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Bataille and the Poverty of Academic Form

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Abstract
This paper argues that the dominant modes of academic address, the conference paper, the journal article, and the monograph, reinforce problematic and exclusionary assumptions concerning what counts as legitimate research, whilst also restricting academic enquiry and impoverishing intellectual life. It makes its case by exploring in some detail the intellectual commitments of one the West's more wayward 20th century thinkers, Georges Bataille. It suggests that Bataille presents not simply a conceptual armoury (and one among many) for critiquing Western logocentrism from within, but offers an example of what a less domesticated, less stylistically narrowed mode of thinking might look like.

Keywords Bataille · Academic writing · Discursive hybridity · The unknowable · Laughter

Academic writing is largely confined to a set of forms, or modes of address, that govern not simply the manner of its presentation, but the style of its thinking. These include the conference paper, the journal article, and the monograph. There is disciplinary variation in each, but academic form remains extraordinarily limited both within and across specialisms. In most fields academic writing is treated as a kind of transmission tool for setting out arguments or presenting findings. Tone is deemed important insofar as it dramatizes restraint. Arguments are seen to be more convincing if they are deprived of their heat. Originality is not signalled by the novelty of a work, which is to say, the extent to which it achieves something which cannot easily be categorised or subsumed by existing thinking. Rather, originality is established by degrees, by small innovations, where newness is permitted only when surrounded by the familiar. Academic writing aims above all for a blandness of expression which seemingly evinces virtues of rigor and sobriety in one's thinking. It is more often than not presumed to be stylistically empty for that reason.

There are ample grounds for doubting academic form and contesting its ubiquity. Take, for instance, Theodor Adorno's case against "the injunction to praise intellectual honesty" which, he claims, "usually amounts to sabotage of thought" (2005, 86). In academic terms, honesty means, in part, ensuring all steps of an argument are laid out on the page and can be easily followed. This insures against falsehood and mirrors the scientific principle that an argument, like an experiment, should be repeatable in the mind of the reader. For

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Adorno, such a demand “not only invokes the liberal fiction of the universal communicability of each and every thought”, it also functions to harness thinking to the dominant form, that of texts “which anxiously undertake to record every step without omission [and] inevitably succumb to banality”. Against this Adorno suggests a rival system, assaying the value of a thought by “its distance from the continuity of the familiar”, whereupon it is “objectively devalued as this distance is reduced" (86). Academic writing surely falls far short of what Adorno has in mind. With its diligent citational apparatus, it permits unfamiliar ideas only to the extent they are embedded in relatable literatures.

There is a mounting, cross-disciplinary challenge to the ubiquity of academic form, including efforts to decolonise the academy that specifically target its dominant genres and seek to undermine, or exceed them, or at least allow other modes of expression in (see, for instance, Miller 2023; Magnat 2020; Robinson 2020; Trahar, Juntrasook, Burnford, Kotze, and Wildemeersch 2019; Wilson 2008; Conquergood 2002). As Gatt and Lembo (2022) argue, building on the work of Cavarero (2005) among others, it is necessary to contest the “epistemic coloniality” that is legitimated by the persistent logocentrism of Western thinking and writing, particularly as it is embodied by the academy, in which the “the rational, linear, and conceptual aspects of language alone are considered as developing and conveying knowledge” (Gatt and Lembo 2022, 830). What this critique attempts, is to extend what has been called a “politics of form” (Olson and Copland 2016), to a questioning of the very tools, the academic modes of expression, through which that politics is expressed.

The effects are necessarily ironic; recognisable academic form is still used to mount these kinds of argument. It is tempting to embrace the irony, perhaps even through to the conclusion Barthes (2000) once arrived at, and “make sarcasm the condition of truth” (12). And yet, sarcasm and its attendant laughter will not be allowed to perturb an environment ruled by the injunction to intellectual honesty. The critic of academic form is left with two differently fruitless options; either mount a critique that works within the form but remains necessarily ironic (or self-defeating), or abandon academic form entirely. In the first case, the academic is reduced to making an argument about the limits of academic form that is itself a mere gesture, one that points elsewhere, and beyond its own knowing, able only to hint at possibilities it cannot fully describe. In the second case, the academic who adopts another mode of enquiry will only be able to indicate the limits of academic form by the force of example. Here, arguments against academic form can of course be made, but in terms that will not be fully cogent to it or might need some degree of translation. In academic terms, such enquiries remain essentially mute. Strange hybrids of the two are nonetheless conceivable. These would be situated between recognisably academic argument and non-academic form (something I have myself attempted in Allen 2021, 2022).

