



Exscription

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JEAN-LUC NANCY

Exscription

Of the two texts united here, the second alone will account for their common title. Eleven years separate these two texts, and the reader will sense this distance.¹ The writing of the second brought me back however, in an unexpected way, to the first. A continuity seemed inescapable, of a community with Bataille which goes beyond and can go without theoretical discussion (which I can suppose lives on, or at least endures with what can be called the tragic religion of Bataille). This community therefore also goes beyond commentary, exegesis, or interpretation of Bataille. It is not without distance or reservations, but these are precisely theoretical. It is a community in that Bataille immediately communicates to me that pain and that pleasure which result from the impossibility of communicating anything at all without touching the limit where all meaning spills out of itself like a simple ink stain on a word, on the word "meaning."² This spilling and this ink are the ruin of theories of "communication," conventional chatter which promotes reasonable exchange and does nothing but obscure violence, treachery and lies, while leaving the power of unreason with no chance of being measured. But the reality of community where nothing is shared without *also* being removed from that kind of "communication," this reality has always already revealed the vanity of such speeches. They communicate only the postulation of the communication of a meaning, and of the meaning of "communication." As for Bataille, beyond what he says and some-

1. The first, in a slightly different version, was published in the anthology *Misère de la littérature* (Paris: Bourgois, collection "Première livraison," 1977).

2. See my *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming), translated by Peter Connor and Christopher Fynsk.

times apart from what he says, he communicates community itself. That is, naked existence, naked writing, and how one silently, hauntingly refers us to the other, making us share meaning's nakedness: neither gods nor thoughts but that *us* imperceptibly and insuperably *exscribed*. Today there is a kind of necessity of saying this, of saying it again: we exist, we write, only "for" this staggering spillage of meaning. More than just a few years are repeated here; our whole tradition must re-appropriate its experience for itself. "Je ferai un vers de vrai rien . . . J'ai fait le vers, ne sais sur quoi" [I will make a verse from nothing at all . . . I made the verse, about what I know not], writes Guillaume de Poitiers around the year 1100.³

I. REASONS TO WRITE

Writing, on the Book

In a certain sense—very certain, in fact—it is no doubt nearly impossible today to "rien écrire" [write anything] on the book. This peculiar French usage of the word "rien" obliges one to understand at the same time both: it's no longer possible to write anything on the subject of the book, and it is no longer possible to get out of writing on the book.

It is no longer possible to write anything whatever about the book: if indeed "the question of the book" must be the issue, to borrow the expression from one of the texts which mark the horizon of this impossibility ("Edmond Jabès et la question du livre," by Jacques Derrida), we must at once postulate that as of now this question has been fully treated (although it has not been nor can it ever be the object of any treatise). A wish to posit, to invent anything about it today can only spring from ignorance or naïveté, whether real or feigned. Something definitive is as of now accomplished regarding this question, by a group, a network or whatever one wants to call it, of texts that can't be avoided, named Mallarmé, Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Bataille, Borgès, Blanchot, Laporte, Derrida. An incomplete list no doubt, an unjust one perhaps—it is nonetheless certain that we must not simply pass through them on the way, but *stay there*. Which is not at all fetishistic, idolatrous, or conservative—quite the contrary, as should be clear. It is time to affirm that the question of the book is

3. All citations from the many authors are woven into this text and will not be footnoted out of respect for the spirit of the article.

already *here*. Reactionary pietism consists in the exact opposite, in indefinitely soliciting these same texts so as to extract from them, and start up again in a thousand more or less declared ways, by gloss, imitation or exploitation, a question of the book in the form of speculation, *mise en abyme*, staging, fragmentation, denunciation or enunciation of the book, stretching as far as the eye can read.

I myself should have liked to content myself with patiently re-copying these texts here. Nothing can assure me that I should not have done so.

But—at the same time, by the same categorical imperative—it's no longer possible to get out of writing on the book.

For this question is not a question, it is not a subject which can be considered as completely or incompletely explored—still less as exhausted. Exhaustion—an undefined exhaustion—forms rather the subject which must be tackled, here as elsewhere.

As for the book (Mallarmé's title and program), the loose ends of something in our history have now been tied up. The power of this knot does not come from the "genius" of these "authors" but signals the historical, more than historical, power and necessity which must have caused the writing of books to get all knotted up in itself. Since the West—what Heidegger made us think of as the West—decided as far back as human memory goes, to consign to books the knowledge of a truth deciphered in a Book—of the World, of God, indeed of the Id—which was nonetheless impossible to read or write, the West is knotted up with writer's cramp. This is in brief the well-known main reason for what we have continually to go and read again in these texts.

