlds*, and is more fully in being than all those tangible and perceptible things in the midst of which we make ourselves to be at home... Wherever the essential decisions of our history are made, wherever we take them over or abandon them, wherever they go unrecognized or are brought once more into question, the world worlds” (OWA 170).

World is no longer only the everyday world of relations of projects and concerns within which things appear meaningful, but now also speaks to the space within which history unfolds. Wherever the question of being is addressed or brought into question, wherever questions of destiny and meaning and are interrogated, the world worlds. According to Michel Haar, “the concept of world is [thus] intrinsically linked to the notion of epoch, so much so that it seems to be cofounded with it” (58). He goes on to argue that this epochal-historical space of “world” is the space within which being becomes *understandable*; being “is not understandable outside of its epochs” (*ibid.*) Being is not given eternally or in the same way in every epoch. The force of Heidegger’s turn to being-historical (*seinsgeschichtliche*) thinking is to make this epochal, historical character

of being uncircumventable. Being discloses itself always within and from out of a particular historical world.

This discussion of world, however, takes place in the context of discussing what makes a work of art a *work*—what “work” does the work of art accomplish? “To be a work means to set up a world” (OWA 170). In order to return this discussion, at least provisionally, to the topic at hand I will examine a work of art other than Heidegger’s Greek temple—David’s *The Death of Marat*. *The Death of Marat* is a painting of a profoundly worldly body. The painting is historical in the everyday use of the word insofar as it represents an important historical event (the murder of revolutionary journalist Jean-Paul Marat by Charlotte Corday) and marks a transformational moment in the development of French neoclassicism as a turn away from the decadence and aristocratic whimsy of rococo.³ At the level of historical *decision* and *destiny*, however, it sets-up Marat’s corpse as that of a martyr through the use of gentle light that comes in from the upper right corner of the canvas and falls beatifically on his face and arms. In addition to this reference to a long tradition of Christian martyr and dead Christ paintings (the placement of the arms, for example, mirrors that of Christ in Caravaggio’s *Entombment*), the stage-like setting of the isolated, sculptural body and its proportionality recall the legacy of classical Roman sculpture, which, in turn, bespeaks the republican

³ David’s *The Oath of the Hortaii*, another monumental painting in the history of French neoclassicism, further bears witness to another world-historical dimension of neoclassicism: the profound influence of the excavation of Pompeii in the mid-18th century. Not only were the revolutionaries reclaiming their Roman heritage of Republicanism, but the artists as well were reclaiming the proportionality and austere simplicity of classical art.

appropriation of the Roman legacy so important to the French revolution. David sets up the body of Marat as a call to the French people to claim their destiny and remain resolute in their decision to become “Rome reincarnate” (Benjamin 395). *The Death of Marat* is nothing if not a decisive and destinal painting, and this decisiveness sets-to-work the world-historical character of the French Revolution.⁴ In setting up a world, art “holds open” the worldly space where decisiveness (or indecisiveness) with regard to destiny occurs. Like the Greek temple, *The Death of Marat* “gives...to men their outlook on themselves” (OWA 168). It is in this way that the work of art “holds open” the world-historical character of being: “in the reflected glory of this splendor there glows, i.e. there clarifies, what we called the world” (OWA 169).

Earth

The light is no mystery,
The mystery is that there is something to keep the light
From passing through.
-Richard Siken, “Visible World”

Heidegger goes on to say that the essence of art is not only the historical setting-up of the world, but also the setting-forth of the earth, on which the world rests: “in setting up [*aufstellen*] a world, the work sets forth [*herstellt*] the earth” (OWA 172). The worlding of the world is the holding-open of the space of world historical decisions; indeed, the world is nothing but this open space within which things are disclosed and “[given] their look” (OWA 168). Earth, conversely, appears as that about which there is

⁴ Indeed, a quick Google search of the terms “Death of Marat” and “Charlie Hebdo” returns dozens of blog entries and op-ed pieces about the murdered *Charlie Hebdo* editor Stephane Charbonnier as the inheritor and repetition of Marat.

nothing to be decided and out of which nothing is disclosed: “earth appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved *as that which is essentially undisclosable*” (OWA 172, emphasis mine). Just as “upon the earth and in it, historical man grounds his dwelling in the world,” the artwork sets-up a world (and holds it open) on the basis of its setting-forth the earth. *The Death of Marat* sets forth the earth in the way its light dissipates gently from right side of the canvas to the left, the ever so slight way the crests of the folds of cloth make contact and separate, and the way the brushstrokes, especially in the wood grain of the box and the negative space above the figure, make visible the subtle intertwining of color and texture.

There is nothing to be decided about the texture of brushstrokes, the shining of color, or the undulation of cloth; they do not teach a moral lesson, disclose a historical situation, or call for revolution. In other words, the being-art of the painting is not reducible to (though also not indifferent to) the political, historical, and personal aspects of the work. Being needs the worlding of the world in order to be encountered as understandable, but there remains some part of being that exceeds the understandability it obtains in the worlding of the world: “something of the non-historical must continually enter into this history, conform to it, be informed by it, but also withdraw from it” (Haar 58). History unfolds upon the face of the earth, which is the inscrutable and nonhistorical ground of the historical and understandable worlding of the world. The “work” of the work of art is to present *both* earth and world in their mutual and inextricable self-differentiation. A tool, by contrast, *consumes* its earthly quality and, insofar as it is encountered as a tool, does not bring the earth into the open space of the world:

Because it is determined by usefulness and serviceability, equipment takes into its service that of which it consists: the matter...[earth] disappears into usefulness. The material is all the better and more suitable the less it resists vanishing in the equipment being of the equipment (OWA 171).

The work of art, unlike equipment, allows the earth to appear *as earth*:

To be sure, the sculptor uses stone just as the mason uses it...But he does not use it up...To be sure, the painter also uses pigment, but in such a way that color is not used up but rather comes to shine forth. To be sure, the poet also uses the word—not, however, like ordinary speakers and writers who have to use them, but rather in such a way that the word only now becomes and truly remains a word (OWA 173).

“Earth” names the dimension of being that *remains unsayable*. It is not an “ineffable” beyond that cannot be brought to language, but rather the aspect of being that has *nothing to say for itself*. It is the part of being that can be witnessed but not conceptualized, heard but not made to speak.⁵

Near the end of the “Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger claims the essence of all art, as the setting to work of truth, is poetry. The trajectory of the “Origin of the Work of Art” is not towards a taxonomy of the various ways in which different artistic mediums set truth to work, but rather towards the *essence* of the artistic occurrence of truth: “*All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of beings, is as such, in essence, poetry*” (OWA 197). The strife of earth and world, of unconcealing and

⁵ For more on this idea of listening to that which cannot be made to speak, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening* (Fordham: Fordham UP, 2007).

concealing, is the “open place” within which beings “shine and ring out,” no longer as things, tools, objects, or particulars, but as *beings*. Indeed, this is precisely what distinguishes poetry from prose in the typical sense. In poetry, it is not only the disclosive, worldly, *meaningful* aspect of language that is brought into view, but *also* the earthy, concealing, nondisclosive aspect; poetry is the “saying which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into a world” (OWA 199). This is the aspect of language that is itself unsayable, but is an essential part of all saying; it is part of language from the most technical jargon to the most everyday small talk, but the work of poetry is to allow it to ring out as it is.

My contention is that this earthly, unsayable (but not ineffable) dimension of being is *irreducibly bodily*; the shining-forth of color, the ringing-forth of words, and the bodying-forth of texture can only appear as nonsense or mere decoration to a metaphysics of the subject. The thickening and quickening of language in poetry cannot be *explicated*. “Explicate” comes from the past participle of the Latin *explicare*, to unfold or unravel. One cannot take apart, unroll the words of a poem and expect them to remain unaltered; it is precisely the way they strike the ear and roll off the tongue that gives them their specificity and singularity. There is not a neutral meaning behind the words that express it that could be obtained by unrolling the words, by explicating their meaning.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* enacts this truth about language through the use of margin annotations and commentary throughout the poem. Part of the genius of the *Rime* comes precisely from its enactment of this failure of conceptual knowledge to grasp the essence of poetic language. Throughout the poem, the

margin annotations attempt to summarize and explicate the stanzas, each time failing to capture the poetry that gives the *Rime* its uncanny beauty. After having shot the Albatross, the Mariner's ship comes to a complete and supernatural standstill in the middle of the ocean:

Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down
'Twas sad as sad could be;
And we did speak only to break
The silence of the sea!
...

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean

Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs,
Upon the slimy sea.
(*Rime* 52)

The margin annotation for the first stanza reads “The ship hath been suddenly becalmed,” and the annotation for the last two stanzas moralizes, “And the Albatross begins to be avenged.” In terms of the narrative and normative content of the poem, these may indeed be accurate explications, but they certainly don't replace the stanzas themselves. The sensory richness of “Slimy things did crawl with legs, / upon the slimy sea” far exceeds

any moral or narrative function, and the repetition of “Day after day, day after day” is not superfluous reiteration but the very rhythm of the poem’s telling.

In these failures of explication, we see that the work of poetry is to tarry with the bodily aspect of language. “Bodying forth occurs wherever the senses are involved” (ZS 197) not because sense-data can be quantified into wave-lengths, but because the bodily-sensory dimension of being that poetry allows to shine forth *remains* irreducible to concepts. Against what Kant thought, “There is no sensory affection which must be supplemented by a concept of the understanding;” Indeed, “Kant did not see the body at all” because he only saw the sensible as data in need of subsumption under concepts (ZS 199). The earthly dimension of poetry, then, is not a romantic flight into some fanciful “beyond,” but rather the opposite: it is precisely this earthly, bodily dimension of poetry that grounds poetry, and art more generally, in the concrete, spatio-temporal dimension of being. It is not the scientific concept, but the poetic word that refers us to the truth that our very being remain inseparable from our being-bodily.