The current paper is largely of the former, ironic predicament. That is to say, it must gesture elsewhere, and beyond its own knowing. As such, it intends a critique that is complimentary to the work that is being done to decolonise the academy, though it remains within the ambit of Western thought, drawing resource instead from one of its more wayward thinkers, Georges Bataille.[1] It suggests that Bataille presents not simply a conceptual

[1] Perhaps due to Bataille’s waywardness, this paper presents its critique in the context of near silence in relation to Bataille’s work within the anglophone world of philosophy of education and educational theory. There is little to no work on Bataille and education published to date in *Philosophical Inquiry in Education, Educational Theory*, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, and *Research in Education*, and only one paper-length treatment by Hunter (2020) published in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*.

armoury (and one among many) for critiquing Western logocentrism from within, but offers an example of what a less domesticated, less stylistically narrowed mode of thinking might look like.

Border Crossing and Discursive Hybridity

In commentary appended to Bataille's *Louis XXX*, his translator Stuart Kendall (2013) explores what it might mean to be intellectually alive, as a writer. For Bataille, intellectual productivity, or writerly propulsion, comes from an encounter with intense experience. Indeed, Kendall claims that an important shift in Bataille's writing coincided with his temporary exile from Paris in 1942, and the suffering which followed, and that it led to a period of writing involving a degree of hybridisation that was perhaps new, or at least heightened. I will return to this in a moment.

First it is worth noting that Bataille occupies a liminal (if not influential) space in intellectual history and might be best left at its margins. Work that draws inspiration from Bataille perhaps needs to remain itself, and by necessity, on the edges of the academy (such as can be seen with many of the contributions to a recent edited collection, which, as the blurb has it, push discursive hybridity to excess: Connole and Shipley 2021). For its part, this essay should not be misread as an attempt to co-opt Bataille to some kind of exercise in the mechanics of thinking, or to take from Bataille a set of tips that might be applied in a range of different intellectual contexts. Rather, the purpose here is to explore just one example of what being intellectually alive might look like in terms of the traces it leaves (mainly in different forms of writing, but also in rumoured exploits, proclivities, and so on) without suggesting imitation, and without making any kind of recommendation, derivative or otherwise. This essay seeks out a very different model of intellectual activity, endeavours to set out some of its features, and presents the ensemble as an instructive example against which to contrast the dominant mode in which intellectuality is expressed, in today's academy.

Bataille's approach to intellectual enquiry is refreshingly unsettling. He explores ideas with a kind of unflinching curiosity that propels his work or drives it beyond what will be considered acceptable from within the frame of conventional morality. To such difficult subjects Bataille brings a refusal "to impose on everyone [least of all himself], with a sick incomprehension, the exile of a part of themselves" (Bataille 2013, 14). Bataille does not sanitise his writing because he is open to the anguish, the perversity, and the horrors of experience. Anything else would be "obfuscation" if not a lie. To moderate his work, to submit it to order, would subject his work to "the dream of a man" that men soothe themselves with, a dream men use to drive out of their perception thoughts that might otherwise cause them discomfort (14). In this respect, Bataille is an anti-humanist thinker, insofar as he draws attention to the tendency of humanisms to perpetuate a lie—the goodness of humankind—upon a denial of its dependence on evil. Or to put it differently, insofar as humanisms tend to assume that mankind can be redeemed by way of its (educated) reasonableness. Bataille takes aim at that presumption, by suggesting it is undermined in practice. The so-called 'real world' that humanists (which is to say, most educated people) both perceive and situate themselves within, is not called to order by humanist good intentions. Rather, "the underlying principle of the real world is not really reason" at all, "but reason which has come to terms with that arbitrary element born of the violence and puerile instincts of the past" (Bataille 2006, 20). Modern civilized society, a so-called reasonable

society, a society that is thought to be well-ordered, is from this perspective merely a society that has come to terms with its arbitrary basis, its own violences, its own unreason, and so has learned not to see all that, at least not in its ubiquity. The consequences for such a position, the consequences for an author, or a critic of this persuasion who has to write in the context of a reasonable, well-ordered, and educated culture, cannot be underplayed. Submission to dominant expectations concerning how analysis is to present itself in respectable society, is nothing less than submission to a kind of cover up, or a self-restraining duplicity. This, at least, provides one way of reading Bataille's statement: "I couldn't find what I'm looking for in a book, let alone put it there" (2011, 85). To the extent his book, any book, remains recognisable before the reasonable and the civilized *as a book* (with all the assurances of stability that entails), it must surely be suspect.

