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The death of thought: Reading Bataille in the ruins of a university

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Abstract

This paper takes on and explores the disturbing and perhaps counter-intuitive notion that the university is the place where the intellect goes to die. This idea is explored alongside Georges Bataille's suggestion that the death of thought might actually be a worthy pursuit and only thought which seeks its own limits is worth striving for. The deleterious effects of the university upon thought are nonetheless contrasted to Bataille's own attempts to take thought to the point of its expiration. The key difference between the 'teaching of death' that Bataille has in mind, and the enactment of the death of thinking that the university achieves is this: Bataille seeks, however impossibly, to bring death "into the field of vision". Academic knowledge production, by contrast, with its systematism, its rigor, its proceduralism and its subsumption by work, merely abandons the thinking subject to the inevitable result, which for Bataille, is unthinking servility, a premature, utterly suppressed, and domesticated, death-in-life.

Keywords

Bataille, academia, servility, knowledge, death, death of thought

In 'The Teaching of Death', a short lecture delivered across two days in May 1952, Georges Bataille contrasts physical death, which teaches nothing, to the death of thought, which might still have something to tell of its experience. Bataille is preoccupied with the affordances of the latter in which "a new domain opens to consciousness" (Bataille, 2001: 124). "From the death of thought", writes Bataille, "a new knowledge is possible" (124).

In this essay I will consider the death of thought, as conceptualised by Bataille, in the context of today's academy.[1] In the West, this institution has long been considered to be in

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a state of ruin (Readings, 1997). Or this, at least, is how its severest critics figure it, bringing others to wonder if the university has become something to be finally *crawled out of* (Fleming et al., 2022). There is a sense, indeed, in which today's academy is already enacting the death of thought by way of total administration, if not neo-Stalinist management practices (McCann et al., 2020; Brandist 2017), as well as the many small mechanisms of micro-terror which follow (Ratle et al., 2020).[2] This leads to the well documented fear that thought, or at least critical thought, is at risk of being driven out of the academy (Docherty, 2015), with what remains becoming increasingly anodyne and formulaic (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013). Within its increasingly reductive professional environments—where thought is only encouraged to the extent it maintains a link to the activity of revenue generation (Marginson, 2011)—actively thinking about the consequences of all this ruination has itself been reconfigured "as an incalculable luxury" (Metcalfe, 2019: 43). Instead, thinking is becoming to a degree simulated, where "hollowed out" university campuses do what they can "to appear 'academic' in recognisable ways," whilst characteristically failing to "actually *give place* to intellectual work" (45).

Important as these criticisms may be, they present three problems worth considering, the last of which provides the focus of the current essay. First, such complaints might well over-rate what intellectual work is able to achieve in those bolt holes and breathing spaces which still remain (Webb, 2018). Second, they may risk over-estimating what can be done, even in a moderately restored university, if critical thought is still expected to express itself through traditional writing and thinking practices; the conference presentation, the academic paper, and the monograph, which are designed to mitigate against the eruption of anything untoward or unexpected (Allen, 2023a, 2023b).[3] And thirdly, the fear expressed in such criticisms for the plight of intellectuality in today's academy is often a rear-guard if not conservative action, it seeks *to conserve* rather than radically question (and so risk threatening) a problematic way of life.

Fearing for the intellectual

The fear of the intellectual before the prospect of challenges to, if not the annihilation of a way of life, is a fear that I have sought to critique both satirically and imminently, in the novel, *The Sick List* (Allen, 2021). Somewhat unintentionally, this theme reappears in two other novels, *The Wake and the Manuscript* (Allen, 2022a) and *Plague Theatre* (Allen, 2022b). When interviewed about the latter, I was asked about this:

> …it is notable that *Plague Theatre* deals with the institution of the museum, described as a place where the intellect goes to "die". On the one hand, it is a 'junkyard' for things already 'intellectualised' and on the other, it is an airless space, where the thinking ability of the intellect is diminished. How does one resurrect the intellect, how does one create something living? Outside of literature?