And of what we have to write again—on condition that we not, following the fashion which forgets the implacable lesson of Pierre Ménard, allow the concept of "writing again" to tumble down to the level of the "rewrite."

According to a law which all these texts contain, and articulate, and whose rigor needs no demonstration, this history stricken by writer's cramp can only end by repeating itself. Never fully dealt with, the question of the book marks the resurgence of repetition. Not of *sa propre* [its own] repetition because it is, inasmuch as it is, the question of what remains without property (property and literary communism, that is the question). Repetition is the form, the substance of what does not have its identity printed once and for all (nor more than once) in the untranscribable Book. For whoever happens to

be deprived of this identity—for everyone in the West—repetition forms the question of the book, the question which must be written in order to dissolve in its writing—what?

In order—but the gesture of writing is never satisfied with a teleology—to dissolve—but in a dissolution itself dissociated from the values of solution conferred on it by metaphysics—not merely the ideal identity inscribed in the blinding whiteness of the Book.

(for in the depth of eternal light, everything which is scattered in the universe is reunited as if bound by love into a single book. Dante.)

but to dissolve this identity to the point of a loss, a privation which is also a privatization, to dissolve even the Book itself to the point of loss, privation, privatization. The Book is there—in every book the virgin refolding of the book takes place (Mallarmé)—we must *write on it*, make it a palimpsest, overload it, muddy its pages with added lines to the point of utmost confusion of signs and of writings: we must in short fulfill its original unreadability, clutching it in the shapeless exhausted hand of the cramp.

What for? we must indeed take the risk: we must write on the book *for a deliverance*. Which would scarcely have to do with Freedom (I mean with that subjective, subject, subjugated Freedom which God or the Spirit of metaphysics automatically confer upon themselves). Writing ought to slip into the interstice of the strange homonym *liber/liber*, into the everyday ambiguity of *livraison* [delivery].

Writing? tormenting yourself, quite vainly hoping for the moment of deliverance? (Bataille)

—and the sentence which follows in the same story, *Histoire de rats*:

My reason for writing is to reach B.

B. is the woman in the story, but her initial and the sentence itself have us read woman, this woman, a woman and a man and B.; Bataille himself, and a place and a book and a thought and deliverance “itself,” in person without any allegorism.

Such is repetition: renewal, rewriting of the petition, of the effort to reach and join, of the request, of the demand, of the plea, of the claim, of the supplication. Rewriting on the book is the renewed clamor or murmur of a demand, of a pressing call. If the texts which I have mentioned do *remain* henceforth in our history, it's because they have not dealt with any question but have knotted this call into a lump in one or more throats of writing: a grand glottal spasm.

They have knotted the ethical and more than ethical call for a

deliverance, onto a deliverance. It is imperative not to answer it . . . the neutral, writes Blanchot, denominating as neutral the literary act which bringing an *unanswerable problem* to the closure of an *aliquid* to which the question wouldn't correspond—or rather it would be indispensable to distinguish with all possible care two incommensurable concepts: the answer to a question and the answer to a call.

It may be that one can answer a call only by repeating it—like night watchmen. It may be that it is not the response which is imperative, but only the *obligation* of responding, which is called responsibility. How, in the book, can the issue be responsibility? Eluding it is no longer possible any more than avoiding this: how, in writing where the Voice is absent (a voice without writing is at once absolutely alive and absolutely dead. Derrida), is a call to be heard, how can it be a question of vocation, invocation or advocacy? How in general can the book's full otherness be delivered?

All these texts have exhausted the theme, the theory, the practice, the metamorphosis, the future, the fugue, or the cut of the book for no other reason than to repeat this call.

I myself had something else to write, longer and for more than one person. Long in the writing. It would be a book as long as the Thousand and One Nights, perhaps, but quite different (Proust).

Repetitions

All the same, it is probably better to dot the *i*'s of repetition, at the risk of repeating myself somewhat.

The reduplication of the book at its own heart, the self-representation of literature, each book's story of its own birth—of its own delivery—its self-analysis, or perhaps the involution of its message in the display of its code, or the figuration of its procedures in the narrative or demonstrative process of the formation of its figures or the putting into play of its rules by the game's rules themselves, all that in a word I will call autobiibliography, all this dates from the invention of the book. Everything on the strength of which our modernity gained entire libraries—it had to be, it was necessary by that very necessity of the book which no written text escapes (the useless prolix epistle which I am writing already exists in one of the thirty volumes on the five bookshelves in one of the innumerable hexagons—and so does its refutation.—*The library of Babel*—, all this makes up the self-repetition which unavoidably constitutes the book from birth. The reason I

write is to reach B.: Babel, Bible, bibliography, bibliomancy, bibliomania, bibliophilia, *bibliothèque* [library].