Kendall writes of Bataille's exile from Paris, and the knock-on effects of unemployment and tuberculosis: "those solitary months…when Bataille was sick, cold, wet, and profoundly alone with the spectre of death…served as a crucible for several key texts and textual strategies in his work" (Kendall 2013, 81). The books which followed "present profoundly heterogeneous, hybrid constructions, including elements of diary and autobiography, poetry, a letter, long quotations from other authors, as well as more recognizably philosophical and theoretical fragments" (83). Bataille also expressed around this time a desire to set his work to music, demonstrating a further possible expansion in form, with his tastes here ranging from liturgical music to the burlesque (Kendall 2013). This might all be placed alongside Bataille's preceding interest in orgiastic and ritualistic practice (which could be considered as another form that thought can take, another mode of thinking), including (the idea of) human sacrifice (Bataille may have volunteered himself for that), quite possibly actual animal sacrifices, coprophagy, and the eating of rancid and vomit-inducing food.[2] Bataille's most notorious experiments surrounded the short-lived journal *Acéphale* which produced only five issues between 1936 and 1939, and was associated with a secret society the activities of which remain shrouded in mystery (see Bataille et al. 2018). There is in Bataille's work a returning attempt to overcome "the separation between life (experience, sensuality, passion) and thought (reason, rationality, order)" (Kennedy 2021, 218), by running both domains into one another. This was not necessarily an easy undertaking; indeed Kendall (2021) claims it caused Bataille some frustration to navigate between his experiences with the group and the objective study of those experiences. Kendall considers the following admission from the preface to *The Accursed Share* to be emblematic of the difficulty this produced: "Certainly, it is dangerous, in extending the frigid research of the sciences, to come to a point where one's object no longer leaves one unaffected, where, on the contrary, it inflames… Should I say that under these conditions I sometimes could only respond to the truth of my book and could not go on writing it?" (Bataille in Kendall 2021, 273–274). Bataille is not alone in seeking to challenge the separation of the intensity of experience and the coldness of reason (Nietzsche clearly anticipates him here). It is an enduring preoccupation, of which Acéphale might be considered "one of the most radical, albeit problematic manifestations" (Kennedy 2021, 218). Arguably, one way in which Bataille (and perhaps also Nietzsche) dealt with the potentially sterile effects of study upon the thing that is to be investigated, was to introduce within the

[2] The suggestion that Bataille engaged in coprophagy, interpreted in part as a practical investigation into (or at least celebration of) the work of the Marquis de Sade, as well as the grounds of an argument for rethinking notions of ecology and environmentalism, is made by Huling (2019).

activity of writing a degree of multiplicity and discordancy that went some way towards mitigating its frigidity.

It is significant, too, that this “multiplication of forms” identified by Kendall, “is apparent both *between* Bataille’s texts and *within* them” (Kendall 2013, 86). This, indeed, is what the slim volume in which Kendall’s essay appears manages to demonstrate, with both *The Little One* and *The Tomb of Louis XXX* displaying many of the elements noted above. These texts (alongside others such as *Inner Experience, Guilty*, and *On Nietzsche*), “are complex textual assemblages, hybrid texts that commingle forms and genres to produce their effects” (86). In *The Tomb of Louis XXX*, Kendall suggests that there is an “intensification of strategies” in the work of assemblage, involving a harsher juxtaposition and a stripping back, where “genres have been reduced to their elemental forms” (89), and are presented in all their mutual friction and incongruity. Here Bataille “writes to shatter the pretense to and vanity of any singular form of or approach to knowledge” (Kendall 2014, xv). Philosophical, scientific, and religious discourses, entail ways of knowing that are at the same time the principles which organise, isolate, and elevate each community. By pursuing deliberate hybridity, Bataille messes with the sectarianism in the modern subdivision of knowledge.

In Kendall’s reading, for Bataille a book, any book (indeed any text, even an academic paper), “is never an autonomous unit, it always appears with and within a more or less visible, complex network of texts and contexts” (2013, 88). To some extent this idea of intertextual dependence is appreciated by academic writing, if not foregrounded, in the pains academics take to duly cite the work of others, and so demonstrate where each paper ‘fits’ within a broader set of debates. Yet for Bataille, the network is much greater than this. Each text is situated within a much larger, ultimately unknowable human assemblage, that “remains forever elusive to individual consciousness” (88). The assemblage includes all possible forms that language might take, which is why it makes sense, if Bataille is to explore (some of) this range, for a range of forms to be represented in his writing.