Strife

It would be easy here, however, to hypostasize the difference between earth and world, perhaps as a difference between “form” and “content” or “subject matter” and “material.” Yet world and earth are neither two different types of matter, dialectical opposites, nor opposite terms in a proposition, but are rather two equally essential and interrelated aspects of being that appear in their *strife*. In this strife, world and earth *cleave* to one another, inseparable in their mutual differentiation: “world and earth are

essentially different from one another and are never separated... Yet the relation between world and earth does not wither away into the empty unity of opposites unconcerned with one another” (OWA 174). “Cleave” is one of those delightful words that has two antonymic meanings. To cleave a piece of meat is to separate it into two (as with a meat cleaver), but when the Psalmist declares, “If I forget thee Jerusalem, may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,” it means precisely the opposite—to stick or to cling. In other words, “to cleave” has an irreducible polyvocality; it means both to separate and to unify. To say that earth and world *cleave* to one another is to say that they differentiate one another and establish their specificity only insofar as they appear *together*, insofar as they appear “in a way that lets them shine forth in their differences and belonging together” (Vallega-Neu 86). Furthermore, this cleaving of earth and world is not a primordial act that lies in a mythical past, but an always occurring *cleaving*. The relationship between earth and world is *verbal*; it is a happening.

The *Rime* is again instructive here. The language of the poem is not only deftly in tune to the earthly dimension of the poetic word, but also its world-historical dimension. The margin narrations that I discussed above not only enact the failure of discursive knowledge to explicate poetic language, but also situate the poem such that it seems to be speaking to us from the mists of an ancient time. The scholastic practice of systematically annotating the margins of texts for future readers was woefully outdated by the time of the *Rime*'s composition and publication. Even the spelling of the title as *Rime* instead of the modern “rhyme” would have seemed intentionally antiquarian by the time Coleridge

first published the poem in Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* in the 1790s.⁶ The ambiguous nostalgia for both the sublime glory and sovereign violence of earlier times is an important historical resonance in Coleridge's work, as well as many of the later "second generation" romantics.⁷ In other words, it isn't that there are some earthy words in a poem and some worldly ones. The opening of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," for example, sets-forth the earthly pleasure of the words "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / a stately pleasure dome decree," while simultaneously setting-up the worldly space of great rulers, foreign lands, and the fog of centuries past ("Kubla Khan" 103). One could never finally settle whether the earth or the world gives the poem its beauty; its beauty comes precisely from the undecidable tension between them.

The relation between earth and world, then, is one of movement and strife; put otherwise, it is an *occurrence* in which "world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed" (OWA 174) One need

⁶ The modern spelling—"Rhyme"—was standard by as early as 1560, a full two centuries before Coleridge's poem.

⁷ Percy Shelley's "Ozymandias" especially comes to mind:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away (Shelley 198).

only recall the all too common reaction to “abstract” painting: “Ok, but what does it *mean*?” This drive to force brushstroke, shape, color, texture, or composition to reveal some “meaning” is the world attempting to force the earth to disclose its secret. The strife of earth and world, however, is not a unilateral conflict: “the earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there” (*ibid*). The all too common answer to “What does this painting mean?” is often a dismissive and conceited, “it’s just *art*.” As if Barnett Newman’s *Stations of the Cross* or Frank Stella’s *Die Fahne Hoch!* do not appear within a space of theological, historical, aesthetic, and political intersections, and contestations. The specificity of art’s work-being resides in its presenting this strife between earth and world, between refusal and disclosure, *as strife*. To return to *The Death of Marat*, the falling of the light on Marat’s face is not only worldly or only earthly; it has a worldly aspect and an earthly aspect, neither of which can be given “priority” if it is to retain its status as a work of art. The beam of light is worldly insofar as it situates Marat within a tradition of martyrdom and sacrifice and calls the French people to claim their historical destiny; it is earthly insofar as it is also simply shines “and wants only to shine” (OWA 172). In a work of art, earth’s self-seclusion is not forced open, yet the world still discloses itself as world; the strife of earth and world manifests itself *as a strife*. This is the setting-to-work that the work of art accomplishes: it sets *truth* to work.

Truth and the Poetic Word

Truth is not a process of exposure that destroys the secret,
but a revelation which does justice to it.
-Walter Benjamin

What is truth? Truth is such a noble thing that if
God were able to turn away from truth,
I would cling to the truth and let God go.
-Meister Eckhart

But what “truth” is set to work in the work of art? It is precisely this very strife of earth and world, “the opposition of clearing and concealing” itself that Heidegger calls truth (OWA 186). Heidegger is not only rejecting the idea that “truth” inheres in a certain kind of propositional representation, but that truth *describes* any thing, quality, or state at all. Truth is “the movement of simultaneous closure and disclosure in which be-ing occurs” (Vallega-Neu 86). In other words, the propositional “truth” that either correctly or incorrectly describes a state of affairs takes place only the basis of a more *originary* access to beings: “Truth is not a feature of correct propositions that are asserted of an ‘object’ by a human ‘subject’ and then ‘are valid’ somewhere...rather, truth is disclosure of beings through which an openness essentially unfolds” (ET 127). Truth occurs concretely in the way in which beings both disclose and refuse themselves; the work of art does not “represent” a truth beyond itself, but is rather the concrete, spatio-temporal establishing of truth’s occurrence. Truth only “establishes itself in the strife,” and cannot therefore “exist in itself beforehand, somewhere among the stars, only subsequently to descend elsewhere among beings” (OWA 186).

Because truth is not a metaphysical essence that exists somehow beyond beings but rather a spatio-temporal occurrence, it does not always occur in the same *way*; works of art do not all set-to-work the same truth. Heidegger insists that truth is always disclosed in an “attunement” [*Stimmung*]. Attunements are “the *how* according to which one is in such and such a way” (*FCM* 67). In everyday experience, attunement is “*ontically* what is most familiar and an everyday kind of thing: mood, being in a mood” (*BT* 130). Attunements, which are the ground and inner possibility of something like “psychological” moods, however, are not simply moods; an attunement is rather “an existential, fundamental way in which Dasein is its there” (133). In other words, the access and relation to being that defines human being changes in accordance with the *character* of this access and relationality. If we are with a person “overcome by grief,” for example, we find that he is “inaccessible... The manner and way in which we can be with him, and in which he is with us, has changed... He draws us into the manner in which he is, although we do not necessarily feel any grief ourselves” (*FCM* 66). No amount of will-power or “positive thinking” can change this attunement, and there is no such thing as non-attuned existence: “Attunements are the fundamental ways in which we *find* ourselves *disposed* in such and such a way. Attunements are the *how* according to which one is in such and such a way” (*FCM* 67). The example of being-with others in an attunement of grief shows that even when another person is closed-off, the disclosure of our being-with them does not disappear—it appears in the mode of being-closed, of impenetrability.

Importantly, however, Heidegger thinks not all attunements are equal. There are certain fundamental attunements [*Grundstimmungen*] that not only disclose *beings* to us but *being* as a whole. Heidegger's most famous example is anxiety [*Angst*], which "reveals the nothing" by allowing being to appear in its totality *as* withdrawal or recession (WM 101). In anxiety being as a whole is disclosed precisely because it is slipping away from us, revealing the nothingness that is inseparable from being. In everyday attunements, this or that being is disclosed to us, while in fundamental attunements being as a whole, *being as such*, is disclosed. In keeping with the fact that attunements are the unavoidable *how* that always accompanies disclosure, Heidegger develops several different fundamental attunements. There is, for example, a certain boredom that is not boredom with this or that thing, but rather

irrupts when 'one is bored.' Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and human beings and oneself along with them into a remarkable indifference.

This boredom reveals beings as a whole (*FCM* 99).

Attunements, or rather Dasein's being-attuned, are a fundamental character of existence in two ways. They refer us to the fact of our thrownness, of the finitude disclosed because we *find ourselves* in a world not of our choosing, attuned in a way that exceeds our private moods. Second, they show that the truth of being—being's disclosure—is not an affectively neutral, universal truth that appears "dressed" in a certain attunement, but rather that the disclosure of being—*truth itself*—is always-already attuned.

The fact of truth's being-attuned, like the setting-forth of the earth, cannot be thought without the body's involvement. In a moment of anxiety, for example, being's disclosure as withdrawal and recession into nothingness is not a mere intellectual curiosity but an existential crisis. One's hands sweat and shake; the heart races and the body trembles. In the indifference of deep boredom, one's limbs feel viscous and heavy. In joy, one's feet feel lighter and colors seem to shine more brightly. These are neither epiphenomena of an incorporeal truth nor indicators that attunement is a psycho-somatic "state of mind." Rather, in attunement one encounters one's own being-bodily. Phenomenologically, one need only think about the difference between "understanding" one's own mortality at a rational level and confronting it in anxiety. I know quite well that I and everyone I love will die someday, but this knowledge does not on its own make me anxious. Only in the bodily, concrete disclosure of this truth in anxiety am I *claimed* by this truth. Just as the work of art does not "express" a pre-existing truth, the truth of my being-finite does not preexist my being-anxious; in a moment of anxiety, I *am* the concrete occurrence of this truth.

The work of art, if it is to carry out the poetic establishing of truth, must be written from *out of* one of these attunements. For Heidegger the task of the poet is not to be "creative" in the sense of the romantic genius or the modern individualist artist, but rather to *say* a fundamental attunement. The essence of poetry, then, is not a certain genre of literature or a form of writing, but the occurrence of *poetizing* [*Dichten*]. In poetizing, truth is set to work in the "imagistic word" (*E* 289). The poetizing imagistic word, unlike the word considered as a vehicle for the transmission of data, does not treat language as

something to be possessed, mastered, and bent to one's own ends; in poetizing, the poet *is appropriated* by the occurrence of truth in language. The poet is no longer a heroic genius who expresses their innermost feelings, but rather a concrete, bodily site for the establishing of truth in poetry. This is not, however, a romanticism wherein an otherworldly "message" is brought to earth through the conduit of a poet; *truth does not pre-exist its establishing*. It simply means that the poem and the poet are *nothing but* this concrete occurrence of attuned truth through the imagistic word. In poetizing "the telling is not simply the result of the positioning of words and arranging of lines," but rather it is the attunement that guides the poetizing (*HH* 18). Poetizing is the allowing-to-occur in language of a fundamentally attuned truth.