The question prompted a certain clarification of my intentions which are useful, I think, for the purposes of the current essay:

> When I describe those places where the intellect goes to die (the museum in *Plague Theatre,* the university in *The Sick List*), I am not necessarily lamenting that imagined death, or calling for some kind of resurrection. There is an element of parody operating here, where the worries of those who fear for the health of intellectual life are being exaggerated and inverted. This so-called death which I write about is also only imagined for a certain kind of intellection, that sort of serious-minded thinking which uses the word 'intellectual' and its cognates and concerns itself with the problem of their diminishment… (Vichnar et al., 2022)

And so, *The Sick List* begins:

> Each book we produce testifies to the intellectual death of its author, Gordon would say. Not worth reading and hardly read, he said, the intellect crawls into them and dies. It is no accident that books of this sort are placed beyond the grasp of so-called ordinary people. Ordinary people, as Gordon might say, must not discover that the university—the place of thought—is the death of thought (Allen, 2021: 7).

Perhaps, with the benefit of the current reading of Bataille, a little more clarity might be achieved, and the problem parsed out slightly more than it was in the Equus Press interview. I am, of course, hesitant to offer interpretations of *The Sick List,* or *Plague Theatre,* or any other fiction I have written, and do so only with the proviso that these are not intended as keys to the text, as attempts to reveal a hidden meaning or secret hitherto kept concealed. Rather, these reflections constitute secondary thoughts, extensions of those texts in my own thinking practice, extensions which are necessarily betrayals of what those texts might have meant when I was writing them.

So, with this proviso in place, I would like to suggest that the suspicion entertained within the novel, namely, that the university—the place of thought—is the death of thought, is an ambiguous one. This novel parodies fears for the plight of a certain kind of academic in particular, the academic who feels that the university is, or at least should be, the home of the intellectual, but that it is being destroyed by hostile forces (a list of which may include, inter alia, managerialism, profit, consumerism, so-called cancel culture and wokeism, audit, performativity, and instrumentalism). This fear, the idea that the university has become hostile to the intellect, is totalised in the opening pages of the book, so that it becomes self-defeating, and ultimately anti-intellectual in its proscriptions. In other words, the censorious gaze of the embattled university intellectual complaining about everything but themselves, eventually turns back upon its own self, and finds the death of thought everywhere, even in its most sacrosanct practices: the activities of academic thinking, academic speech, and academic writing. The outlook of the book is avowedly anti-intellectual from the outset, then. And yet, and symptomatically, this effect is achieved in the most demonstrably intellectual of anti-intellectual ways.

A version of intellectuality, the belief that academics are (or at least should be) intellectuals, is sustained, perhaps even strengthened, just as the possibility of an intellectual life still being lived out in these places, comes into question. Even when switching from the feared destruction of an institution (as exemplified, for instance, by Marginson, 2011) to the absolute destruction of humanity, the very thought of its extinction can be turned

round in this manner, whereupon the "possibility [that] all philosophy, all logos, and all humanity, and even all life, is today threatened with annihilation" (Lewis, 2017: 267), becomes the occasion for another academic output. This is a symptomatically, laughably, inescapably familiar predicament, which the present paper cannot escape.

This belief in the necessity of intellectual work, a belief that is performed in every of its written outputs, is sustained both in the determinedly intellectual outlook of the book's narrator, but also in the form of the novel itself, which is presented as a monologue, in the form of a single, unbroken paragraph. This unbroken paragraph is the conduit of unbroken thought and a sign of the relentlessness at work within the domain(s) of the academic intellect. But it also becomes the medium of an intellect at war with itself, condemned to produce more of the same. As such, the book demonstrates that it too is a victim of its sickness, where this sickness takes the form of its own internal (and festering) dynamic. The situation it conveys is much worse than is commonly presumed; the university is sick and ailing in the conventional sense that it has become a hotbed of instrumentalism and gameplaying, but the intellectual who might view themselves as a victim of these practices, is also sick. There is something sick, or sick making, built into academic intellectuality itself, or so the book suggests. This novel presents its own reading of the origins of that sickness (a reading that is tied up within its narrative). However, for the purposes of this paper I turn to one of the 20th century's more notorious, counter-academic, and un-recuperable (if not highly influential) French intellectuals, Georges Bataille. I do so in order to explore how his work provides a way into thinking about the paradoxical phenomenon just described.

Working with Bataille, one might say that if there is sickness at the heart of academic intellectuality, this sickness is introduced by the enslavement of academics to at least two governing (and deceptively banal) ideas: first, the idea that a decent university is one that produces authoritative knowledge or knowledge that is sanctioned by systematised disciplinarity or method, and second, the related assumption of the research project, namely, the notion that an academic must have one in order to be a legitimate researcher.