Simple coverage, or writerly range, is not in itself the object here. Rather, what Bataille is pursuing in his writing, as Kendall interprets, is a “play of discourses and types of knowledge, wherein each type of writing brings with it a range of stylistic tropes and possibilities, as well as referential and epistemological assumptions and limitations” (90). The mutual frictions and prohibitions of these different forms of writing becomes evident to the thinker as they rove between them, as they discover that “what can be said in one form might be horrifying or even explicitly forbidden in another” (90). Academics only experience a mild variety of this border crossing experience, as and when they transgress into a neighbouring field and find themselves called out for their lack of expertise, or training. Arguably, a much broader field of experimentation, involving border crossings into regions where borders are ill-defined, and disciplinarity no longer has any purchase, would sensitise thinkers (academics in particular) to the constraints they more usually write under.

In order to think, then, in Bataille’s more expanded sense, it is necessary to experiment with a diverse range of forms, and in doing so experience both their restraints and affordances. Even poetic writing brings its own limits. To the extent poetry “introduces the strange, it does so by way of the familiar”, writes Bataille. Indeed, he defines the poetic as “the familiar dissolving into the strange”, a process that “never dispossesses us entirely, because the words, the dissolved images, are charged with emotions already experienced, pinned to objects that link them to the known” (Bataille 2014, 11). This suggests that the discursive form adopted is not the only restraint; form interacts with prior experience, limiting perception by the images and emotions it conjures.

Enquiry of a kind that is sensitive to the restraints or the conditioning effects of form, necessitates a type of stylistic and intellectual eclecticism, a suppleness among and between forms. It is a mode of enquiry that would also, in consequence, mean that the writer remains somewhat uncategorizable, or illegible, before others (and perhaps also themselves). Effectively, the writer can no longer have, or allow themselves to fall into, a settled form. Such eclecticism does not preclude the desire for conceptual clarity, however. Or more precisely, Bataille does not himself give up on a wish to attain "clarity of consciousness" in the essays that make up *Literature and Evil*, for instance. But it does allow for an experimental approach to the production of these essays. As Bataille writes, "at first, I could provide no more than an obscure expression of my ideas owing to the turmoil of my mind. Turmoil is fundamental to my entire study; it is the very essence of my book" (Bataille 2006, ix).

This approach to writing, to intellectual enquiry, would fall foul of the impulses of today's academy which still insists on some degree of specialisation and mastery, a directive which entails, above all, a degree of homogeneity within approaches to knowledge. Even when disciplines are eroded, their once proud insularities attacked in favour of interdisciplinary amalgamation, this homogeneity persists, and is perhaps strengthened. It is the condition of assessment. Here Bataille's more eclectic approach to writing could not be further removed from the ultimate demand of performative academia. The university insists that its thinkers make themselves legible before all else, and always before others, as they render their work open to inspection, ranking, and reward. This performative regime would presumably find Bataille's writerly eclecticism wanting, doubly suspect for its lack of seriousness and its lack of commitment to any single form. Its novelties would not be easily assayable because the evaluative orders required for assessment of value would have not yet accreted. Its written outputs would appear valueless, almost blank, before the twin gaze of managerialism and audit.

The academic tendency is to single out individuals (for accolade, for inspection, for promotion, for dismissal), whereas the writerly approach of someone like Bataille operates in the reverse direction, straining towards a kind of self-divestment across texts. One way in which Kendall explains this is to suggest that Bataille's "entire corpus is an assault on the concept of autonomy, whether of individuals, objects, images or texts" (91). This entails, also, a kind of self-assault, or what Kendall calls "a question of betrayal, betrayal of self, betrayal of designation, of nomination" (96). Within the text "the bonds of identity that ground our faith" are, as Kendall (2014, xiv) argues, quite deliberately disturbed.

Of Bataille's *Inner Experience*, completed in the summer of 1942, Kendall writes:

> Bataille tortures his text: he tears it apart. He interrupts his arguments with autobiographical reminiscences and flights of poetic language. He abandons his outlines, leaves things unfinished. He makes a mockery of rhetorical modes of persuasion: combines forms and registers, interjects quotations to the pointof self-effacement, shifts between temporal moments—past and present—and personal and impersonal modes of discourse (Kendall 2014, xiv).