This is what the book has more accurately ended up reciting and harking back to, in the age of its material invention: in the age of printing, age of the true book, age of the fully developed subject and of communication. Printing has satisfied the need to relate to each other in an ideal mode (Hegel). Since then everything has happened as if all the ideal content of communication consisted in autobibliography. All books display the being or the law of the book: from the beginning it has no object but itself, and this satisfaction. I am writing to you, daughter, with pleasure, even though I have no news for you (Mme de Sévigné).

Everything has been said, and we come too late, in the more than seven thousand years that there have been thinking men: so it is that the first chapter on books must be begun, in a book entitled *Characters*. The exhaustion of material prescribes the infinite number of possible ways to form the signs of it. It's the history of the world which we are now visiting, the goddess tells him: it's the book of its destinies. Move into another room and there is another world, another book—somewhere in it you will find the *Essays* concerned with theodicy where it's all written, and you'll read there that all Borgès ever wrote was but a thought of Leibnitz's which Lichtenberg had already recopied: the libraries will be cities. No place will be free of books, even if there should happen to be a lack. You are quite right, sir, there is a whole chapter missing here, leaving a hole of at least ten pages in the book, writes Tristram, the author who also recounts his own birth. Nor will any book be free of books, for, not content to inscribe our name on anonymous thoughts by a single author, we appropriate those of thousands of individuals, epochs, and entire libraries, and we steal even from plagiarists, writes Jean Paul plagiarizing himself one more time. The textual anthology—choosing flowers from books, choosing books so as to arrange in each book the bouquet of its literariness—continues unabated all the way down to us.

All this repetition *en abyme* of the book constitutes its redundancy, both native to it and more naïve than is usually thought. Redundancy is the overflow of the undulating wave, its excess: the Book has always been thought of as the endlessly spouting spray of an inexhaustible ocean—wouldn't a jet of grandeur, of thought, or of considerable emotion, a sentence pursued in large type spaced out to one line a page, keep the reader in good condition for the length of the book

(Mallarmé). The wave repeats itself and falls back again. This repetition is perhaps properly called composition: to compose is to gather back together, to put back in, to bring back home, and to reduce. Every book brings back the redundancy of the Book to the space delimited by an inscription. In each of its temples, autobibliography is worshiped.

—on condition that it know nothing of the other repetition for which in fact it is only the exchange of the remuneration. The age of printing is indeed the age of the subject—there is no book that is not the book of an ‘I,’ and ‘I’ repeats itself, that is how it can be recognized.

I have no more made my book than my book has made me—a book consubstantial with its author. The subject sets itself up as a Book, and only this self-erection has ever secured the substance of a subject—whose frank dissimulation allows desire to be read like an open book: thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book; you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject. I am not building here a statue to erect at the town crossroads, this is for a nook in a library, and to amuse a neighbor. Others form man; I tell of him, and portray a particular one, very ill-formed. I want people to see my natural and ordinary pace, however off the track it is. My reason for writing is to reach B.—to reach myself, to reach in her my society, her solitude, to reach him, her who says ‘I,’ not natural, not ordinary.

‘I’ repeats its desire to itself—but can that desire be anything but off the track? That the I display itself is not enough to make it visible. Someone gets lost irremediably in the matter of his book—someone who will not stop repeating to himself: “the matter of my experience, which will be the matter of my book” and this time it’s Proust. Lost in every book, someone—who is and isn’t the one who says I—repeats himself. Through the *abyme* of autobibliography and in spite of this *abyme*, an autograph walks into the abyss. Its errant movement begins at the same crossroads as its self-erection.

This is the autograph which takes its singular leave at the very opening of its book. So farewell. Montaigne, this first day of March, fifteen hundred and eighty. Signature of place, signature of name, signature of farewell, it enters its own book as if it were a tomb. It is sameness which, in altering its identity and its singularity, divides their seal (Derrida).

Literal and literary repetition belongs to him who goes astray in

his own marks—in the speeches of his own wake, like Finnegans, signs are on of a mere by token that wills still to be becoming upon this there once a here was: an exodus has begun again, here, and someone has entered into the history of his diaspora. The repeated call comes from him. It's the call of a solitude which preexists any isolation, the invocation of a community which neither contains nor precedes any society. How to deliver the full otherness common to all books? someone asks, some writer or other, an 'I' who is called.

*bent over the book open to the same
page
what he hears are the songs from
the other side where the others are (Jacqueline Risset)*

The Story he Writes himself about the Book

is a story which conforms with his desire and his exodus. Writing, he says, marks everywhere the end of communism. That is, of what he has never known, because he was born with writing.