Servility and knowledge production

In relation to authoritative knowledge, Bataille is forthright in his rejection. "I think knowledge enslaves us," he claims, and that "at the base of all knowledge there is a servility, the acceptation of a way of life wherein each moment has meaning only in relation to another or others that will follow it" (Bataille, 2001: 129). Knowledge tends to the assertion of a connectedness between things, or at least, where knowledge can connect one thing to another, it is seen to be doing well.

Perhaps worse still is the idea of knowledge "with no other end than itself" (82), commonly accompanied by ideals of disinterestedness, suspended judgement, and calculative neutrality, all signs of an intellect divorced from the discomforts of experience. Hardly propelled, or not by anything vital or urgent, in Bataille's assessment this kind of intellect is likely to languish, become "emasculated", and concern itself with "minor activities" (82).

This recalls another concern Bataille has with the operation of knowledge, namely, that it constrains all activities, minor or major, by what it sees and declares to be 'real' or possible. "The sphere of known elements wherein our activity inscribes itself is only the product of our intelligence", Bataille writes (85). It would appear that knowledge, activity, and intelligence, are bound to one another here in a set of mutually delimiting relations.

Lastly, is the demand for rigor, the idea that rigor is a basic necessity in the pursuit of knowledge. Bataille describes the process of "putting a book together" as one that involves "attaining a rigor, a mastery contrary to my easiness" (Bataille, 2011: 81). Against this compulsion, which Bataille also evidently suffers, he promotes a "profound laxity" (Bataille, 2001: 79) which arrives only by the abandonment of the above servilities, a laxity of the intellect that might be considered a favourable sign, the outward symptom of "a being going the furthest that it can" (82).

Arguably, these enslavements play out in the very form of academic writing, let alone its content, where academic writing is expected if nothing else to be internally coherent and rigorously presented, or developmentally staged.[4] There is a basic intolerance built into academic form for strange or unexplained jumps, for non sequiturs, and shifts of register. Academic thought is constrained to work within, and sometimes against, all manner of tacit prohibitions which govern its connections—you cannot make that unexpected jump, you cannot make that unusual association, or at least you will do so only if what you do is fully justified, which is to say explained, or returned to the predictable order of things. Any unjustified associations, or unexpected shifts or formulations which remain are (or ought to be) driven out of academic writing at the peer review stage. Academic convention treats such things as if they were nascent forms of the intellect, early versions of ideas that need to be tidied up; these ideas have not yet taken their final form, they have not met the threshold of the publishable. This kind of presumption forms the basis of its disciplinary conceits, those which connect the advancement of understanding to the observance of academic writerly tradition. It is tempting to add to this assessment the rather devious accompanying suggestion, namely, that the utterly banal, overly bureaucratised, or procedurally concerned work-life of today's university—the administrative tasks academics bemoan having been lumbered with—are not all that far removed from the pedantries of academic writing. In each case, assuring the connectedness of things is the paramount concern, and laxity (of intellectual composition, of attention to procedure), is an obvious sign of failure to adhere to given standards.

For his part, Bataille's disciplinary eclecticism (which would never pass through today's blind peer review) was remarkably productive as a mode of enquiry. His suspicion of knowledge, or at least, Bataille's reservation before the servility that settled forms of knowledge production entail, did not mean that Bataille would abandon the effort to understand his situation and the world he found himself constrained to live within. Bataille's work is actually underpinned by a drive to think things through, to explore, investigate and reason, that is perhaps rare, at least in terms of its profligate energy, in the contexts of today's academia. Bataille's pursuit was no mere intellectual pastime, but was, as he puts it in *Eroticism*, a "ceaseless search which carries the spirit, beyond philosophy and science if necessary, *but by way of them*, after every potentiality that can open out before it" (2002: 33, emphasis added).

In this context it is telling to see how André Breton, in his Second Surrealist Manifesto, pillories Bataille at length, arguing at last:

> M. Bataille's misfortune is to reason: admittedly, he reasons like someone who "has a fly on his nose," which allies him more closely with the dead than with the living, but *he does reason* (Breton, 1972: 184).