The result is an utterly frustrating book—it is impossible to pinpoint Bataille within it. This would seem to be an earlier if not more avowedly self-sacrificial variation of what Michel Foucault once described as his own determination to write in order to become other than what he was, to write in order to escape an impulse he associates with bureaucrats or the police (today known as Deputy Vice Chancellors, Deans, Directors of Research, Departmental Heads, HR representatives, and so on), which is to pinpoint and label and

designate and measure, and ultimately discipline.[3] Bataille's own evasions are encapsulated well by Maurice Blanchot, who writes of Bataille's

> own infidelity, the necessary mutation which forced him to be unceasingly an other while remaining himself to develop other exigencies which resisted becoming united either because they responded to the changes of history or to experiences, which, not wanting to repeat themselves, had become exhausted (Blanchot 1988, 4).

Insofar as it occurs through the activity of writing, this kind of self-divestment may be considered in part to be a product of experiments in form, and a growing sensitivity by way of those experiments to the affordances of the form, the style, the mode of writing, which facilitate if not produce thought, preferably undisciplined thought, thought that refuses to fall already in the act of thinking to the reign of measurement, the tyranny of an audience, and the expectations of taste.

Writing for No Community

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I move now from a consideration of the benefits of stylistic border-crossing, to a closer treatment of why one particular realm of writing, that of literature, might be worth turning to, and could offer opportunities that academic form disallows.

Bataille claims that literature (which seems, in his definition, to include poetry), holds a unique status among written forms. It provides a domain within which the limiting effects of reason, calculation, and morality, can be transgressed. In his analysis of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Bataille (2006) finds an example of transgression, of travel beyond all morality, sense, and reason, in the figure of Heathcliff. This may come as no surprise. But he finds it too in the childhood that Heathcliff and Catherine share, a childhood that must also be considered Evil, and not only in the sense that all childhoods describe the condition of the "animal-becoming-human" (Hunter 2020, 1190), but in the more specifically heedless childhood Heathcliff and Catherine share on the moors, a particularly intense one, because it was so unpoliced, so open to experience. This claim concerning Evil is worth exploring in a little detail, as it introduces some helpful ambiguity into Bataille's use of the term, where indeed Evil encounters are not necessarily to be avoided. Consideration of this analysis helps explain why Evil (as Bataille figures it), along with a range of other negative forces, are allowed into Bataille's thought, as potentially productive ideas and experiences to work with.

Within the narrative of *Wuthering Heights*, Bataille finds instances of transgressive experience, approaching Evil. He describes this experience as one involving a "divine intoxication which the rational world of calculation cannot bear" (22). Such intoxication produces experiences that are "opposite of Good", Bataille claims, where, in his definition

[3] Here is the quote in full which comes from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: "do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing - with a rather shaky hand - a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again. I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write" (Foucault 1972, 17).

of that term, “Good is based on common interest which entails consideration of the future” (22). This, precisely, is what Heathcliff transgresses, but an earlier version of that transgression is also to be found within the wild childhood of Heathcliff and Catherine on the moors. It is something they must be educated out of as they are brought to maturity, to a way of thinking and acting, that is considerate of the future and of community. Or in the most immediate sense, they must be educated to be mindful of the consequences of actions, and mindful of others. Bataille believes that something important is lost, here, as a result of this rationing of life, this submission to a law of consequences. He claims that it involves a “condemnation of the present moment for the sake of the future”, and that this condemnation is “an aberration”. Indeed, this very condemnation of childhood experience is, Bataille claims, the origin of an adult definition of a certain kind of Evil. “In the education of children preference for the present moment is the common definition of Evil”, writes Bataille (22). In other words, childhood experience, if not children themselves, are Evil insofar as they fail to live within and remain dangerously oblivious to the kind of calculative reason, a consideration of effects, and of others, that Bataille associates with the Good.

> Her life, over by the time she was thirty, was completely sheltered. She was born in 1818 and rarely left the Yorkshire vicarage set in a rugged wasteland where her father, an Irish pastor, gave her an austere education, but little else… Reserved as she was, she appears to have been good, active and devoted, indeed gentleness itself. She lived in a sort of silence which, it seemed, only literature could disrupt (Bataille 2006, 15).

