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The Presence of Rimbaud in the Poetics of Georges Bataille

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The Presence of Rimbaud in the Poetics of Georges Bataille

Martin Llewellyn

**Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D. in French, King's
College London**

Abstract

The poetics of Georges Bataille are relatively little known in the critical literature on Bataille, in part due to the fact that the relevant texts are somewhat dispersed across his complete works, and partly because Bataille is most often still not thought of as a poet or as a writer who considers poetry seriously or to the same extent as philosophy or fiction. It is also the case that Bataille himself was profoundly ambivalent about poetry and saw poetry as a minor, lesser discourse, one towards which he declared a hatred. I seek to understand this ambivalence and do so by analysing the presence of Rimbaud in his work, a figure with whom Bataille engages critically, often obliquely, but profoundly and throughout the period during which he writes on poetry. This problematic engagement, from the starting point of rejecting poetic history, nonetheless determines the formal, thematic and philosophical problems of Bataille's own poetic project. The approach to Bataille's writings via those of Rimbaud – while also taking account of broader references to literary history and to poets such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé – allows for Bataille's poetry to be considered afresh in a literary context rather than a broadly philosophical one. The methodology I employ works through a series of close readings of Bataille's texts – principally *L'Expérience intérieure*, *L'Impossible* and *L'Erotisme* as well as *La Littérature et le mal* and key articles – to analyse the core concerns of Bataille's poetics and how these concerns are articulated in poems written by Bataille himself. I argue that Bataille's poetics engage with and concretise his other concerns, the notion of sacrifice being crucial among them, and also his philosophical enquiries into experience and subjectivity. I argue that the notion of sacrifice dominates the poetics and is the guiding praxis for many of the poems, yet both sacrifice and subjectivity are problematic at best to communicate through poetry. Sacrifice and subjectivity both present difficulties as well as offering solutions to the conditions of representation in poetry after Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Surrealism and Rimbaud.

Acknowledgments

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Abbreviations

The twelve volumes of Bataille's complete works are abbreviated as 'OC' followed by the volume number. References to Rimbaud's writing are divided between the two volumes *Œuvres* and *Correspondance* indicated in the notes.

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Introduction

The Ghost of Rimbaud: A Poetics of Experience and Sacrifice

De la poésie, je dirai maintenant qu'elle est, je crois, le sacrifice où
les mots sont victimes.¹

Within Georges Bataille's *œuvre* poetry occupies a minor and contentious space yet it is in his writing on poetry and his poems that concepts, such as sacrifice, which are central to his thought, are the most visible. The epigraph from Bataille's book *L'Expérience intérieure*, published in 1943, creates a link between poetry and sacrifice revealing how sacrifice operates in poetic language. It is clear, then, that Bataille's poetics – his thought on poetry and his poems – has sacrifice at its heart. The aim of this thesis is to read Bataille's poetics in a way that provides responses to questions raised by what seems to be a rather strange and opaque statement about poetry. The questions that are raised by the epigraph form the basis of enquiry in this thesis, particularly, what is at stake in Bataille's conceptualisation of poetry as a sacrifice and what is meant by words becoming the victim of a sacrificial act? The implications for poetry and for language determined by sacrifice are considered in reading Bataille's poetics in regard to their formal construction as well as their linguistic nature. To answer the question of the origin of the sacrificial impetus Bataille ascribes to poetry, I look at the precedent of Rimbaud's poetic project although Rimbaud's presence informs Bataille's poetics beyond the concept of sacrifice. Another question I aim to answer is why Bataille grants poetry this violent and sacrificial character and how this connection informs the aim of his poetics to undermine and subvert poetic representation.

According to Bataille, poetry sacrifices words and thus, by extension, their meaning. The act of sacrifice affects every aspect of Bataille's poetics and extends to elements that are key to any discussion of poetic discourse: the nature and purpose of representation and the status and position of the subject. The concept of sacrifice and the practice of poetry are linked by the function of the subject and it is the figure of the subject that affects representation. For sacrifice to work in poetic language it is not only words that are sacrificed but the subject; the subject in Bataille's poetics thus stands for and enables the depiction of sacrifice. Technique, metaphor, theme or personal confession are not concerns in Bataille's poetics – although residual traces of all four may be detected in the poems – rather his poetry discards linguistic effects in favour of communicative affect. The affect the poems seek to communicate is this experience of sacrifice. Sacrifice is the dynamic that pushes beyond representation beyond its conventional, mimetic limits in Bataille's poetry and it is the effects of experience at this limit that form the basis of his poetics. The subject, who is represented

¹ Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes* V (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 156.

through the concept of experience – signalling how philosophical enquiry is reconfigured as poetic affect in Bataille's poetics – becomes the site where the violent experience of sacrifice is inscribed. The subject, then, provides the basis for sacrifice to act and destroy subjectivity in experience and to investigate the form of poetry that sacrifices the meaning of words within it. The representation of sacrifice is Bataille's transferral of a spectacular and contagious effect of shock at the exposure to violence within linguistic systems of representation.

Sacrifice channels the element of the unknown part of experience into subjectivity and thus acts as Bataille's method of pursuing a subversive writing method. In considering Bataille's literary significance beyond his philosophical status, the importance of sacrifice points to the precedent Rimbaud's poetic project provides in regard to Bataille's writing practice and that, furthermore, evolves to influence the form of his own projects. The preoccupation with subjectivity and with representation is evident in Rimbaud's project, a project Bataille interpreted as a sacrifice; Rimbaud's poetry not only sacrifices poetry but also led to the sacrifice of himself as a poet. Thus, according to Bataille, Rimbaud revealed the potential of poetry to communicate the sacrificial gesture and, furthermore, to enact it within its discourse: sacrificing poetry is the only way to grant poetic language a profound and irreducible meaning beyond literature and beyond the biographical influence of the poet.