This is supposedly an insult, yet Bataille seems to recognise his misfortune as an unavoidable fact of his situation. Expressing, in turn, some sympathy for the surrealist interest in so-called primitive man—who was apparently not yet bound to what is 'real', or 'calculable', or 'reasonable'—Bataille (1994) argues that this primitive state cannot however be returned to. Or at least, that state will not well up, or re-emerge, by the lifting of a few restraints. Bataille explicitly recognises that he is confined within what modern 'man' has become, and as such, is forced to exist within his overbearing consciousness.

For Bataille, it is only "through penetrating into our consciousness that we can try to transgress the difficulties of the present world" (1994: 79). "Whether we like it or not," he adds, "we are reduced to conscious analyses of our present position" (79), a situation in which capitalism is ascendent, technicism overpowers thought, and individualism reigns. Bataille is not able to simply turn from these forces and embrace some ungovernable excess, as if ignorance and unreason were easy achievements, as if they simply emerge of their own accord the moment a thinker no longer pays the pursuit of knowledge due respect. Rather, Bataille is drawn to knowledge, and perhaps propels himself towards it with particular force, since for Bataille, "the limit that is knowledge" takes form as a "goal to be crossed" (Bataille, 2014: 15). Bataille's hope, nonetheless, is that consciousness might be pushed to a point of "extreme lucidity", an extremity of wakefulness, "the limit of which is necessarily silence" (1994, 82).

This silence is relatable to what Bataille will later call "the death of thought" (Bataille, 2001: 214). Silence is a characteristic of the realm of what Bataille calls nonknowledge and of sovereign experiences had within that realm. This silence can only be described in the form of a practical joke: "if we talk about it we incriminate the silence that constitutes it. It is always a comedy, a practical joke" (126).[5] This is a joke, a predicament, that Bataille is painfully aware of. "I am in front of you as a babbler, offering all the reasons I would have for keeping my mouth shut" (114). These were Bataille's words as he neared the conclusion of another lecture in which he discusses approaching "nonknowledge in the form of death" (113).

It is worth observing how academics operating as knowledge producers, are also inveterate talkers and writers, prodigiously garrulous in their outputs. They pour out words and these words stand in place of what they seek to know or declare knowledge of. For Bataille all this verbiage (including his own) is problematic insofar as "language troubles everything it touches, it spoils it, it corrupts it, it stains it through a process that is only appropriate for everyday operations, such as planing down a board or ploughing a field" (126). Bataille's claim, here, feels overly blunt, if not simplistic, and it is tempting to suggest it would benefit from further nuancing insofar as language introduces its own uncertainties, its own infirmities (although this might be what Bataille has in mind when

he speaks of spoilage and corruption). But to the extent that academic language tends to treat words as if they were mere transmission tools for reducing down problems (planing a board), or turning over ideas (ploughing a field), this analogy might be worthy after all. Academic writing is not uniquely useless for the work of thinking in Bataille's sense (clearly other uses of language would be problematic too), but academic language is nonetheless uniquely oriented towards the work of corruption in its most systematised variety, and might, as such, be viewed as an acute example of the issue Bataille presents. The problem with the kinds of analytic language that academics are trained in, is that they orient towards the goal of precision, of as much clarity as possible, in a manner that is overbearing, and limits what can be seen. Admittedly, academics also perform humility in their linguistic preferences, and are often tentative in the arguments they do make (this is, in part, how politeness is managed, and how the burden of proof is lessened), but the orientation is still towards accuracy and refinement. Vague or unwieldy formulations are treated as suspect, as symptoms of poor accomplishment, or as problems to overcome, rather than demonstrable (and laudable) evidence that thought might be pushing against its own limits.

For Bataille, language is also a system of concealment that works to soothe over unbearable truths, such as the persistence of violence in all domains, including the territory of the 'civilised'. Civilised speech rests upon the assumption that violence has been excluded from its operations. This creates a pact of sorts, but it is one that perpetuates a lie (Bolin, 2020). The same arguably applies to academic writing, viewed as a form of extended discourse governed by expectations of civility. The apparent calm of civilized speech in general, and the virtue of academic exchange in particular (viewed as necessary to the pursuit of truth, but which, as many academics will know, is only a cover for substantial disagreement, if not mutual enmity), is another self-regarding idea that the civilized seem bound to perpetuate.