Yet somehow from this upbringing Emily Brontë was able to produce a book that Bataille places alongside the work of Sade in terms of its ability to depict divine infamy, which for Emily Brontë takes form in the abjection of Heathcliff. Bataille pays attention here to the suggestion that this is done by way of a kind of mystical experience, and that this experience drew resource from Emily Brontë’s confinement and not in spite of it. Here he approvingly quotes Jacques Blondel’s study of Emily Brontë (*Emily Brontë. Expérience spirituelle et creation poétique*), in which, as Blondel writes, “Emily Brontë shows herself… capable of emancipating herself from all prejudice of an ethical or social order” (Blondel in Bataille 2006, 23). This amounted to “a sense of total liberation from society and morality”, and was figured as “a desire to break with the world in order to embrace life in all its fullness *and discover in artistic creativity that which is refused by reality*” (Blondel in Bataille 2006, 23, emphasis added). Blondel suggests that this liberation “is necessary to every artist” and that “*it can be felt most intensely by those in whom ethical values are most deeply rooted*” (23, original emphasis). This analysis applies fairly well, Bataille argues, to the atmosphere in which Emily Brontë was brought up, involving protestant severity and extreme moral tension, yet of a kind that is not based upon unreasonable prohibitions, but represents a version of Christianity that exhibits strong “fidelity to Good based on reason” (23). By extension, Bataille claims, “the law violated by Heathcliff—and which Catherine also violates by loving him in spite of herself—is the law of reason”. Or it is at least, “the law of a community founded by Christianity on an alliance between primitive religious taboos, holiness and reason” (23).

What marks out literature above other forms, for Bataille, is that it is “not aimed at an organised community of which it would be the foundation” (25). This claim might appear somewhat extraordinary given the extent to which so-called classic literature functions as a cultural signifier, familiarity with which is taken as a sign of class or at least education. But what Bataille is drawing attention to is a radical potential he finds in literature, which might be pitted against its more typical conservative, socially reproductive function. On

this point, care must be taken to avoid making Bataille sound like a counter-hegemonic thinker, celebrating the potential radicalism of the arts. His position is nothing like that of, say, Chantal Mouffe, who lauds the potential political function of art, seeking as she does to examine "the different ways in which artistic practices can contribute to unsettling the dominant hegemony" (2003, 91). Bataille is not here interested in the potential political radicalism of literature, he is more drawn to its asocial characteristics, which make it potentially irresponsible or dangerous (where these terms should not be read as objections). It is precisely because literature (as Bataille figures it) is not burdened with "the task of regulating social necessity" and has no interest in "establishing the laws of the city" , or showing "the path of the Good", that literature holds the potential to infringe moral laws (Bataille 2006, 25). Which leads Bataille to a rather wonderful formulation: "Only literature could reveal the process of breaking the law…*independently of the necessity to create order*" (25, original emphasis). Literature of this sort is what he then comes to describe as "*authentic* literature" (25, my emphasis), where its authenticity resides in its independence from (or lack of subservience to) performing a social function, with obligations and consequences that it must bear in mind. Probably most authors writing today would find this a tough calling and what Bataille has in mind would only apply to a fringe literature published by small independent presses (such as, for example, Schism Press, publisher of *Acéphale and Autobiographical Philosophy in the 21st Century*), that seemingly have no investment in the social and political obligations that an author, or publisher, might feel to their readership.

The decision to adopt (with qualification) Blondel's suggestion that Emily Brontë was herself moved by mystical experience makes sense to Bataille insofar as he viewsmysticism as a potentially transgressive activity. Nonetheless, Bataille suggests there is no evidence that she actually had mystical experiences, and in making this claim Blondel "probably goes too far" (27). If anything, a reading of Emily Brontë's poems suggests an attitude that was "less calm, more savage. Its violence is not slowly reabsorbed in the gradual experience of an enlightenment", and so it seems to have little to do with "the relatively familiar world described by the great mystics" (28). Still, Bataille finds mysticism to be a productive concept to work with. He presents mysticism as "an almost asocial aspect of religion" (25). It is a state of perception that is experienced in solitude and brings about "a different truth to that which is concerned with the perception of objects, or indeed of the subject, connected as it is, with the intellectual consequences of perception" (26). It is, moreover, virtually incommunicable, and can only be approached "through poetry and through the description of those conditions by which one arrives at these states" (26). What Bataille is outlining here, in effect, is a mode of thinking, an intense, passionate and mystical experience, that is unshackled from moral categories, from calculative thinking, from the need to make sense to extant communities, and from troubling itself (at least not in the moment that it is pursued) with its intellectual consequences. Each restraint is keenly felt within academia, with intellectual consequences perhaps felt most immediately during the process of writing itself, where any idea, any new thought that is remotely novel, is immediately restrained by the worry, *can this be made to make sense*, or more plainly, *how can I say this (can I say this) without appearing stupid*. These are the restraints to be fled from to a realm of thinking and of creation that is entirely cut off from conventional intellectual production, which involves becoming lost in some other thing. And here Bataille immediately anticipates and then refuses to answer the obvious question. "What the 'other thing' represents is of no importance… So unlimited is it that it is not even a thing: it is *nothing*" (26).