But he writes in his books—and in all his books—what communism was, the book's absence. The book never pretends to anything less than retracing what exceeds it. The question of the book's origin will never belong to any book (Derrida)—and yet, O memory! you who have written what I have seen, here will be seen your nobility (Dante). So he writes the world of the bard, the storyteller, the sacred reciter. The first poet, who took this step so as to free himself through the crowd's imagination, knows how to return through it to real life. For he goes off right and left to tell the crowd the exploits which his imagination attributes to the hero. This hero is, fundamentally, no one but himself. But the poet's listeners, who understand him, know how to identify themselves with the hero (Freud). This pure self-poiesis in pure community continually haunts all of literature: and it's a man of the here, a man of the now, who is his own narrator, in the end (Robbe-Grillet).

It was, he says, the world of a mime who had no models and no imitators, the world of the brilliant improviser, of the dancer drunk on god, of the drumbeats, the blows, the whistling of an unwritten music, the world of prayers, supplications, invocations. It's the tribe with its words and recitations, the chanting cry of the primitive commune around its hearth—silent writing of a fire so bright that it tears without leaving a trace (Laporte).

Which is followed, in the story we tell ourselves, by the society of that writing which is not the book but the engraving of sacred characters, the inscription of the Laws on tablets of stone or metal, on columns, pilasters, pediments, and mouldings, hard writing and everywhere the erection of steles setting forth the Order and the Arrangement, the Structure and the Model, for no one and thus for all: this was monumental communism, architectural writing and hieroglyphic monarchy. All the words must have a characteristic aspect of depth or prominence, engraving or sculpture, the writer of maxims (Joubert) says of sacred writing. And every book tends uncontrollably toward the maxim: *maxima sententia*, the greatest thought . . .

Last comes—from nowhere and everywhere, from Egypt, Ionia, Canaan—the book; last comes *ta biblia*, the irremediably plural Bible, the Law, the Prophets, the Scripture, as it divides itself, lays itself out, puts itself *en abyme*, and disseminates itself. It is and is not the Book of only one—author or people.

Last comes the very belated, very old religion of books, and all the exodi begin. Egypt, Ionia, Canaan move, constantly scattering communes crossing the desert.

The history of books begins by losing itself in the book of history. There nothing tells us who if anyone wrote the very first pact which is nonetheless called the Book of the Alliance (*Exodus*, 27:7). It's the history of the pact—a pact of deliverance—broken, kept, betrayed, still offered—and of the renewed call to sign it once again. Scarcely graven before they were broken, the Tablets are never set up, they wander in the Ark with the wandering tribes. The Scrolls unroll and the volume of history swells until it reaches us; the book is inseparable from the story, the history of the novel: the age of the book is romanticism. In our writings thought seems to proceed with the movement of a man who walks straight ahead. In the writings of the ancients, on the contrary, it seems to proceed by the movement of a bird which soars and whirls as it goes forward (Joubert).

Who does not see that I have taken a road along which I shall go, without stopping and without effort, as long as there is ink and paper in the world?

Books begin with their repetition: two stories of genesis mingle, overlap, repeat and contradict themselves. Books are copied, reproduced, *published* because they are not in themselves public as either a song or an obelisk; we transmit them, translate them—

seventy-two Jews, six from each tribe in seventy-two days on the island of Pharos, made the Bible Greek—, we betray them, counterfeit them, imitate them, recopy, recite, and cite them. Whoever says 'I' mixes up books and signatures in his book: In the reasonings and inventions that I transplant into my soil and confound with my own, I have sometimes deliberately not indicated the author, in order to hold in check the temerity of those hasty condemnations that are tossed at all sorts of writings. Here the repeated repetition begins again.

Books are a corruptible matter. Books are made of wood: *biblos*, *liber*, *codex*, *Buch*, it's always bark or tree. It burns, it rots, it decomposes, it can be erased, it falls to the gnawing criticism of mice. Bibliophilia is, just as much as philosophy, an impossible love, its objects discolored, faded, worn-out, cut-up, full of holes. Books are miserable, hateful. Descartes hates the job of making books. There is nothing for the Subject—the other, the same; who says 'I' (think)—in the tomes, nothing but loss of time, a life uselessly consumed in reading the scraps of knowledge that I myself can found. There should be some legal restraint aimed against inept and useless writers, as there is against vagabonds and idlers. Both I and a hundred others would be banished from the hands of our people. This is no jest. Scribbling seems to be a sort of symptom of an unruly age. When did we write so much as since our dissensions began? since our writing has been troubled.