Language as the medium of academic exchange is suspect to Bataille in another respect too; it prevents problems from taking form in their true abysmal proportion, by chopping them up. In his conclusion to *Eroticism*, Bataille (2002) writes: "The time comes when we have to take hold of conceptual data as a whole, the ideas upon which our existence hinges in this world" (274). This statement comes toward the end of a fairly long book which has operated by subdividing its object of enquiry and so has functioned by failing to take hold of its problem 'as a whole'. Bataille is not immune to the irony. This language to which he refers was an avoidable necessity, it facilitated his analysis, even if it also persistently haltered it. "This body of thought would clearly not be available to us if language had not made it explicit" (274), he goes on. And then comes a passage worth quoting at length, since it describes Bataille's predicament well, but even more tellingly describes that of academia more generally.

> But if language is to formulate it, this can take place only in successive phases worked out in the dimension of time. We can never hope to attain a global view in one single supreme instant; language chops it into its component parts and connects them up into a coherent explanation. The analytic presentation makes it impossible for the successive stages to coalesce… language scatters the totality of all that touches us most closely even while it

> arranges it in order. Through language we can never grasp what matters to us, for it eludes us in the form of interdependent propositions, and no central whole to which each of these can be referred ever appears… (274)

"Most … are indifferent to this problem," Bataille adds (274), an assessment that remains both cutting and germane.

This recalls another pointed remark which draws out a little further the self-enclosing effects of bringing the intelligence to bear on life's problems, a process that separates those problems out and thereby removes them from the convulsions that made them appear: "The development of intelligence leads to a drying up of life that, in return, has shrunken intelligence" (2014: 15), Bataille writes. The double move involved here is significant. It suggests a process that worsens with time, with the diminishment of life by the development of intelligence reducing the vital resources that the intelligence benefits from, indeed requires, if it is to remain animated.

What Bataille does not say, though it seems to apply, is that if knowledge enslaves, if at the base of all knowledge there is a certain servility, then within that knowledge, and the thinking it permits, there is already a trace of death. Similarly, if academic verbiage—spread across its copious journals—functions as a systematic evasion of some of the most important and most intractable problems, it might be read, in its diligently monumentalised activity of problem-chopping, as the memorialisation of dead and dying intellect.

The key difference between the 'teaching of death' that Bataille has in mind, and the enactment of the death of thinking that the university achieves is nonetheless this: Bataille seeks, however impossibly, to bring death "into the field of vision" (2001: 122). Academic knowledge production, by contrast, with its systematism, its rigor, its proceduralism and its subsumption by work, merely abandons the thinking subject to the inevitable result, which for Bataille, is unthinking servility, a premature cessation, an utterly suppressed, and domesticated, death-in-life.

On (not) having a project

On the question of a project, Bataille declares his "opposition" bluntly in the book *Inner Experience* (Bataille, 2014: 13). Indeed, he claims that the book is formed around its opposition to the idea that it must submit to a project in order for it to be written. As with the impulse to produce knowledge, the draw of a project is not easily evaded. It risks taking hold of Bataille's introduction to the book, where Bataille explains what the book is about, and yet, "having written a detailed outline of this introduction, I cannot hold myself to it" (13). In other words, there is an element of self-betrayal which is deliberately written into Bataille's writerly practice. His writing is designed to undermine itself, or at least, to prevent a book taking form around an idea that becomes its internal logic, or principle of homogeneity. Bataille is of course aware that this might itself become a project, and so adds, "I don't in any way oppose project with a negative mood (a sickly spinelessness), but the spirit of decision" (13).

Projects are typically imports. They import external frameworks (of value, of knowledge, of intent) which condition how they are able to unfold and where they are able

to travel. Hence Bataille refuses to ground his work in what he calls "a dogma"—by which he means "a moral attitude" (taken, one presumes, to include any evaluative system or order of discourse, religious or secular). He also refuses to place it within the orbit of "a science" (or academic discipline)—by which is meant, "knowledge cannot be either its goal or its origin" (even if knowledge remains an enduring interest, a thing he must pass through). And, lastly, he argues that it "cannot have any other concern or goal than itself" (13). Otherwise put, it refuses to orient itself by reference to an external set of drivers, but plays out under its own propulsion. In a sense, Bataille's writing, and his investigation of experience, becomes its own authority, it sanctions itself, although, and this is crucial, it is an authority that also "expiates itself" (14). That is to say, it makes amends for its coalescences. There is the persistent danger, in other words, of coalescing around and becoming a project, and so a need to introduce an element into once's thought which persistently troubles that tendency. In *Eroticism*, Bataille describes the problem as that of our having fallen into existence as discontinuous beings, forever unable, for as long as we live, to overcome the unbridgeable gulf that separates one being from another. To confront this separation is to approach an experience of extreme self-divestment. This will involve a wrench, a moment of violence, or an experience of violation, "which jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being" (2002: 16). If Bataille's endeavour produces its own authority, it is of a curious kind that annihilates each project as it takes form and approaches individuality as a thing to be "snuffed out" (16).