This rethinking of poetizing as allowing-to-occur, as the attuned establishing of truth, however, requires a new approach to reading and encountering poetry. If the task of the poetizing poet is to say the disclosure of truth within a certain attunement, then the job of the reader or listener cannot be to break apart the poem into its components or to find the "hidden" truth or meaning "behind" its metaphors. The work of art sets to work the occurrence of truth and the job of the listener or reader is to *give oneself over to this occurrence*. In the usual approaches to a poem—reading for pleasure or academic analysis—"it is *we* who dispose over the poem as we will. But our task is the contrary: the poetry is to prevail over us, so that our Dasein becomes the living bearer of the power of this poetry" (*HH* 21). Part of the work of the reader or listener, then is to *belong* to the poetic occurrence of truth, which means to give oneself over to the attunement within which that truth is occurring. To become "the living bearer" of poetry is to give oneself

over to the concrete occurrence of truth. In bearing the truth of poetry, we not only hear the poem's "message," but, as we say in English, feel it in our bones. This means that in both reading and writing poetry, one must always give oneself over not only to the worldly, meaningful dimension of the work, but also the earthly, bodily dimension of the poem's occurrence of truth.

To read *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, then, requires first and foremost attuning oneself to the poem's truth. Against the will to master the poem by summarizing its narrative and thereby arriving at a "moral" or "meaning," one must stand within the uncanny intertwining of horror and wonder that animates the *poetizing* of the poem. When the Mariner bemoans, "The many men so beautiful / and they all dead did lie: / but a thousand thousand slimy things / lived on; and so did I" (56), the task of the reader is not to analyze the mariner's psychological state, but to stand with the mariner in this disclosure of truth.⁸ The essence of the poem lies not in its rhyme or composition, but its establishing of a site where we can stand with the poet in the experience of truth.

Poetizing withstands the occurrence of truth by standing within truth's attuned occurrence. This withstanding is not only withstanding in the sense of standing against, but also in the sense of with-standing, standing with, perhaps even standing within. In the first sense, however, one is not "withstanding" poetry by resisting its disclosure; rather insofar as the poetic occurrence of truth exposes us to being, rendering us no longer

⁸ Again the tension between the marginal notation and the stanza is striking. The margin notation reads: "The mariner despitheth the creatures of the calm and envieth that they should live, and so many lie dead" (56). Not only does this fail to capture the beauty of the stanza, but obscures the fact that the mariner is revolted by the sea-creatures *and yet* feels a deep, shameful kinship with them.

“Metaphysical humans [who] have overstepped the word and left it behind as a tool they themselves possess and master,” poetizing requires that we withstand this exposure, this loss of the illusion of mastery (*E* 255). The second sense, that of standing-with, names the fact that the poetizing of the poetic word exceeds our particularity as an individual. In withstanding the exposure of the occurrence of the truth, we stand with the poem and the poet in this disclosure of truth.

Standing on the deck of motionless ship, surrounded by the ghastly, non-rotting corpses of his shipmates, the mariner experiences his being-estranged from humanity and his being-with the “slimy things” that “crawl with legs upon the slimy sea.” The poem does not only offer an expression of Coleridge’s philosophical concept of the sublime, but also extends an invitation, a call to stand with the mariner of the deck of that motionless ship and withstand the becoming-uncanny of being itself. This establishing of a bodily site for the experience of being’s becoming-uncanny is the very poetizing of the *Rime*.

In this withstanding of poetizing (as standing-with the establishing of truth), we find ourselves exposed to truth. The body is not a “mortal coil” that encloses a soul or is animated by a volitional subject, but rather a site of exposure that dis-closes our own being-exceeded by being. Through the experience of poetry, we encounter the earthly dimension of being and the concrete bodily exposure of ourselves to an occurrence that exceeds us; in poetry, we glimpse the truth of ourselves as be-ings—spatio-temporal occurrences of being.

In Heidegger's thinking of poetry as the establishing of truth in the imagistic word, then, we find an *irreducibly* bodily way of thinking truth and experience. To return to our starting point, we can now pose *Leib* as not only the way in which the body is involved in everyday being-in-the-world, but also as the sensory receptivity to the setting-forth of earth in work of art. If we were not fundamentally bodily beings, we could not bear witness to the shining of color and the resonance of words; the earth refers us back to our concrete spatio-temporal existence as bodily beings. In examining Heidegger's thinking of poetizing, we saw that poetry, insofar as it establishes an image of the attuned occurrence of truth, allows us to stand within the experience of our being-bodily as being-exposed. Poetry is not the necessary and sufficient condition for the designation of a certain linguistic artifact as a poem, but an experience of the truth that what it means to be human is to be a bodily site for the occurrence of being. In poetry, we learn the truth of being-human as being exceeded and claimed by being itself in the strife of earth and world.

CHAPTER III

BATAILLE'S ECSTATIC TRUTH

The years pass, and people continue to entertain the illusion that some day they will be able to talk about Bataille. Because of this illusion they never really come to grips with his work which is of capital importance...An earnest wish: may the younger generation do it for us, do what we did not dare.
Marguerite Duras

For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies on insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!
Herman Melville

In this chapter, I will turn to the work of Georges Bataille in order to examine a different strife—that of continuity and discontinuity. Bataille understands human being as uniquely situated between two modes of experience, two ways of being in the world. The first, which Bataille calls *discontinuity*, understands being as discrete, separate beings. This reification and separation of being into objects, according to Bataille, provides the ground for thinking in terms of self-preservation, utility, and calculation. Put another way, discontinuity responds to the “necessities” of life and makes possible the realm of *labor*, of projects, and discursive reason. Discontinuity provides the ground for useful human activity and knowledge by dividing up being into self-identical objects named by discursive concepts. According to Bataille, however, discontinuity is not ontologically grounded, but is rather a necessary illusion; we are not actually discontinuous, discrete beings separate from one another, but are rather only momentarily-emerging waves in a great ocean of being. This groundless and oceanic movement of being is what Bataille calls *continuity*. According to Bataille, humans are unique in their experience of existence

as discontinuous; animal life lives in oceanic continuity, while humans remain necessarily in an agonizing tension between the discontinuity demanded by the necessity of labor and the continuity we cannot deny as mortal, material beings. Bataille is not strictly speaking “anti-discontinuity,” but rather wants to contest the disappearance of experiences of continuity and spaces for encounters with these experiences. We need the discontinuous world of labor, but we need not therefore subject our entire existences to its rule.

My contention is that Bataille’s thinking of continuity, like Heidegger’s thinking of poetry, is one of *bodily exposure*. Like Heidegger’s earth, Bataille’s continuity refuses both utility and explication, and Bataille also finds a deep intimacy between poetry and the interruption of everyday experience. Unlike Heidegger, however, Bataille treats poetry as only a slight glimpse onto a more dramatic experience of exposure—ecstatic or mystical experience.

I will begin by briefly explicating Bataille’s ontological argument for the strife of dis/continuity in the “systematic” texts of his later career, namely *The Accursed Share*, *Theory of Religion*, and *Erotism*. Next, I turn to the *Summa Atheologica*, Bataille’s intensely personal collection of writings from the time around and during World War II, wherein he elaborates several irreducibly bodily avenues to the ecstatic experience of exposure, namely eroticism and laughter. An intense orgasm or a burst of laughter is a bodily disruption of discursive reason. Wishing to intensify these experiences by breaking down the habits of discontinuity, however, Bataille seeks further after a “method of meditation,” a bodily discipline of exposure that would leave one open to

experience these ecstatic disruptions. One of these methods, which I will take up in the final section, Bataille takes from the bodily meditations of the medieval Christian mystic Angela of Foligno. Through an examination of this practice, I will show how bodily practices can be brought into thought in order to disrupt the hegemony of discourse and labor.

Neither God nor an Oyster

My words poorly announce the melancholy I feel that I am neither God nor an
oyster.
-Bataille

But to be constantly asking “What is the use of this?” is unbecoming to those of
broad vision and unworthy of free men.
-Aristotle

Bataille’s entire thought circulates around an obsessive conviction, neither dogmatically assumed or grounded in argument, but rather derived from experience: the world of discursive knowledge and utility is a necessary but regrettably hegemonic illusion that obscures the fact of being’s ontological groundlessness. This tension between useful and wasteful, knowable and unknowable, transcendence and immanence, grounded and groundless, constitutes the protean core of Bataille’s thought. In his later texts—especially *Theory of Religion*, *The Accursed Share*, and *Erotism*—Bataille provides an explanation of this tension in terms of economics, the natural sciences, and sociology. Economically, he explores the fact that every economic system (including the natural circulation of energy) produces far more than could ever be put to use, and thereby *necessitates* the wasteful expenditure of resources (*AS* 21). Sociologically, he

investigates the religious and social practices of various groups (including his notorious account of Aztec human sacrifice in both *Theory of Religion* and *The Accursed Share*). In *Erotism*, he uses scientific accounts of asexual and sexual reproduction to differentiate between discontinuous and continuous beings and to elaborate the link between death and the erotic.

I want to begin, however, with a kind of mythological *Urhistory* of humanity Bataille provides in *Theory of Religion*.⁹ This mythological genesis story begins in animality: “Animality is immediacy or immanence” (TR 18). Bataille argues that “the goshawk eating the hen does not distinguish it clearly from itself, in the same way we distinguish an object from ourselves,” because this would require the *positing* of the object (*ibid.*). The animal is not a subject that experiences itself over and against a world of objects, but “is in the world like water in water” (TR 19). Bataille calls this oceanic situation “intimacy” or “continuity.” The animal exists *intimately* without any notion of itself as a discrete identity to alienate it or estrange it from the world. Indeed, the lion is not the gazelle, but it is more like “a higher wave overturning the other” than a self-conscious subject negating another through violent self-assertion (TR 19). For Bataille, an animal is *continuous* with this its world; to be “lost in the world like water is lost in water” is to exist in continuity.

⁹ Bataille himself admits that the narrative of animality and humanity is “considered from a limited position” that “seems questionable,” but he nevertheless finds it a useful way to introduce the problem of dis/continuity (TR 9).

The transition to humanity, for Bataille, begins with representation and the ability to form a sense of subjectivity divorced from one's surroundings (*CH* 49).¹⁰ The situation of human being is unique insofar as it has the ability to transcend nature, to become *discontinuous*. This discontinuous way of being posits the object and thereby reduces "that which is" to the *order of things*" (*AS* 57). In this order, we find "the separate positing of each *thing*, reduced to the *use* that is has" (*ibid.*) Things, posited as discrete objects in a discontinuous world rather than waves in the ocean, are determined by and reduced to their use-value.