For he who says 'I' *must* nonetheless write, the demonstration is inexorable: thinking through the problem of the ego and the alter ego, of the originary coupling and the human community, Husserl writes: In all this there are essential laws or an essential style the root of which lies first in the transcendental ego, and in the transcendental intersubjectivity which the ego discovers in it, and consequently in the essential structures of transcendental motivation and constitution. Success in elucidating them would in itself give this aprioristic style a supremely honorable rational explanation: final transcendental intelligibility. Husserl writes what he doesn't want—to write. He writes that the originating alteration of the ego, the community of men, forms or deforms style, writing, even intelligibility, the ultimate success of which it deciphers.

Thus supplication through the book began at the same time as the persecution of books. Writing is tied to a cruel simulacrum of torture (Laporte). And now, through the glass everyone can see the inscription

being etched on the body of the prisoner. Obviously a simple writing can't be used, it mustn't kill on the spot, but within twelve hours on the average (Kafka, "The Penal Colony").

The officer in charge of the machine executes himself, at the end of the story, by engraving on his own body the law which he has violated: *Be Just!* But only the mad machine is left to apply the law savagely—communism and capitalism writing machines. Yet it is the same appeal: How to deliver the book's full otherness?

Apocalypse

And what if books always announced, always provoked, the resumption in this story of what has no place there, does not happen there? And what if we understood why, today, speaking, writing, we must always speak *several times at the same time*, speaking according to the logic of discourse and thus under the nostalgia of the theological logos, speaking too to make possible a communication of speech which can only be decided on the basis of a communism of relations of exchange and thus of production—but also not speaking, writing in a break with any language of speech and writing (Blanchot)?

At the end of books, there is the *Apocalypse*. This is the kind of prophecy—call, that is—which is actually written. It is the book of the end of the world, the book of the new beginning. Its writer says and I say his name—John—and he names his place of exile—the island of Patmos. This book is a letter to the scattered churches, to the secret community bereft of its communion. In this letter a letter is addressed to each one of the churches, to each one of the assemblies. The letter is repeated, divided, transformed: To the Angel of the Church of Ephesus, write: Thus speaks he who holds the seven stars (John). To them in Ysat Loka. Hearing. The urb it orbs. Then's now with now's then in tense continuant. Heard. Who having has he shall have had. Hear! (Joyce).

John writes in this book the visions which it is given to him to see: but he only writes because the visions command him to write. The Angel speaks to him holding the Book but John does not recopy it: he writes what the Angel dictates to him. What is revealed is not the Angel nor the Book: it is man's writing. He who is announced through revelation, who says in his turn who he is, is he who says—of whom John writes that he says he is the alpha and omega. He is the Book, of course, but also: nothing but the final count of the characters

of writing—that is all that is revealed of the seven broken seals of the book of the slaughtered Lamb. It's the end of religion.

John writes all his visions of writings. But in the middle, he is forbidden to write the words of the seven thunderclaps. No book delivers the unheard, inaudible, deafening speech—the primitive tumult the sound of which would have given rise to the exaltation of the mystical community. But the book knows of the scattering of the communion—it is the inscription of it and it communicates its call: Let the hearer say “Come!” *Come!* punctuates the Apocalypse and our books on books. Come, and restore to us the conventions of what disappears, the movement of a heart (Blanchot quoted by Derrida). It's up to you to take the step of meaning. There is no chance of deciding, no future in deciding, in whatever language, what comes in “Come” (Derrida).

It is not a call to communication, but the propagation of the repetition of the appeal, or the order and of the demand which bear, produce, convey, teach nothing, *rien—viens*, —which do not call for a response but for the simple obligation to respond, the responsibility to write again with the twenty-five letters which contain no revelation but only their own exhaustion.

Here the exhaustion is initial: the reason I write is to reach B.—to go from the first to the second letter, to trace letters tied one to the other, which calls writing, which calls a woman, a man, a book, a story and always like B. in the story an impossible unsustainable nudity.

Far beyond and far short of what any speech can unveil of the real—far beyond and far short of any One Book, apocalypse is still to be discovered, the discovery which shakes all books: that the book and the communion are stripped, dis-covered, in all books. The book's absence is the absence of Communion—our communion or a share of one to all and of all to one (Mallarmé). But also the presence—always instantly swallowed up—of the book. John must swallow a little book. I took the little book and swallowed it; in my mouth it had the sweetness of honey, but when I had eaten it, it filled my guts with bitterness.

What communicates, what is taken in communion is nothing, is not nothing, nothing but bitterness, but a call; another communism, in the future but not the close of history, a communism of exodus and repetition, would mean nothing (but, as Blanchot says, *in addition to* what they mean, what do words want: relations of exchange, thus of

production?), but this communism would write the deliverance of books, in books. Vain so long as it is bookish (it's Montaigne who made up the word)—and how could it not be, starting right here?—, but no doubt also bookish so long as it is vain, so long as writing, still and once again, is not openly at risk in it.