Negativity does still have a place in Bataille's thought, then, but only as an affirmative decision to destroy or negate, an avowed decisiveness rather than a reactive, or rear-guard manoeuvre. This is why Bataille returns to the amok, in 'The Teaching of Death', a word which describes a raging embrace of death, an insanely negative decision to murder others and die oneself, which also, at the same time "has the merit of attracting the attention *of others* to death" (Bataille, 2014: 119). Bataille turns here again to "the custom of amok" he finds in Malaysia, which recognises as a discrete spiritual affliction the "sudden fury that overcomes an individual armed with a dagger who rushes headlong into the crowd and kills until he is killed himself". The amok is, as Bataille earlier observes in discussion of Breton's own definition of surrealism, "the simplest surrealist act" (Bataille, 1994: 74).[6] Bataille's own preferences lie elsewhere. His thought orients at times toward the comparatively peaceful activities of what he calls inner or mystical experience, which involves passing beyond what is known to a place where thought itself must die. For this to occur, a high state of detachment must be achieved, and this is only possible if the subject is left undisturbed in their anguish. In relation to the concern with having project, which Bataille finds at the root of at least modern 'man', it could be argued again that what he is now calling mystical experience risks becoming another such project. It might become a guiding commitment, an end, that subordinates thought to its pursuit. But this, precisely, is where the importance of mystical experience lies. If it is a project, it is an impossible one, and its impossibility grows the more it is pursued: "Mystical experience is pursued to the extent that it becomes impossible," Bataille claims, "and it is always limited by the fact that the more it is realized, the more impossible it becomes" (1994: 90). The

challenge is to sustain an attitude, a way of proceeding, which is "contrary to myself being a project" (2014: 13).

The death of thought

In 'The Teaching of Death', Bataille argues that "one must…make a resolution" to travel beyond philosophy and science (which are governed by their determination to grasp hold of, apprehend, immobilise, and hence will only perceive what can be grasped and stilled), and see the challenge of thinking in the expanded sense as one of "pushing things to the end, of not holding on to the first subterfuge that comes along" (2001: 121). The problem with science is that it only "envisions subordinated things—only things subordinated in time to their results" (125). Whereas the problem with philosophy, Bataille suggests, is more solipsistic in kind. Philosophy always presumes its own necessity, and before that, its own possibility ("philosophy…assumes at least that philosophy is possible", 121). Something similar might be said of intellectuality more broadly configured (taken here in the form of its academic presumption, the idea that intellectuality is the mission and defining characteristic of academic life). The problem with intellectuality is that it always presumes its own indispensability, and in its academic context, assumes that in a healthy university (that is to say, in a university that has not yet entirely yielded to the reductive effects of managerialism and performativity), intellectuality will exist and thrive and can take on 'life's big questions' and do them justice. Success in this context is tied to the idea of securing an environment in which knowledge can be produced. A healthy intellectual environment is presumed to be one where a certain degree of stability endures, and this idea of stability is inevitably connected to the comforts it provides its academics. By contrast, Bataille has in mind to pursue a "rupturing of individual subjectivity, exiting from the sad, myopic fetters of the isolated ego" (Taylor, 2020: 4). The conditions which are taken to signify academic health—stability, comfort, repose—are, for Bataille, signs of enslavement, or at least retreat, against which Bataille connects the activity of thinking otherwise, and the creation of new knowledge, to the production of discomfort.