For Bataille, however, the dividing up of the universe into discrete, useful things does not only change our attitude towards things and animals, but introduces "a world where a man can be merely a thing" (*AS* 56). Bataille understands the positing of the world of objects as the simultaneous positing of the subject as an enclosed identity that stands over and against the world of objects. Following Hegel, Bataille sees the emergence of discontinuity as linked to the simultaneous emergence of reified relations among subjects and the reduction of some subjects to *things*, to slaves. This is why Bataille often refers to discontinuity and discursive reason as servility: "No one can make a *thing* of...the slave without at the same time estranging himself from his own intimate being, without giving himself the limits of a *thing*" (56). The discontinuous world of subjects and objects, then, is one in which alienated humanity defines not only the objects it uses but its very existence in terms of utility and projects.

¹⁰ I am not aware of any secondary literature on the subject, but it should be noted that this idea bears a striking similarity to Lacan's mirror stage. See, Lacan, "Some Reflections on the Ego," in *Écrits* (New York: Norton, 2007).

Nonetheless, this discursive operation of objectification that introduces the order of things and the world of labor, is never complete. The pre-discursive world of intimacy is always rumbling just beneath the smoothly functioning production of knowledge and completion of projects. Even at its most efficient, discontinuous reason cannot escape the fact that a certain share—the *accursed share*—of being cannot be put to use. Bataille argues this point both economically and phenomenologically. In *The Accursed Share*, he starts from the simple observation that “the living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life” (AS 21). This excess energy can only be wasted. This “leftover” portion of energy, Bataille argues, is “wrongly supposed to be insignificant” (AS 13); rather “it is not necessity but its contrary, luxury, that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems” (AS 12). The wasteful expenditure of this accursed share of energy—whether in the form of war, human sacrifice, or saturnalia, refers us to the fact that we are not discrete subjects but rather only temporary points of exchange in a vast “economy” that exceeds us in every way and ultimately has no end. In the “luxurious squandering of energy in every form,” we “destroy that which [we] consecrate,” by affirming that our narrow utilitarian view of the world is not an ontological truth, but “a transcendent illusion” (Land 64).

This “luxurious squandering,” Bataille argues, is the basis of *sacrifice*. He points out that, etymologically, sacrifice means to “make sacred,” and, he continues, to be sacred is to *have value in oneself and not because of some use-value* (VE 119). By destroying a valuable object, we remove it from the limited means-ends economy of the

profane and restore it to its sacred status as something beyond use, something that can only be affirmed by being destroyed. Furthermore, this useless expenditure of the accursed share is necessary to the functioning of the restricted economy of means-ends (hence the term “general economy”). This is the explosive paradox of the accursed share, of the sacred: not only does the functioning of a restricted economy depend on an operation whose logic it cannot recognize, but the wasted part, the accursed share is the only thing of value in the entire economy, *precisely because it is not conceived of in terms of use-value*. It is a “true end” and not merely a relative end.

Using Bataille’s example of the farmer, we can quickly see the problem of a purely restricted economic view of the world: “The stick digs the ground in order to ensure the growth of a plant,” whose value is in turn given only reference to the feeding of the farmer, whose value is only given in terms of his ability to dig the ground and grow the crops (*TR* 28). Only by sacrificing the crops, taking them out of this endless deferral of meaning, can they become a true end: “the absurdity of an endless deferral only justifies the equivalent absurdity of a true end, which would serve no purpose” (29). Bataille’s idea of “general economy” is a rethinking of political-economy that would reintroduce the idea of a “true end” into the study of economics; it is an economics founded not on “incentives” and “rational agents,” but on sacrifice, on expenditure without reserve, on *waste*.

Bataille, however, also explores the sacred as a question of sociological inquiry. Indeed, insofar as general economics still understands the sacred as an “object,” it may not go far enough. The sacred is not simply *what* has been sacrificed, but the *experience*

of sacrifice: “What a ‘true end’ reintroduces is continuous being, lost in the world like water in water” (*TR* 29). Religion, according to Bataille, grows from the primordial yearning we feel for the sacred intimacy of continuity, but it errs insofar as it posits an externalized continuity in the form of a transcendent God.¹¹ Organized religion, especially Catholicism, offers an interesting paradox for Bataille: on the one hand religion offers a space removed from the profane world of labor. The burning of incense, the Eucharist, and the collective chants and singing retain traces of what Bataille considers a more ancient, more intimate form of ritual communication with the sacred intimacy of continuity. On the other hand, Bataille holds to Nietzsche’s diagnosis that organized religion, especially Christianity, reifies artificial hierarchies and, through the idea of salvation, reintroduces into the sacred the structure of project and utility. Furthermore, Bataille accuses organized religion of having “made the sacred substantial” (*VE* 243); the sacred, for Bataille, is not any being beyond being or transcendent God, but rather “the opposite of a *substance* that withstands the test of time, it is something that flees as soon as it is seen and cannot be grasped” (241). Indeed, the sacred is nothing but “the most ungraspable thing that has been produced between men: the sacred is only a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of convulsive communication” (242).

Even in the world of work outside the church, however, “sudden openings” appear “beyond the world of useful works” (*AS III* 231). Drinking a glass of wine after work, for example, sometimes “there enters a *miraculous* element of savor” that does not

¹¹ Though Bataille talks of “religion” in general this way, it is clear that he is referring to the Abrahamic religions. There are some scant engagements with Buddhism and Hinduism in *Inner Experience*, but in general Bataille means the religions of the Book by the term “religion.”

contribute anything to the world of work and utility (*AS III* 199). An economist might be able to give an account of how drinking wine is a “reward” to motivate me to return to work the following morning, but this is true only in a *restricted* sense; the miracle of flavor, the bodily, sensual pleasure of a good glass of wine always-already *exceeds* the attempt to place it in an economy of means and ends. Indeed, “human life [is] full of moments...when the ceaseless operation of cognition is dissolved” (*AS III* 208). Usually we ignore these moments, treat them as interesting fascinations, or explain them in terms of the very discontinuity they interrupt (as with the economist’s explanation above). For Bataille, however, these moments are the “hour of truth,” brief experiences when we are not subjugated to discontinuity, but are rather immersed in the intimacy of being like “water in water.”

The account of the positing of the world of objects that Bataille gives in *Theory of Religion* and *The Accursed Share*, however, remains an “external” description of intimacy. The political-economy of *The Accursed Share* may indeed give a coherent, perhaps even convincing, account of the limitations of the discursive, utilitarian world of subjects and objects, but Bataille is nonetheless insistent that intimacy of being in the world like water in water is *an experience*. *Theory of Religion* and *The Accursed Share* use the tools of scientific discourse to show the limitations of those very tools, but they thereby betray the elliptical postscript to *Theory of Religion*:

“TO WHOM LIFE IS AN EXPERIENCE TO BE CARRIED AS FAR AS POSSIBLE...I have not meant to express my thought but to help you clarify what you yourself think...You are not anymore different from me

than your right leg is from your left, but what joins us is THE SLEEP OF REASON—WHICH PRODUCES MONSTERS” (113, ellipses in original).

So what is this experience carried as far as possible that joins humans in a useless, non-discursive intimacy? It is *ecstasy*.

Being-Oceanic

But where do those waves of everything that is great and sublime in man finally flow? Is there not an ocean for these torrents? *Be that ocean.*”
Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §615

Ecstasy is the undergoing of intimacy, the experience of the sudden appearance of the sacred within the profane, of impossible continuity within the realm of discontinuous possibility. Whereas *Theory of Religion* and *The Accursed Share* develop a theory and history of the human’s odd place between the immanence of animality and the transcendence of God, Bataille’s *Summa Atheologica* attempts to *communicate* an experience of intimacy rather than explain its history and ramifications. The *Summa Atheologica*, whose title invokes Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, was written around and during World War II. Bataille’s *Summa* comprises three books—*Inner Experience*, *Guilty*, and *On Nietzsche*. While these texts neither constitute a coherent system nor a confessional autobiography, they are markedly different from Bataille’s other non-fiction works. In the *Summa*, Bataille does not so much develop a theory or argument as much as he tries to let “experience to lead [him] where it was leading, not to some end given in advance” (*IE* 9). Bataille states “at once, that it does not lead to a harbor (but to a place of

bewilderment, of nonsense).” This restless place of bewilderment is what Bataille calls *inner experience* or ecstasy.

In this section, I will first sketch an outline of Bataille’s experience of ecstasy, relating it to the claims about intimacy in the previous section. Next, I will examine why this necessitates Bataille’s idea of *communication*, which must not be confused with representation or expression. Finally, I will show how the thinking of communication cannot be thought as a private experience of a subject, but is rather a *dispossessing event* that claims the one who experiences it by exceeding their particularity.

Bataille begins *Inner Experience* with a simple clarification: “by ‘inner experience’ I understand what one usually calls *mystical* experience: states of ecstasy, ravishment” (*IE* 9). In terms of our preceding discussion, ecstatic inner experience is the human experience of being in the world like water in water: “In the sunlight this morning...an infinitely simple life, blending with the stones, the moss, the sun-filled air” (*ON* 15). Bataille is not painting with metaphor when he claims to experience a “blending with the stones, the moss, the sun-filled air,” but is rather trying to communicate the feeling of ecstatic release when “Oneself is not the subject isolating itself from the world, but a place of communication, of fusion of subject and object” (*IE* 16). Despite his deeply Hegelian inclination, Bataille’s fusion is *not* a “synthesis” that “joins” subjects and

objects.¹² Indeed ecstasy is only “fusion” from the standpoint of discursive reason; just prior to the statement about the “fusion of subject and object,” Bataille remarks that ecstasy “only...*appears* to unify what discursive thought must separate” (*IE* 15, emphasis added). Ecstasy is not so much the fusion of subject and object into a higher unity, but rather the dissolution of the illusion of discontinuity; in ecstasy, one does not reach a higher plane of consciousness but rather sinks back into the oceanic continuity which discursive reason carved up into subjects and objects.