Returning to his earlier treatment of the transgressive nature of Catherine and Heathcliff's childhood, Bataille is keen to point out that the mystical experience he subsequently

describes "is as far from the spontaneity of childhood as it is from the accidental condition of passion" (27). It would be a mistake, then, to idealise the 'Evil' potential of children as actors somehow heedless of the future and of the consequences of their actions, as if that were somehow inherent to childhood, when the experience Bataille has in mind is clearly something that one has to work at. And yet, for all that, "contemplation liberated from discursive reflection has the simplicity of a child's laugh" (28).

Laughing After All

.

> Knowledge demands a certain stability of things known. In any case, the domain of the known is, in one sense at least, a stable domain, where one recognises oneself, where one recovers oneself, whereas in the unknown there isn't necessarily any movement, things can even be quite immobile… (Bataille 2001, 133).

Few academic impulses feel more inimical to encountering the unknown than the drive to publish, to set things down and make things known. The unknown is by definition beyond grasp, cannot be reduced to intelligibility, and is easily ignored by systematic thinking. Academic researchers will find nothing unforeseen if they keep on searching with similar methods. If the academy is to risk opening itself to forces that may threaten its habits of thought, it might be necessary to look for different texts and listen to different sounds that are entirely unlike the voice of an academic holding forth at a conference or in a meeting.[4] Of these possible other sounds, the sound of laughter is tempting to end with as it carries the potential of an eruption which, if only momentarily, over-rides the seriousness of academic form.[5]

In a lecture from 1953, 'Nonknowledge, Laugher, and Tears', Bataille presents his case for laughter, arguing that "one of the most remarkable aspects of the domain of the unforeseeable unknown is given in the laughable" (Bataille 2001, 133). He claims that the unknown is encountered in "this effect of intimate overturning, of suffocating surprise, that we call laughter" (133). This element of suffocation or at least pain inherent to severe forms of laughter is worth pondering over. The momentary threat of death-by-suffocating-mirth is perhaps what places laughter so close to what Bataille elsewhere describes as "the basis of true literary emotion", wherein death, or the prospect of annihilation, "introduces that break without which nothing reaches the state of ecstasy" which he aims for in mystical experience (Bataille 2006, 26). This state of ecstasy might include experiences of the ultimate futility of all human constructs, including reason, before the unknowable absolute. Much earlier, in 1939, Bataille describes what he calls "Joy in the Face of Death" as "the ironic and impassioned sensation that there is a fundamental absurdity in human affairs" (Bataille 2018, 438). It is a sensation that sweeps everything away before the disconcerted

[4] Take, for instance, Daniella Cascella's "Voice from a Faintspeaker… deceptively luring the readers into an illusion of clarity, which shall be shattered in its reverberations" (2022, 15), or Emile Bojesen's experiments in sound composition which are "incompatible with dominant conceptions of and approaches to education and the assumption that it must produce knowledge" (2022, 610).

[5] Although Bataille's ideas are taken in a somewhat different direction to what I attempt below, it is worth noting that Bataille's thought has been discussed in the philosophy of education as it relates to the question of laughter. For more on this topic see the incorporation of Bataille as part of a larger argument about communal laughter as a potential educational event in Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein (2011).

mind, all assurances and certainly all trivial matters ("the little diversions that order our everyday stupidity", 440) roundly disappear before its churning effects, leaving only a set of "energetic presences, altogether mobile, violent and inexorable" (439). In a manner that might seem curious then, death serves as the "ultimate emblem" of Bataille's affirmation of life, since it is considered "as the only element in modern life capable of resisting the dogmas of commodification, individualisation and coercion" (Kennedy 2021, 223). These are reflective of modernity's three institutions that Bataille sets out to attack for enslaving us: the institution of science which enslaves to dead thought (prioritising reason over experience), fascism which enslaves to authority (and to a repurposed past), and bourgeois capitalism which enslaves to profit (Kennedy 2021).[6] A version of each institution (science, authoritarianism, profit) is arguably well-embedded, if not prospering in today's academia (McCann et al. 2020).