Bataille is interested in the point at which thought 'founders', a word that might be taken to mean, the point at which thought breaks or fails. Yet Bataille also plays on the seafaring metaphor of a ship that fills with water and sinks—perhaps broken or cast over a concealed obstacle, a hidden rock, or a sandbank, or alternatively inundated by a wild sea. In the case of what Bataille calls "simple physical death", thought founders, it sinks out of sight and fails to communicate or leave any residue of the experience. When it comes to the death of thought, however, which may be fleeting and can be survived by the thinking subject, Bataille suggests that "the thought that founders accomplishes its shipwreck". It does so in the sense that the wreckage persists in memory, in the traces of an experience that can be given over to the activity of reflection. A trace experience of the death of thought, of its foundering, persists "where the consciousness of foundering persists" (Bataille, 2001: 124).

Bataille declares it "completely evident that the first [simple physical death] teaches nothing, whereas, in the second, a possibility of consequences subsists" (124). The thinker who returns from this abyss, or void state, which Bataille likens to a state of ecstasy, will

have seen, he claims, how "a new domain opens to consciousness from the death of thought… from nonknowledge a new knowledge is possible" (124). This co-option of the experience of a realm of nonknowledge to the production of further knowledge about that experience, is itself part of the trickery of knowledge production and is always a betrayal of the experience. It is for this reason that the pursuit of the death of thought "always fails… It is in fact only an *impotent movement*" (125); the death of thought becomes impotent to the extent that it is remembered. The experience of the death of thought becomes part of the property of the thinker who, in the end, takes it as "an appropriated thing in order to make it the object of teaching." This manoeuvre "is inevitable" (125), Bataille suggests, and is exactly what he has himself enacted by delivering his lecture on 'The Teaching of Death'. What nonetheless marks Bataille off from most of what goes by the name of thinking in the academy, is that Bataille is painfully aware that all thinking is an appropriative act, and so all thinking, even attempts to think otherwise, to think the impossible, will betray itself in the act of making those experiences known. It is tempting to suggest that the situation Bataille finds himself in would be laughable if it were not so serious. Yet Bataille would perhaps turn this around, and suggest that it would be serious, if it were not so laughable. Laughter is, indeed, the sound Bataille (2001) imagines himself making before the profound silence which announces the death of thought.

Most of what counts as knowledge production of an academic kind has no time for the incorporation of mystical or ecstatic experiences of oblivion, and so what Bataille has in mind remains at its margins. Bataille's beguilingly simple condition, "mystical experience requires only that the subject shall not be disturbed" [in the activity of becoming disturbed] (2002: 23), cannot be met in the frenzied environments of academia where interruption is the norm. As such, academic intellectuality is tied to its servilities of knowledge from first to last. If the university is indeed a place where the intellect goes to die, it does so by coming to existence in a state of servility and finally expiring in that very same state. What Bataille perhaps teaches in his teaching of the death of thought is a realisation of the full extent of that tragedy, a tragedy to be laughed at, and so exceeded.

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Notes

1. This critique is offered 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*.
2. These developments have their mirror in contemporary schools which exhibit a 'slide to authoritarianism', certainly in England (Reay, 2022), where evils have become rooted within the education system, and have become insidious, because they manage to appear so banal (see Clarke and Haines Lyon, 2023; Clarke et al., 2021).
3. Work is clearly being done even within the remit of the academic paper (see, for instance the work of Amy Scott Metcalfe, already cited) to expand its scope. However, the recognisably standardised form of the academic paper remains ascendent, and it does so even when its limits are tested, that is to say, it remains dominant to the extent that the academic paper is presented as the primary site where experiments with academic form are expected to take place.
4. This expectation endures in spite of the subject matter. And so, for instance, contributions to a recent special issue 'Punk and Educational Research' which seek in part to move "away from research about punk, and instead [draw] attention to how punk thinking and knowledge-making practices provide analytical and theoretical tools that can be drawn on in generative ways" (Vass and Heffernan, 2023: 4) are still expressed in the conventional form of the academic paper, which is not very punk. This observation is not intended to the detriment of the authors concerned, rather, it is a systemic irony produced by the dominant form of academic writing, which is extraordinarily difficult to subvert in practice, in the context of a university, for those willing and driven to do so.
5. The same goes for all talk of death: "Of course, talking about death is the most profound *practical joke*", it is "to throw oneself in the water so as not to be wet" (Bataille, 2001: 119).
6. Here Bataille has in mind a notorious line in the Second Surrealist Manifesto of 1930, which describes something similar, or at least relatable: "The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level" (Breton, 1972: 125).

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