As we saw in the previous section, Bataille does not see discontinuous existence as ontologically grounded, but rather as a representational illusion. In his response to Jean-Luc Nancy’s essay on Bataille, Blanchot underscores the fact that “isolated being is the individual, and the individual is only an abstraction, existence as it is represented by the weak minded conception of everyday liberalism” (18). Ecstasy dispels these abstractions and places one back into continuity. It is not “a window on the outside, on the beyond, but a mirror” and reflects the truth that “subject, object are *perspectives of being in the moment of inertia*...that all representation of the object is phantasmagoria” (*IE* 59).

Continuity is ontologically prior to discontinuity, but discontinuity is the experiential home and norm for human beings. Ecstasy is not, then, a particularly

¹² Bataille’s relation to Hegel and Kojève is one of the most discussed issues of scholarship surrounding Bataille. See, especially, Gemarchak, *The Sunday of the Negative: Reading Bataille Reading Hegel* (Albany: SUNY UP, 2003); Gasché, *Georges Bataille: Phenomenology and Phantasmology* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2012); Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1991); and Derrida, “From a Restricted to a General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve” (in *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, 1980).

captivating or entertaining psychological state; it is “the hour of truth”—an experience of the groundless *movement* of be-ing (*G* 27). Jason Wirth puts it concisely: Bataille’s claim, following Nietzsche’s injunction, to have “become the ocean” is “obviously not *correct*. It is true in a way that renders traditional truth untrue” (Wirth 132). Ecstasy names the way in which discontinuous human beings can be claimed by the ontological truth that discourse obscures by carving up the world according to clear and distinct ideas, and thereby sheltering itself from the abyssal movement of being. If the world of isolated subjects investigating objects through discursive reason produces knowledge that makes projects and labor possible, then ecstasy is not a “state” one could “know,” but is rather an encounter with the impossible truth of being, with what Bataille calls *nonknowledge*.

Nonknowledge, however, is not merely the inverse of knowledge.¹³ In a discussion of Descartes, Bataille asserts, “It is easy for each of us to perceive that this science [of discursive knowledge], of which Descartes is so proud, *even complete with the answers to all the questions that it can regularly formulate, would leave us in the end in nonknowledge*” (*IE* 108). Nonknowledge does not contest the usefulness of discursive knowledge, but rather contests that discursive knowledge can offer any truth beyond this usefulness; nonknowledge affirms the groundlessness of knowledge that Nietzsche

¹³ This seems to me to be the clearest point of departure between Bataille and the Surrealists with whom he always occupied an intimate but dissident relation. See Wirth “The Dark Night is Also a Sun: Bataille’s Mad Game of Writing.”

famously posed in the opening lines of “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense.”¹⁴ For all its usefulness in completing projects and guiding action, knowledge cannot avoid what nonknowledge reveals: “that the existence of the world, cannot, in any way, cease to be unintelligible” (*IE* 108). Nonknowledge, then, is neither a higher form of knowledge nor its opposite, but rather the fact that “where you would like to grasp...nontemporal substance, you only encounter a slippage” (*IE* 97). Nonknowledge—as the continual and irreversible slippage of all knowledge—does not disclose an “answer” or provide a new form of knowledge, but rather reveals that human existence is nothing but an irresolvable enigma, an answerless question posed by our uniquely torturous position as dis/continuous being. This understanding of being as an irresolvable enigma is the basis of one of Bataille’s most terse formulations of ecstatic nonknowledge: “*supplication without response*” (*IE* 12, emphasis added).

Communication

Throughout *Inner Experience*, Bataille repeats and modifies a certain phrase that serves as a mantra of nonknowledge: “NONKNOWLEDGE COMMUNICATES ECSTASY” (*IE* 57). One person does not communicate to another person;

¹⁴ “In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the highest and most mendacious minute of “world history”—yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die. One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened.” (Nietzsche 139).

communication is the ecstatic movement within which one is swept up with others, into a “community having no object but experience” (IE 35). This means that ecstasy is above all not a mental state belonging to an individual, but is rather the way in which a human being can be related to the excessive, turbulent occurrence of being; there is no decisive act of the will that enables one to achieve ecstasy. If there were, then, “nonknowledge would still be knowledge. I would explore the night! But no, the *night explores me*” (IE 153). The nonknowledge of ecstasy exposes one to truth that “I am and you are, in the vast flux of things, only a stopping point... a brief moment of pause” in the “the violent movement of worlds [that] will make of your death a splashing foam” (IE 97). This truth is not knowledge because it does not allow us to clarify a concept or carry out a project; it is a truth that claims the one who bears it without thereby giving them a solid ground on which to escape this violent movement. It continuously throws one back into this vast flux and offers no respite, no ground.

Nonknowledge, then, is not the “outcome” of ecstasy and cannot be deduced, attained, or justified; it *communicates* ecstasy. “Communication,” which is an integral part of Bataille’s thinking of ecstasy, has to be interpreted carefully. In contemporary English, “communication” rings of the transmission of data, as in “telecommunications.” In reading Bataille, however, we should hear the etymological resonances of *communion* and *community* instead. Communication is ecstatic communion with the turbulent ocean of being. According to Nancy’s reading of the Christian tradition, the ritual of communion solidifies the presence and concreteness of God’s being through the ritual assertion, “*hoc est enim corpus meum*,” and thereby grounds the *knowledge* of an infinite

life to come after we pass through the finitude of this earth (*Corpus* 3).¹⁵ The Christian communicates with God through the communion. The ecstatic atheologist, on the contrary, is communicated with by the “celestial bacchanalia” of vast transfers and squandering of energy without either temporal or teleological end.

This communication of nonknowledge does not ground presence, but rather initiates the displacement of all ground and presence. Which is to say, nonknowledge communicates “a principle of insufficiency at the base of human life” (*IE* 85). Ecstasy is the communication of human finitude and insufficiency through experience. In discontinuity, the subject sees her particular identity as the ground of her being and seeks to preserve this particularity; ecstasy opens up this particularity to the fact of its being only a momentary eddy, a temporary congealing of particles with no real permanence or solidity. Humans are insufficient in relation to the metaphysical understanding of ourselves as grounded subjects who can assert our wills and control the world around us, who can “become everything” (*IE* 3).¹⁶ When Bataille speaks of “laceration” or the “wound,” he is indicating the experience of this principle of insufficiency to subjectivity; ecstasy *wounds, lacerates* the self-enclosed subjectivity of discontinuous human life, and

¹⁵ Nancy’s recent “deconstruction of Christianity” takes many of its cues from Bataille and Bataille’s reading of Nietzsche. See, *Dis-Enclosure* (New York: Fordham UP, 2008) and *Adoration* (New York: Fordham, 2012).

¹⁶ This tension between the subject wanting to “become everything” and confronting the principle of its insufficiency seems to form an important point of tangency between Bataille’s thought and Schelling’s *On The Essence of Human Freedom*. To my knowledge the only authors who have broached this connection between Schelling and Bataille in any sustained way are Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life* (Albany: SUNY UP, 2003) and Gasché, *Georges Bataille: Phenomenology and Phantasmology* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2012).

communication opens this wound until subjectivity can no longer maintain itself: “I stretch the laceration out: at this moment, I reach the point of ecstasy” (*G* 31).

Communication occurs through this “chink the armor” of individual identity (*ibid.*). Which is to say, *ecstasy exposes*. In ecstasy, the movement of being sweeps up an individual and ruins their individuality by exposing them to the excessive event that brings everything from sea urchins to galaxies into being only to return them back to nothingness.

The Vertigo of Nudity

Ecstasy, however, does not only arise through a careful deconstruction of metaphysics. Importantly, Bataille consistently links this ecstatic communication of nonknowledge to two bodily occurrences: eroticism and laughter. My claim is that this bodily character is essential; eroticism and laughter are two bodily effusions that disrupt discontinuous identity and communicate ecstasy.

The link between the erotic and the ecstatic is both incredibly common and exceedingly obscure, but Bataille, in usual fashion, offers a definition that is stirring and provocative, if not particularly clear: “Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death” (*EDS* 11). To assent to life is not to attempt to preserve it through work and project, but to give oneself up to its movement; labor and self-preservation *subordinate* life to the future, to its preservation for the future. To assent to life

necessitates a confrontation with the point of death, insofar as its movement does not exclude death, but rather includes it.¹⁷

This, however, may seem to have little to do with what we ordinarily mean by the erotic. For Bataille the erotic is not simply synonymous with sexual activity; there can be eroticism without sexual intercourse, and there can certainly be mechanical, non-erotic sex. The erotic is the aspect of sex that has nothing to do with reproduction. The erotic names the experience of sex not as a chore, as a labor necessary for the continuation of our species or the creation of a child, but rather as a vertiginous attraction, an enticement to expend one's energy without thought of the future and to feel a deep, bodily intimacy with another. Bataille's infamously obscure pronouncement that "the sexual act is to time as the tiger is to space" (*AS* 13) is not a surrealist exercise of nonsense. It is rather a precise comparison of the *wastefulness of resources and energy* that constitutes both the existence of large predators like tigers and the frenzy of sexual excitement. If life cared only for efficiency, there would be only single-celled organisms reproducing asexually; instead we have the absurdity of eroticism and the excessiveness of the tiger.

¹⁷ Though I hope the reader will not take my citation of a neuroscience study as an attempt to "prove" the experience of ecstasy in the erotic, Anjan Chaterjee's *The Aesthetic Brain* is instructive here. Chaterjee notes that neural activity in certain brain areas drastically decreases during orgasm. These areas include the "ventromedial prefrontal context [which] is engaged when we think about ourselves and our fears...the ends of the temporal lobes [that] organize our knowledge of the world...and the parahippocampus [that] represents our knowledge of the external world" (87). Chaterjee suggests that these results point towards a "captivated" picture of orgasm: "Perhaps it means that the person is in a state without fear and without thought of themselves or their future plans. They are not thinking about anything in particular and are in a state in which the very boundaries that separate them from their environment have disappeared" (87).