I repeat: The reasons for writing a book can be reduced to the desire to modify the relations existing between a man and his fellows. These relations are judged unacceptable and are perceived as a dreadful misery (Bataille).

Far calls. Coming, far. End here. Us then (Joyce).

(April 1977)

II. REASONS TO READ

It is becoming urgent to stop commenting on Bataille (even though the commentary on him is still quite sparse). We ought to know it, Blanchot hinted at it, appropriately, refusing to comment on this rejection of commentary. Therefore I have no intention of commenting on him in Blanchot's stead. (But Blanchot so often does nothing but "comment on" Bataille: thinking with him, conversing with him to infinity. Thus he writes: "How had he ended up wishing for the interruption of discourse? And not the legitimate pause which permits the give-and-take of conversations . . . What he had wanted was something quite different, to stop it cold, to break into the circle. And at once it had happened: the heart ceasing to beat, the eternal talking drive stopping.")⁴

Moreover there can be no question of "refusing." There has never been and will never be anything simply reprehensible or simply false in commenting on what, by venturing into writing, has already presented itself for commentary, and in reality has already begun to comment on itself.

But such is the ambiguity of Bataille: he has become involved in discourse, and in writing, deeply enough to expose himself to the full necessity of commentary. And thus to its servility. He has advanced his thought far enough for its seriousness to deprive him of the divine capricious evanescent sovereignty which was however his sole "object." (That limit, heart-rending and sorrowful, joyous and relieved,

4. Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 26.

that deliverance from thought, which does not abdicate—quite the contrary—but which no longer has reason to be, or has not yet reason to be. That freedom predating all thought, which there can never be any question of making into either object or subject.)

But when he eluded the gesture, the proposition and the position of a thinker, a philosopher, a writer (and he ceaselessly eludes, not finishing his texts, still less the “sum” or the “system” of his thought, leaving even his sentences unfinished on occasion, or else relentlessly withdrawing by an eccentric, lopsided syntax what the progression of a line of thought was laying down as a logic or a *topic*)—when he stole away, he also stole from us access to what he was communicating to us.

“Ambiguity”: is that the word? Perhaps, if it’s a matter of acting, of a simulacrum—which we mustn’t hesitate to impute to him *also*. Bataille always *played* at being unable to finish, put on an act of excess, stretching writing to its bursting point, the excess of what makes writing: that is to say what simultaneously inscribes and ex-scribes it. It was a game and an act, for he wrote ceaselessly, writing everywhere, always, the exhaustion of his writing. He both said and wrote this game, this act. He wrote that he was guilty of talking about the glass of alcohol instead of drinking it and getting drunk. Drunk on words and pages to express and at the same time drown the immense futile guilt of the game. Saving himself that way, too, as it were, and always oversure of finding salvation in the game itself. Thus not detaching himself from too visibly a Christian theater of confession, absolution and relapse into sin, and of dependence on forgiveness all over again. (Christianity as theater: the repair of the irreparable. Bataille himself knew how much theater there was in sacrifice. But the question is not of opposing to this the abyss of a “purely irreparable.” What must rid us of the spirit of catastrophe which dominates us is a higher freedom, more terrible perhaps but in quite another way.

That theater too is ours: a sacrifice of writing by writing, which writing redeems. There is no doubt that some have hammed it up compared with what were, in spite of everything, Bataille’s restraint and sobriety. No doubt that too much has been made of the writer’s nails being torn out, of suffocation in underground vaults of literature and philosophy. Unless sequences of thought have been hastily reconstructed, gaps filled in with ideas. (A commentary in both cases.) This does not urge on any critic commentaries on Bataille (and if that were necessarily the case I would be implicated). There are powerful

and important commentaries, without which we could not even pose the question of his commentary.

But after all Bataille wrote "I want to arouse the greatest mistrust. I only speak of lived experiences; I do not confine myself to imaginary actions" (6, 261).⁵

How can we not be affected by this mistrust? How can we simply go on with reading, then close the book, or make notes in its margins? If I underline just this passage and quote it as I have just done, I betray it already, I reduce it to a "state of intellection" (as Bataille says elsewhere). Yet it had already been reduced to something in which intellection certainly doesn't exhaust everything, but nonetheless oversees the stage. Elsewhere still Bataille writes that writing is the "mask" of a cry and a non-knowledge. What then does that writing do which writes that very thing? How could it not mask what at one moment it unveils? And how could it not mask, in the end, the very mask which it says it is and which it says it is applying to a "screaming silence"? The blow cannot be parried, the mechanism or machination of discourse is implacable. Far from rising to deafen us, the cry (or the silence) has been spirited away by being named or indicated, under a mask which is all the harder to locate for having been supposedly shown, named in its turn, in order to be denounced.