The 1953 lecture is notable for suggesting that laughter is the basic experience from which Bataille's philosophy departs: "insofar as I am doing philosophical work, my philosophy is a philosophy of laughter. It is a philosophy founded on the experience of laughter" (Bataille 2001, 138). The lecture begins with a very brief and summary treatment of attempts to explain laughter, suggesting they are all wrong or incomplete, and dryly commenting that only one theory remains (his own) and is essential to them all, namely, the theory which accounts for their failure. From this Bataille posits that what he calls "the laughable" (or the phenomenon of laughter) is unknowable (135), which is why there can be no theory that accounts for it except one which states exactly that. He then takes this a little further and suggests that the laughable might actually "be the *unknowable*" (135, original emphasis), or might constitute one way in which the unknowable is experienced. Laughter is prompted, Bataille suggests, when we "pass very abruptly, all of a sudden, from a world in which each thing is well qualified, in which each thing is given its stability, generally in a stable order, to a world in which our assurance is suddenly overthrown, in which we perceive that this assurance is deceptive" (135). Laughter occurs when "something unexpected is produced, something contrary, something in contradiction to the knowledge that we have" (144). Or, as Bataille phrases it a little differently again, drawing attention now to the transitory nature of laughter:

> someone who laughs…does not abandon his science, but he refuses to accept it for a while, a limited time, he lets himself pass beyond it through the movement of laughter, so that what he knows is destroyed, but in his depths he preserves the conviction that, just the same, it isn't destroyed (144).

One might say, then, that for Bataille laughter "never becomes a final negation" (Bolin 2020, 1431), but is reinvested in living as a stimulating, enlivening encounter with that which cannot be controlled. Elsewhere, Bataille is clearer in associating laughter with thought. As Bataille (2001) puts it in 'Method of Meditation', "to *laugh* is to think". In laughing the person meditating opens "the depth of worlds" which can have no meaning in

[6] And as Kennedy (2021) argues: "In Bataille's Acéphalic symbolism, all three come to be associated with the head, seen variously as reason, authority, or calculation, which therefore must be passionately rejected…" (228) – hence the headless figures drawn by André Masson, one of these providing the cover for the first issue of *Acéphale*. Decades later Masson clarified that the headless figure is "a *self*-sacrificing man. He is not sacrificed; he sacrifices *himself*" (Thévenin and Masson 2016, n.p.). This seems a crucial point, indicating the extent to which the three institutions identified above need to be escaped through a self-denying, self-sacrificial process. They cannot be done away with without a significant alteration to those who have been formed as their subjects.

themselves (they are beyond knowledge). But their lack of meaning, is what enables a process which can “bring other objects of thought into contact with those depths” (90). Thinking is taken into a highly indeterminate realm, where thought ultimately must stop (die, or be silenced) if it rests there long enough. Laughter is what happens around the operation, in the surround of this silencing, in which thought ruptures “those bonds that subordinated it” (91). Laughter occurs as thought confronts the limits of human understanding and responds with gross and discordant mirth. This is the moment in which it becomes apparent that the world and “the being that we are, is out of reach” (135) and that all we have been equipped with so far, are poor and distracting substitutes. There is undoubtedly something tragic about this experience, although it also testifies to the existence of a realm that is beyond the reach of (and so ungovernable by) the three institutions identified above as dominant within academia, those of science, authoritarianism, and profit. Still, the joy Bataille associates with laughter “cannot be separated from a tragic feeling” (142). Pursuit of the unknown by way of laughter, and experiences of ecstatic loss and self-divestment, are likely, moreover, to require ongoing effort, to the extent that they are difficult to achieve, and cannot be brought back to more serious contexts without disfigurement.

In the terms of this paper, thinking beyond academic form might entail first giving up on it at intervals, where this process of giving up might well begin with finding it laughable, or risible. This would be rather neat and satisfying, if it conjures a fairly pleasant image of academics passing over and beyond the restraints of their form in moments of eruptive disappointment, of recognition, before the self-imposed limitations of their seriousness and the dubious interregnum of the institution they are constrained to work within. Yet the experience of laughter, for Bataille, lies close to the experience of death. If laughter at the plight of academia is to be of an analogous kind, it must take the form of an utterly shattering realisation of just how much is at stake, globally, institutionally, personally, for those who are prepared to call time on the institution. And as Bataille acknowledges, other responses are just as consonant with moments of unsettling that accompany the overthrow of (self)assurance and the arrival of the unknown, including tears, sensations of anguish, even terror. This raises the question of what might prompt such experiences in academic settings, since these responses cannot easily be delivered by everyday professional life, even despite its traumas (Sievers 2008). For its part, the academic paper is profoundly limited as a mechanism for conjuring doubt and taking thought beyond the limits that have been imposed upon it. Its arguments remain trapped within a system of making things known and assigning each argument its place. This paper makes no recommendations on this front, beyond suggesting that exceeding academic form will require some effort and persistence, and that it may require experiments that produce an experience of limits, experiments that might, in some cases, follow some of the directions of travel indicated above

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