The erotic body is no longer the body of work, of labour and self-concern, but rather what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “the body of pleasure,” which is “detached from the schemas of perception and operation. It is no longer available...to any of the usual ways of its functional, active, relational life” (*Corpus II* 93).¹⁸ The erotic body, the body of pleasure that is nonetheless deeply connected to pain, always haunted by the possibility of a violent turn, loses itself in its touching and its being-touched, and thereby

organizes itself around itself, that is, around this contact of bodies that has no end other than itself: around this contact that is also the contact of the same body with itself. For it is precisely in this way that it no longer is or has a "self" but is exposed in its entirety (*Corpus II* 96).

The erotic is the undergoing of the body as exposure in several senses. The body is materially exposed, laid bare and vulnerable; the line between violence and eroticism is notoriously thin.¹⁹ In eroticism, we succumb to this exposure and abandon our protections. The erotic body *exposes* the identity and particularity of the self to a mingling with another or others, to the *communication* of pleasure. Giving and receiving

¹⁸ Nancy quickly notes that the body of pleasure and the body of pain are simple inversions. In pain, the same disruption occurs but the in the mode of a withdrawal rather than a laying-open.

¹⁹ This constant intertwining of violence and sensuality has given Bataille an interesting place in feminist philosophy. While some like Patricia Yaeger argue that Bataille’s thinking entails an incredibly problematic affirmation of sexual violence, others like Julia Kristeva and Amy Hollywood find important resources in Bataille for thinking sexual difference and the experience of gendered bodies, despite his often transparently sexist language. See Yaeger “Consuming Trauma; or, the Pleasures of Merely Circulating” (*Extremities*, 2009), Hollywood “Beautiful as a Wasp: Georges Bataille and Angela of Foligno” (*Harvard Review of Theology*, 92:2, 2002), and Kristeva *Powers of Horror: Essays on Abjection* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982).

pleasure in an erotic encounter quickly becomes difficult to differentiate; two or more people are swept up in a movement of pleasure, sometimes unable to differentiate whose pleasure is whose, precisely because the very specificity of the “who” no longer holds sway. Finally the erotic body exposes one to a compulsion that supersedes and disrupts worldly concerns: “What is blurred is everything that is organized for—subordinated to—the task of effecting something external” (*Corpus II* 93). The being-swept-up of eroticism reveals the “unjustifiability” of ecstasy; though the social scientist may ask the question, an erotic body would not be able to provide a “why” for its actions, and yet it will sacrifice dignity, social position, and self-concern in the movement of erotic excitement: “Silent and naked, isn’t the intimacy of the universe to which you open yourself an intolerable dizziness? And isn’t the universe that yawns between your legs unfinished? A question without a response” (*G* 140).

The erotic, then, is a site in which “the hour of truth” occurs bodily. We already saw that ecstasy exposes one to the movement of being. In the erotic, this takes the form of nudity: “Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence...it is a state of communication revealing...a continuance of being beyond the confines of the self” (*EDS* 17). Unless it appears within the strictures of a scientific investigation or a socially regulated environment (a locker room, for example), the naked body holds a vertiginous attraction. Being neither exoskeletal, feathered, nor furry, a naked human is exposed to the elements. The attraction is vertiginous because it is a complicated amalgam of horror and desire, revulsion and lust. This maddening and indistinct effusion

of passion is the first convulsive wave of continuity that distinguishes eroticism from mere sexual activity.

In the explanatory discourse of sexuality, sexual reproduction is usually put forth as the goal of sexual activity, and the vertiginous attraction of the naked body is taken to be an evolutionary lure for the accomplishment of this goal. Those of us whose sexual activity in no way furthers our genetic line, however, see the deep mistruth in this.

Alphonso Lingis, discussing why the conquistadors found the sodomy of the Aztecs just as terrifying as their sacrificial rites, explains that, from a Catholic perspective,

[Sodomy] attacks the human species as such. Not only does it invert the natural finality of organs by which we came to exist; it is directed against the imperative to maintain the genus which every positive law, every universal, must presuppose. *It is the last limit of outrage under the eyes of the monotheist god, God the Father...* It is the act, unmotivated and unjustifiable, that posits the singular one, the monster (*Abuses* 14, emphasis added).

Sodomy reveals the erotic dimension of sex that exceeds and disrupts every economy of evolution and morality within which we have attempted to restrain its terrifying power.

The intertwining of eroticism and reproduction in heterosexuality does not only constitute a clever evolutionary motivation, but also bespeaks the inextricable intertwining of the useful and the ruinous that characterizes human existence.

Eroticism reveals that the vertiginous attraction of continuity and ecstasy is a *bodily* truth; our body knows intimately that from which the scientific mind recoils.²⁰ Eroticism is a way in which ecstasy can be communicated through the interactions and touchings of *bodies*.

Contestation

I MYSELF AM WAR.
-Bataille

Philosophy is the opposite of all comfort and assurance.
-Heidegger

The intertwining of the erotic and the ecstatic, however, hardly constitutes an original contribution to the history of mysticism. Indeed, even the most devout of Christian mystics often spoke of bodily erotic experiences of the divine. If Bataille's ecstasy is to be atheological and not simply a return to the religious, we must tease out

²⁰ Is it any surprise that Immanuel Kant, perhaps the most elaborate thinker of discontinuity in the history of Western thought, is said to have bound his hands at night as not to be able to masturbate?

the specific difference of his thought from the Christian tradition that informs it, but from which it nevertheless distances itself.²¹

Bataille's ecstasy differentiates itself from mystical experience in that "it does not lead to a harbor (but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense)" (*IE* 9). Bataille's ecstatic inner experience *offers no consolation*. For Meister Eckhart, perhaps the most famous Christian mystic and a common point of reference for Bataille, mystical union *necessitates* that one "no longer feels any torment in his heart for anything whatsoever... This means: throw all anxiety out of your heart, so that in your heart there can be nothing but constant joy" (Eckhart 75).²² Eckhart goes so far as to argue that a truly enlightened Christian would not blink at seeing his entire family put to death before his eyes because he would be secure in the knowledge of God's mercy and the existence of the afterlife (*ibid.*). Even if a Christian like Eckhart does not conceive of God as substance, they nonetheless find in God a *ground*. God is a guarantor of meaning, even if that meaning is hidden in this life; God is the guarantor of being's coherence and completion: "A man... wanting to lose himself, situates himself before the universe. If he

²¹ Like his relation to Hegel, Bataille's relation to mysticism occupies a large portion of the scholarship around his thought. Nick Land and Michael Greene tend to downplay Bataille's religious streak, reducing it to clever poetics and transgressive appropriation, while Peter O'Connor and Andrew Hussey rather argue that it constitutes the uncircumventable core of his thinking. See Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1991); Greene, *Bataille's Wound* (Barrytown: Station Hill, 1998); O'Connor, *Georges Bataille and The Mysticism of Sin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003); and Hussey, *The Inner Scar* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000).

²² I would remiss not to point out that Eckhart's thought also had a profound influence on Heidegger. See Schürmann, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy* (Aurora: Lindisfarne, 2001).

sees a completed arrangement in the universe, he is before God” (*G* 27). Even a deeply mystical God like Eckhart’s is ultimately a god of *peace* and *consolation*.

There is joy to be found in Bataille’s ecstasy, but it is the joy of Nietzschean affirmation rather than Christian consolation, and it certainly offers nothing that could be called “peace;” it comes only after a torturous confrontation with one’s vulnerability and finitude. In *On Nietzsche*, Bataille claims to teach “the art of turning anguish into delight” (*ON* 170) but in *Inner Experience* he clarifies, “anguish that turns into delight is still anguish” (*IE* 40). The joy of ecstasy is necessarily preceded by and intertwined with the torture of the impossible. This torture of the impossible is not the humiliation and shame the mystic feels for her sins in the presence of Christ, as when Angela of Foligno laments that she “could not imagine a death vile enough” to make up for her sins (Angela 128). Angela undergoes the torture of her shame and self-loathing because she nonetheless retains the hope of salvation. One supplicates oneself at the base of the Crucifix *because* the situation is not yet impossible—one always retains the possibility, the hope salvation. An ascetic renounces this world in hopes of finding a greater reward in the next. Blanchot accuses Christian monks of pretending to “divest themselves of what they have, and indeed of themselves” not in order to actually dispossess themselves of all possession, but rather in order to make themselves “again the owners of everything, with God as guarantor” (Blanchot 15). Indeed, the prologue of *The Rule of St. Benedict* describes the logic of monastic life in these terms: “Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom” (6).

The Christian supplicates herself before God because this supplication guarantees an eventual end to her misery; the ascetic suffers in order to *earn admission* to a world without suffering at all.

Unlike the ascetic, Bataille has “no refuge on earth or in the heavens” (*G* 104). Indeed, for Bataille, “God has no other meaning: alleged refuge.” This is how Bataille understands the death of God—the loss of any guarantor. Hence Bataille’s declaration, “I cannot say that I myself have not been a student of theology, that my atheism is not that of a theologian” (*USN* 237). A positivist or a scientist, who would come to atheism through rational argumentation has not undergone the catastrophic communication of ecstatic nonknowledge, but rather replaced a supersensible guarantor with a newer, perhaps more pernicious faith in the manipulability of nature through quantification. I say perhaps more pernicious because at least the Christian mystics proceeded from a confrontation with the dramatic, the miraculous, the mysterious; unlike the “men of science” Bataille impugns, the Christian had the merit of not yet having been reduced to a bureaucrat producing useful knowledge.

Without guarantor, the atheologist seeks only “to ruin that which in [himself] is opposed to ruin” (*IE* 122). The atheologist supplicates himself before an empty night with no hope of a possible salvation: “Supplication, but without gesture and certainly without hope. Lost and supplicating, blind, half dead. *Like Job on the dung heap, imagining nothing, night fallen, defenseless, knowing that all is lost*” (*IE* 41, emphasis added). In this supplication without response, one is laid bare before the finitude and abyssal groundlessness of her existence, but she finds *no way out*. There is no heavenly

consolation or divine punishment on the other side of existence; indeed, *there is no other side of existence at all*, but only the turbulent indifference of “lightning, mud, a vast expanse of water, the depths of the earth“ (*IE* 62). Bataille does not call ecstasy the *impossible* because it cannot be experienced; on the contrary, it is the experience of the exhaustion of every possibility of avoiding the hour of truth. Every attempt to know, to control, to make sense of existence is a *possibility* of rest from the storm of birth and death. There is, however, no such possibility in ecstasy: “Nothing like that happens: what alone remains is the circular agitation—which does not exhaust itself in ecstasy and begins again from it” (*IE* 113).