Ambiguity is therefore inevitable, insurmountable. It is nothing other than the ambiguity of *meaning* itself. Meaning should signify, but what makes meaning, or the meaning of meaning as it were, is in truth nothing other than "this empty freedom, this infinite transparency of what finally doesn't have the burden of having a meaning" (6, 76). Bataille never ceased to fight this burden, he wrote only to free himself from it—to reach liberty, to let it reach him—, but writing, speaking, he could only make himself once again responsible for some signification. "Dedicating oneself out of principle to this silence, philosophizing, speaking, is always a murky business: the sliding without which the exercise could not be then becomes the movement of thought itself" (11, 286). The ambiguity lies in emptying experience of thought, through thought; this is philosophy, this is literature. And yet emptied experience is not stupidity—even if there is stupor in it.

Any commentary on Bataille involves him in a direction of mean-

5. All references to Bataille are taken from the *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, Gallimard, 1970), and will appear in the text as vol., p.

ing, toward something univocal. Therefore Bataille himself, when he wanted to write *on* the thought with which he had most in common, wrote *Sur Nietzsche* in a move essentially intent on *not commenting on* Nietzsche, on not writing *on* him. "Nietzsche wrote with his blood—whoever criticizes him or, better, puts him to the text can do it only if he himself is bleeding." "Let no one doubt it for an instant: you can't understand a word of Nietzsche's work before experiencing that dazzling dissolution in its totality" (6, 15, 22).

But the same goes for all commentary, of whatever author, of whatever text it may be. In a writer's text, and also in a commentator's text (which every writer's text is in its turn) what matters, what thinks (at the very limit of thought if necessary) is what does not lend itself wholly to a univocal meaning but which stumbles under the load of meaning and throws it off balance. Bataille never stops exposing this. Alongside all the themes he deals with, through all the questions he debates, "Bataille" is *nothing but* a protest against the signification of his own discourse. If he is to be read, if reading rebels straight away against the commentary which it is, and against the understanding which it ought to be, we have to read in every line the work or the play of writing *against* meaning.

This has nothing to do with nonsense, nor with the absurd, nor with a mystical, philosophical, or poetic esotericism. Paradoxically, it's straight from the sentence—straight from the words and syntax, a way, often clumsy or lopsided, removed in any case as much as possible from the operation of a "style" ("in the acoustico-decorative sense of the term" as Borgès says) of weighing on meaning itself, given and recognizable, a way of interfering with or impeding the communication of this meaning, not first to us, but to this meaning itself. And reading must remain in its turn unwieldy, awkward and, without ceasing to decode, beyond decoding. This reading remains caught in the strange materiality of language, it conforms with the singular communication which is carried on not only by meaning but by language itself or rather, which is nothing more than the communication of language with itself without making out meaning, in a suspension of meaning, fragile, repeated. Real reading goes forward unknowing, it always opens a book like an unjustifiable cut in the supposed *continuum* of meaning. It must go astray at this break.

This reading—which is first of all reading itself, all reading, inevitably given over to the sudden, flashing, sliding movement of a writing which precedes it and which it will rejoin only by reinscribing it

elsewhere and otherwise, in ex-scribing it outside itself—this reading still does not comment (this is a *beginning* reading, an *incipit* which is always begun again), it is neither equal to nor in a position for interpreting, for causing meaning. It is rather a surrender to that abandon to language where the writer has exposed himself. “There is no pure and simple communication; what is communicated has a direction [*sens*] and a color” (2, 315), (and *sens* here means movement, advance). It does not know where it is going, and doesn’t have to. No other reading is possible without it, and every “reading” (in the sense of commentary, exegesis, interpretation) must come back to it.

But in this way Bataille and his reader are already displaced with respect to ambiguity. There is not on the one hand the ambiguity of meaning—of all possible meanings, the ambiguity of univocal meanings multiplied by all “acts of intellection”—and on the other hand the “ambiguity” of the meaning which unburdens itself of all possible meaning. Something quite different is finally in question, which Bataille knew: it is perhaps the very thing that he “knew” above all, “*knowing nothing.*” It’s not a question of that necessary, ridiculous machination of meaning which puts itself forward as it withdraws, or which puts on a mask as it signifies itself. To leave it at that condemns writing without appeal (certainly this condemnation haunted Bataille) and also condemns to being ridiculous or intolerable the wish to affirm a writing removed from intellection and identical to life (“I have always put into my writings my whole life and my whole self, I know nothing about what might be purely intellectual problems” [6, 261]). For this is still, always, a discourse full of meaning and which steals the “life” of which it speaks.