Ecstasy, then, is not only a confrontation with the insufficiency of human knowledge and useful action (nonknowledge), but also with the absolute finality, irreversibility, and meaninglessness of death (the impossible). When Bataille calls ecstasy “contestation,” he means that it contests and subverts every attempt to halt its movement, to affix it with a meaning, or to put it to work in the service of a restricted economic model. The fault of Christian mysticism is to place ecstatic nonknowledge back within a limited economy of salvation. Angela thirsts for her death because her belief in God points her beyond it. Christ’s sacrifice recoups its losses, so to speak, in the resurrection, and the Christian mystic believes the obsessive mantra that has comforted Christians since John put wrote it down nearly twenty centuries ago: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have life everlasting” (John 3:16). Secure in the knowledge of the everlasting life of the soul (and, for some, bodily resurrection), the Christian mystic avoids the lacerating truth that

makes the corpse an object of fascination for the atheologist.²³ The atheologist knows the decomposing corpse is not a mortal coil from which a soul has been freed, but is rather the inevitable dissolution of a wave crashing on a beach. The molecules of the wave indeed survive, but any particularity the wave had does not; the same movement that gave birth the wave tears it asunder and returns it to the depths.

The Christian approaches death as the last trial before a final settling of accounts, an assigning of meaning through the sorting of souls into the saved and the damned. In ecstatic nonknowledge, one does not find answers, but undergoes the displacement of all answers, the infinite night of death. Meaning is infinitely destroyed and nobody is saved or damned. There are those who laugh and those turn away from this catastrophic nihilation, but in the end *they both die*. The difference is in whether or not they were dead before they died, or whether their death was an assenting to life up to its most extreme limit. Whereas discontinuous reason allows one to “put off existence...not to die but to be dead,” ecstasy contests this deferral and offers the *impossible*: a taste of death while one is still living (*IE* 46).

²³ One need only read Bataille’s fiction to find evidence of his fascination with corpses.

Laughter and Trembling

A dreadful laugh at last escapes his lips;
The laughter sets him free.
A Fool lives in the Universe! he cries.
The Fool is me!
-Ray Bradbury

For all this contestation and anguish, however, Bataille is not only a thinker of the “torment,” of the lacerating communication of ecstatic nonknowledge. We should not forget that Bataille claims to “teach the art of turning anguish into delight” (*ON* 170) and “the practice of joy before death” (*VE* 235). In the previous section, we saw how the contestation of ecstasy allows “no way out,” and does not offer salvation for the inexorable finitude of human being. This is, however, no simple nihilism, for “beyond the sick ecstasies, you will still have to laugh” (*G* 150). There are many forms of laughter, all of which contain an element of communication, but our concern here is the ecstatic, lacerating laughter that finally turns anguish into delight. This laughter does not express a recognition of some truth, but is rather the body’s own *affirmation* of being-exposed in ecstasy.

So what differentiates mad laughter from tragic torment? Laughter notes that the finitude of human life is not only the finitude of death, but also the finitude of being *chance*, of being contingent through and through: “I appreciate in myself the precariousness of being. It is not that classic precariousness based on the fact that I have to die, but a new precariousness founded on the fact that there was very little chance of

me having ever been born” (qtd in O’Byrne 1).”²⁴ As Bataille’s biographer Michel Surya quips, “A human being is not only mortal...he is also unlikely” (1). In other words, not only can one be sure that he is “not everything and...will die,” but he must also recognize that his very coming to existence was *abyssally, infinitely* unlikely (*IE* 3). Bataille finds in this “precariousness of being” a deeply, if darkly, comedic spirit. The terrifying certainty of one’s death is matched only by the laughable contingency of one have been born in the first place. In this monstrous combination, Bataille finds the essential tragicomic character of the human situation. Ecstasy may not end in the repose of prayer, yet it nevertheless does not consist only in tragedy; eventually one has nothing left to do but collapse laughing. One can imagine the story of Job but instead of the voice of God, Job finds only at the end a burst of maniacal laughter, an affirmation without salvation.

The ecstatic laughter that turns anguish into delight is not so much a consolation or respite as it is an affirmation. In the torment of ecstasy, one recognizes her finitude and impotence, being unable to find a ground or control the movement within which they find themselves. In laughter, however, she “celebrates the marriage of power and loss” (*G* 92); she recognizes that by being swept up in the turbulent movement of being, she has lost her *limits* and found her power: “I am a throw of the dice, that is my strength” (*G* 95). One laughs because there is nothing left to argue, justify, or explain; in being claimed by the double finitude of being both mortal and unlikely, one can only laugh.

What interests us most here is the fact that laughter is not only an affirmation of finitude and contingency, but is a *bodily* affirmation. Laughter, like the erotic, is bodily

²⁴ This quote is only translated as an epigraph in Anne O’Byrne’s *Natality and Finitude*. The French is from Bataille’s *Oeuvre Complete* 4:444.

communication; one does not laugh because one has “recognized” the double-precariousness of being as both contingent and finite and is expressing that recognition via laughter; *laughter itself affirms*. The moment of bursting into laughter is Bataille’s version of the moment of divine merciful intercession in the torment of the mystic (Angela of Foligno calls this moment “grace” [Angela 135]). One does not “will” laughter, but is seized by it in the absence of any other possible response to the impossible situation in which she finds herself.

Laughter, of course, is not a unitary phenomenon, and it is not only the laughter of the mad atheist that communicates. In a “fragment” of the *Summa*, Bataille turns to the laughter of tickling: “What is essential is the moment of violent contact, when life slips from one person to another, in a feeling of magical subversion” (*G* 129). In tickling another, we join them in laughter, in a bodily communication that accomplishes nothing, and renders the one being tickled convulsive and absurd. Even in the middle of the most quotidian smalltalk, a genuine outburst of laughter gives us a feeling of intimacy if we laugh along with another. In a group, “laughter reverberates and grows from one person to another,” communicating a movement of continuity (“Contact and Communication” 120).

Laughter, however, is not only a bodily form of communication, but also a bodily disruption of discursive language. Laughter is the body’s mockery of language, a vocal outburst in which the vocal cords do not to transmit information but delight in their own excitation. Laughter occurs through convulsions of the vocal cords and does not “utilize the external forms of language, but sly glimmerings” of guttural noise (*G* 128).

Furthermore, jokes themselves often rely on the subversion of clear and distinct categories that sustain scientific discourse.²⁵ Laughter expresses nothing, does not “mean” anything, and has no intentional content at all; laughter communicates affirmation.

Laughter communicates a bodily affirmation of exposure, contingency, and finitude. Completely outside any schema of self-conscious representation or intentional expression, laughter transforms the body into a site for ecstatic release rather than productive labor.

De Imitatione Christi

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.
...
I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast
-Psalm 22

Laughter and eroticism, however, are random outbursts of continuity in discontinuous life, unless one has first become open to these experiences. Many people laugh and orgasm without ever undergoing the loss of self, and yet these experiences, for Bataille, harbor just that possibility. Yet this would seem to present an immediate paradox: if ecstatic continuity is the contestation of all utility and teleology, how can one

²⁵ I imagine Bataille, like Deleuze, would find himself more akin to Lewis Carroll than Gottlob Frege in thinking about the shimmering movements of sense and meaning in language.

possibly have a *method* of ecstasy? Bataille's answers to this question often amount to a simple admission of paradox, but he nonetheless develops methods of "meditation" that he proposes were helpful to his own experience. Without wanting to dismiss this paradoxical character completely, my contention is that these *methods* are not step-by-step guides to ecstasy, but rather *disciplines* of exposure, practices by which one can become more open to dispossessing communication. In other words, the goal of these exercises is to make oneself vulnerable, to strip oneself of the protections that identity erects against the crashing waves of continuity. Using one such exercise that Bataille takes from Angela of Foligno, I will show this exercise is a practice of exposing oneself rather than a method for achieving a state, and that this practice of exposure occurs through sensory, bodily meditation rather than intellectual contestation.

Despite the salvific teleology of Angela of Foligno's ecstasy, Bataille finds something remarkably compelling in her account: "Speaking of God, Angela of Foligno speaks as a slave. What she expressed nevertheless grips me to the point of trembling" (*G* 14). Bataille finds in Angela not only the night of nonknowledge, but also a meditative method, a rigorous discipline of exposure by which one can be more open to communication. Obviously, these methods cannot be a step-by-step guide that culminates in ecstasy (which would reintroduce not only the primacy of the will, but also the actuality of the individual, the structure of project, the idea of salvation, etc). He nevertheless insists that ecstasy "cannot reject method" (*G* 25). Method is not a blueprint for attaining ecstasy, but rather "violence done to the habits of relaxation...*method swims against the current (ibid.)*." All the ways we avoid confronting the hour of truth are

“habits of relaxation,” and method is not an answer to a question, but a discipline of exposure. One cannot *attain* ecstasy and no method would guarantee its communication, but one can develop ways of opening oneself to such an experience.

In her *Memorial*, Angela speaks of a certain practice of sensory meditation before a crucifix:

While I was meditating on the great suffering which Christ endured on the cross, I was considering the nails, which, I had heard it said, had driven a little bit of the flesh of hands and feet into the wood. And I desired to see at least that small amount of Christ’s flesh which the nails had driven into the wood. And then such was my sorrow over the pain that Christ had endured that I could no longer stand on my feet. I bent over and sat down; I stretched out my arms on the ground and inclined my head on them (145-6).

This sensory meditation on the laceration of the Christic body and the intermingling of the word-made-flesh with the vulgar wood of the cross propels Angela into being “totally absorbed by this vision” (*ibid.*) Feeling Christ’s sufferings in her own body, Angela “experiences the cross” *with* Christ in a way that does not concern itself with the theological meaning of the crucifixion but rather with its bodily occurrence (*ibid.*). Later, as she is questioned by “Brother Scribe,” Angela will draw conclusions

about the magnitude of this pain and why Christ had to undergo it, but in the moment of the vision itself, there are no such questions about meaning or justification.²⁶

The pain of the crucifixion, however, quickly gives way to the joy of God's presence: "Then Christ showed me his throat and his arms. And then my former sorrow was transformed into a joy so intense that I can say nothing about it. *This was a new joy*" (146). As we saw in the previous section, the suffering of the laceration of the subject in Christianity leads to complete restoration:

My soul saw this vision so clearly that I have no doubts about it, nor will I ever question it. I was so certain of the joy which remained in my soul that henceforth I do not believe I will ever lose this sign of God's presence.

Such also was the beauty of Christ's throat or neck that I concluded that it *must* be divine (146, emphasis mine).

Later in the *Memorial*, Angela describes another episode brought on by this practice of "standing in prayer and meditating sorrowfully on the passion of the Son of God incarnate" (180). The meditation leads to an experience of such shattering pain that she declares anyone who claims to be able to describe it fully must be a heretic (179). She nonetheless attempts to communicate part of the experience:

My pain, then, exceeded by far any that I have ever experienced...My body could not sustain me...I saw such deep pain in the soul of the Son of

²⁶ "Because the sins were great and those committing them so numerous, the pain, as a consequence, had to be great. Christ, you suffered out of the great compassion that was yours for your elect, and because their entire purpose was to destroy you and because they did not know you, I perceive that you were submitted to the rudest possible treatment" (181).

the Blessed Virgin Mary that my own soul was deeply afflicted and transformed in such pain as I had never known before; *and all my joy was gone* (181, emphasis added).

The communication of the passion Angela undergoes is so profound here that it becomes absolutely indistinguishable from her own pain, both bodily and spiritual. Angela, then, finds a way to lay herself bare by breaking down the usual conceptual evasions of continuity through a bodily practice of meditation. Importantly, she does not undergo these experiences every time she meditates before the crucifix, but through the discipline of remaining focused on Christ's wounds, she finds a way to *expose* herself to this stigmatic ecstasy.

Amy Hollywood draws the connection between Bataille's interest in Angela's meditations on the Passion to Bataille's own bodily meditations on the suffering of another (Hollywood 70). Instead of crucifix Bataille chooses a photograph of a Chinese man being tortured to death:

I had recourse to upsetting images. In particular, I would stare at the photographic image—or sometimes my memory of it— of a Chinese man who must have been tortured during my lifetime...In the end, the man, his chest flayed, twisted, arms and legs cut at the elbows and knees. Hair

standing on his head, hideous, haggard, stripped with blood, *beautiful as a wasp*” (IE 121).²⁷

The writings on this photograph, which span nearly four decades of Bataille’s writing, are some of the most troubling and disturbing in a corpus widely known for its scandalous flirtation with horror and violence.²⁸ What Bataille finds in these photographs, however, is not anecdotal evidence of the limits of human depravity or a spectacle for sadistic entertainment. Instead, Bataille explains, “I loved him with a love in which the sadistic instinct had no part: he communicated his pain to me or rather the excess of his pain, and it was precisely this that I was seeking, *not to enjoy it, but to ruin in me that which is opposed to ruin*” (122, emphasis added). Bataille finds in this sensory meditation a way of breaking down the habits of relaxation, both discursive and non-discursive, by which we turn away from the ecstatic “hour of truth:”

When an image of torture falls before my eyes, I can, in my fear, turn away. But if I look at it, *I am outside myself*...the sight—horrible—of

²⁷ Bataille does have his own writings on the crucifixion and on the stigmata. See MacKendrick, “Sharing God’s Wounds: Laceration, Communication, and Stigmata” in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Contact and Communication* (Albany: SUNY UP, 2009).

²⁸ Hollywood devotes a large portion of her book defending Bataille’s meditative practice before these photographs. Whereas some readers understand it as an a-historical voyeurism by which Bataille finds pleasure in the suffering of this Other, Hollywood insists that Bataille is instead responding to the specifics of his own historical moment by developing a practice of *witness* that testifies to the pain of others without trying to place that pain in an economy of redemption, salvation, or morality. See *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992).

torture opens the sphere that enclosed (or limited) my personal particularity, it opens it violently, lacerates it (30).

Like Angela, Bataille finds in this sensory meditation an opening for exposing himself to communication of the bodily truth of being. In the face of such cruelty, “it is natural to rebel, to cry out (the heart fails us): ‘That can no longer be!’ and to weep and blame some whipping post” (122). If we can find a meaning, a scapegoat, a *reason* for this suffering, we can restore a sense of order and normalcy to the world, and turn away from the fulgurating truth of nonknowledge; by refusing to turn away from the photograph, however, Bataille can “only love him, right to the dregs and without hope” (*ibid.*)

In viewing photographs and videos of other people’s suffering, one often feels the hair stand up on the back of the neck, the stomach twist into knots, and sometimes even waves of nausea. Bataille’s practice involves surrendering to these convulsions rather than closing one’s eyes or turning to reassuring ideas of justice, meaning, or salvation. When Bataille speaks of stretching the laceration he feels before the image of torture, he means attending to these bodily convulsions, allowing them to break down his sense of being discrete from the other, of being separated and protected from his pain. The body in pain becomes a site of *communication*; just as eroticism can turn two or more bodies into a site for the communication of pleasure, the meditation on images of torture creates a kind of secular stigmata, an occurrence not of the transmission of pain from one body to another, but of two bodies joined in a community of pain.

In other words, the evasive response is a flight from the bodily into the conceptual or a refusal of the bodily communication of suffering by turning away, sheltering the body rather than exposing it; unable to bear the communication of the pain, we retreat into explanation. Bataille's method returns us to our bodily exposure, to the body as a site of communication. In this practice, the contestation we saw in the previous section becomes bodily rather than intellectual; Bataille's meditative practice contests discourse with bodily experience rather than discursive argumentation.

Through all of these instances of ecstatic communication—eroticism, laughter, and stigmatic meditation—Bataille thinks the body not as an object or as an “embodied” subject, but rather as a site, an opening for encountering the uncanny dimension of being and experience that eludes the calculations of reason and the closure of the concept. Like Heidegger's thinking of earth and poetry, Bataille's ecstatic body offers a way to think the body as a site of exposure, a being-open-to that which gives experience its richness and irreducibility to concepts or projects.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The body is the being-exposed of being...
The body is the self in departure.
-Jean-Luc Nancy

While writing this essay, I often found myself in a particular conundrum Judith Butler describes in the opening of *Bodies That Matter*:

I tried to discipline myself to stay on the subject, but found that I could not *fix* bodies as simple objects of thought. Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies "are." I kept losing track of the subject. I proved resistant to discipline. Inevitably, I began to consider that perhaps this resistance to fixing the subject was essential to the matter at hand (ix).

I quickly came to realize that if a body, or a bodily experience, is not to be the quantifiable body of science or simply an extension of metaphysical subjectivity, then this slippage, this constant withdrawal from conceptual fixity must be affirmed rather than denied, embraced rather than mitigated. In both Heidegger's poetizing and Bataille's ecstasy, we have found openings for thinking the body as a site for an encounter with that which exceeds rational calculability and metaphysical objectification, finding instead a reminder of our exposure and finitude as beings rather than our self-enclosure and infinity as sovereign subjects.

Like the body itself, however, the implications for such a rethinking of the body, if taken seriously, slip past the boundaries of simple philosophical explanation. The bodily dimension of experience I have pursued here is not an “object” of study about which one can speak or write without affecting that speaking or writing itself.

In Heidegger’s engagement with poetry, we find not only a philosophical explication of poetry, but an *entangling* of philosophy with poetry. Heidegger’s own thought becomes increasingly poetic, not only in its concern but in its execution. The unpublished writings of the 1930s and 1940s are not fragmentary because they are incomplete, but rather because they take seriously the claims they make. Heidegger not only thinks exposure as an “existential” category, but incorporates this thought of exposure into his own writing. The aphoristic, poetic language of *The Event* and *Contributions to Philosophy*, for example, *transform* thought rather than simply redressing the same metaphysics in a more alluring cloth. “Language and the human being determine each other reciprocally,” Heidegger says near the end of *Contributions*; indeed, Heidegger is one of those rare thinkers who takes this seriously (393).

This is to say that Heidegger’s thinking of poetry does not simply change the way we read and think about poetry, but requires a fundamental shift in how we philosophize, how we write, how we think, indeed, how we live. We can no longer ignore the attunements within which we find ourselves and out of which we philosophize. I wonder whether or not Heidegger’s country walks were an attempt to awaken himself to quiet the quotidian concerns of everydayness and to be able to hear attunement; perhaps it was a form of thinking with his feet.

In Bataille, this call to transformation is even more explicit. By incorporating meditative practices into the heart of his oeuvre, the *Summa Atheologica*, Bataille boldly embraces his own claim that his texts are not meant for those read to acquire knowledge, but those who would be part of a new community founded not on a common feature, but a bodily experience of dispossession. Bataille's own writing not only speaks *of* communication, but themselves are an attempt at communicating, an attempt to let silence break forth within discourse itself.

I must admit, there is no small share of disingenuousness in my invoking this idea of a transformation of philosophy in the conclusion of a standard philosophical essay; I am certainly not a writer or thinker of the caliber of either of the men I have been dealing with here. Nevertheless, I will leave the reader with this: if a philosopher is to be more than bureaucrat, more than an auditor of arguments or an archivist of concepts, then perhaps what is needed is a willingness to let philosophy transform itself, to engage questions that expose us rather than reassure us. The question of the bodily—the *most* difficult, according to Heidegger—may be a good place to start.

APPENDIX

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Heidegger

- BT* *Being & Time*
CP *Contributions to Philosophy: of the Event*
E *The Event*
ET "On the Essence of Truth" (in *Basic Writings*)
FCM *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*
GAI *Frühe Schriften (Gesamtausgabe Bd. 1)*
HH *Hölderlin's Hymns: Germania and the Rhine*
OWA "The Origin of the Work of Art" (in *Basic Writings*)
WM "What is Metaphysics?" (in *Basic Writings*)

Bataille

- AS* *The Accursed Share, Vol. 1: Consumption*
ASII *The Accursed Share, Vol. 2: The History of Eroticism*
ASIII *The Accursed Share, Vol. 3: Sovereignty*
CH *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*
EDS *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*
G *Guilty*
IE *Inner Experience*
ON *On Nietzsche*
USN *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*
VE *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*

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