There is something else, and without the “knowledge” of it Bataille would not have written anymore than anyone else: in truth “ambiguity” does not exist, or it exists only as long as thought considers meaning. But there is no more ambiguity once it is clear (and it necessarily is before any consideration of meaning) that writing *ex-scribes* meaning just as much as it inscribes significations. It ex-scribes meaning, that is it shows that what it’s about, the thing itself, Bataille’s “life” or “cry,” and finally the existence of everything which is “in question” in the text (including most singularly writing’s own existence) that all these are outside the text, take place outside writing.

At the same time this “outside” is not that of a referent to which signification would refer (thus the “real” life of Bataille, signified by

the words "my life") the referent does not present itself as such except by signification. But this "outside"—entirely exscribed into the text—is the infinite retreat of meaning by which each existence exists. Not the brute datum, material, concrete, reputed to be outside meaning and which meaning represents but the "empty freedom" through which the living being comes to presence—and absence. This freedom is not empty in the sense of being vain. No doubt it is not directed toward a project, a meaning or a work. But it uses the work of meaning to expose, to lay bare the unusable, unexploitable, unintelligible and unfoundable *being* of being-in-the-world. *That there is being*, or some being or even beings, and in particular that there is *us*, our community (of writing-reading): that is what instigates all possible meanings, that is what is the very place of meaning, but which has no meaning.

Writing, and reading, is to be exposed, to expose oneself to this not-having (to this not-knowing) and thus to "exscription." The exscribed is exscribed from the first word, not as an "unsayable" or as an "uninscribable" but on the contrary as that opening into itself of writing to itself, to its own inscription as the infinite discharge of meaning—in all the senses one should give the expression. Writing, reading, I exscribe the thing itself, "existence," the "real"—which *is* only exscribed and whose *being* alone is what's at stake in inscription. In inscribing significations, we exscribe the presence of what withdraws from all signification, being itself (life, passion, substance. . .).

The being of existence can be presented: it presents itself when exscribed. Bataille's cry is neither masked nor stifled; it makes itself heard as *the cry that is not heard*. In writing the real does not represent itself, it presents the unheard-of-violence and restraint, the surprise and freedom of being in exscription where writing at every moment discharges itself, unburdens itself, empties itself, of itself.

But "exscribed" is not a word in the language nor can one fabricate it as I do here without being mangled by one's own barbarism. The word "exscribed" exscribes nothing and writes nothing, it makes clumsy gestures to indicate what must write itself alone, straight out of the always uncertain thought of language. "The nudity of the word 'write' remains," writes Blanchot,⁶ who compares it to the nudity of Madame Edwarda.

There remains Bataille's nakedness, his naked writing, exposing

6. Blanchot, *Après-coup* (Paris, Minuit, 1983), 91.

the nakedness of all writing. Obscure and clear like a skin, like a pleasure, like a fear. But comparisons are not enough. The nakedness of writing *is* the nakedness of existence. Writing is naked because it "exscripts," existence is naked because it is "exscripted."

From one to the other passes the light and violent tension of that suspension of meaning which comprises all "meaning"; that *jouissance* so absolute that it accedes to its own joy only by losing itself in it, by spilling itself into it, and it appears as the absent heart (absence which beats like a heart) of presence. It is the heart of things which is exscripted.

In a sense Bataille must be present to us with that presence which distances signification and which itself would be communication. Not a united body of work made communicable, interpretable ("Collected Works," so precious and necessary, still cause unease; they communicate as complete what was only written in pieces and by chance) but the dawdling, now over, of an exscription of finitude. Released in it are an infinite *jouissance*, a pain and a pleasure so real that touching them (reading exscripted) convinces us at once of the absolute meaning of their nonsignification.

In yet another sense, it is Bataille himself, dead. That is, the exasperation of every moment of reading in the certitude that the man who wrote what is being read existed and the confounding evidence that the meaning of his work and the meaning of his life are the same nakedness, the same denuding of meaning which distances them from each other as well—by the full distance of an in(x)scription.

The dead Bataille and his books offered as his writing leaves them: they're the same thing, the same ban on comment and comprehension (the same ban on killing). It's the implacable and joyous counterblow one must strike against all hermeneutics so that literature (and) existence can once again expose themselves; in the singularity, in the reality, in the freedom of "the common destiny of man" (11, 311).

Speaking of Bataille's death, Blanchot wrote: "the reading of books must open us to the necessity of that disappearance in which they withdraw. Books themselves refer us to an existence."⁷

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Translated by Katherine Lydon

7. Blanchot, *L'Amitié* (Paris, Gallimard, 1973), 327.