This thesis, then, reads Bataille's poetics alongside Rimbaud's poems so that Bataille's poetics may be viewed in their literary-historical context. Rimbaud's project provides two major precedents that are critical to any reading of Bataille's poetics: first, Rimbaud's project conceived as a sacrifice and; second, Rimbaud's own critique of poetic discourse and subversion of poetic language is evident in Bataille's ambivalent attitude to poetry. Rimbaud's presence is fundamental to Bataille's poetics because it signals the way in which Bataille's poetics engage with sacrifice yet not as an aspect of the textual, material praxis symptomatic of modernism but to posit the subject beyond language and beyond discourse. Bataille's poetry thus sacrifices its aesthetic, literary aspect to inscribe itself in the disarticulated body of the subject.

To begin the overview of this thesis, I argue that there are three core elements to Bataille's poetics: first, the subject; second, representation and, third, sacrifice. It is the relation of these three features to poetry that I aim to trace in my reading of Bataille's writing. The argument as it threads through the parts and chapters in this thesis is broadly chronological and follows the development of the poetics and their ideological origins and how they are pressured and shaped in Bataille's thinking as it develops in the intellectual friction with Breton and then with Sartre. Bataille's poetics thus become the site where Bataille attempts to think through his idea of the subject by means of experience, a concept that inextricably depends upon and

informs representation, in opposition to Breton's idealist and Sartre's politically engaged subjectivity. Bataille's interpretation of Rimbaud is thus negatively defined by Surrealism's moral and politically motivated interpretation. Rimbaud's project is drawn into the poetics to become aligned with Bataille's thinking that had formed its materialist character in antagonistic rejection of Surrealist idealism. Thus the preoccupations of Rimbaud's project – the subject and subjective representation – both of which interrogate the ideals, morals and aesthetic codes of poetry come to be situated at the heart of Bataille's poetics. The third defining feature of Bataille's poetics – sacrifice – develops initially from his early interest in anthropology. Additionally, it is Rimbaud and the termination of his project that is characterised as a sacrifice which introduces sacrifice to the linguistic, poetic sphere. Sacrifice is the unstable element in the poetics and poetry comes to stand for the sacrificial principle expressed through language. Sacrifice thus illuminates the experiential part of subjective representation yet at once places it beyond the grasp of representational and referential language. The problem that preoccupies Bataille in his poetics is how to overcome this linguistic deficit: the poetics are thus animated and motivated by an attempt to move beyond the problem posited by sacrifice, of how to represent the subject and his experience of being exposed to the unknown in the instant of sacrifice.

Therefore the key steps in the argument as they appear in the thesis develop the three core elements set out above. The significance of poetry in Bataille's thought and writing is established in Part I, primarily how Bataille's poetics joins representation to writing practice. Second, in Part II, the significance of Bataille's poetics as a literary discourse – rather than a philosophical one – derives from his singular reading of Rimbaud's project. This reading introduces the principle of sacrifice into poetry – poetry becomes the sacrifice of words – and which has implications for representation as part of writing practice that is legible at the level of the poem as well as at the level of project. Third, in Part III, the practice of determining representation by and through experience rather than vice versa implicates and determines the formal and structural patterns of the destabilisation of project. Bataille's poetics, ultimately, determine his poetry as a discourse in which form reflects content and, as a discourse, the poems must show this; the ruination of representation is depicted in the disarticulation of the subject. Yet, at the same time, the poems must not be absolutely consumed by the destruction unleashed by sacrificial affectivity because there is still the need to communicate the experience.

In Part I the period in the 1930s that predates Bataille's writing on poetry is explored in order to show how the poetics developed in a situation conditioned by materialist ideology and how – in response to Breton's idealist valorisation of poetry – they attained their paradoxical position of militating against poetry. Chapter 1 establishes the development of Bataille's poetics forged in the context of his antipathy towards Breton's idealist Surrealism

and thus negatively defines Bataille's thought as materialist, a position that determines the ideological tone and linguistic programme of his poetics. In Part II Bataille's poetics are discussed through their establishment and discursive and formal presence in his writings during the 1940s and '50s. The focus in Chapter 2 moves forward chronologically from Bataille's initial engagement with Surrealism to map the position of his poetic writing across his projects – primarily *La Somme athéologique* – in which the poetics are informed by and substantiate the three key concepts in Bataille's thought: *inner experience*, the *impossible* and *eroticism*. Chapter 3 develops a formal reading of *L'Expérience intérieure* to complement and advance the one in Chapter 2 in order to reveal the structural aspect of the poetics as they affect Bataille's writing practice, primarily through the subversive tendency to destabilise form and genre. Part III encompasses both particular thematic expressions of concepts in the poems in chapters 4 and 5 and the broader linguistic aspects, paradigms and strategies in Chapter 6 that reflect the political and representational programme of the poetics.

In Chapter 5 I measure the evolution of representational strategy in relation to the concept of eroticism in which eroticism marks the final stage of the evolution of experience in representation in the poetics where the subject is disarticulated according to the force of poetic experience. Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of exscription refers to the linguistic process in which the subject is no longer depicted as a stable, monadic entity but is instead disclosed through his absence and disarticulated corporeality. There is a shift in approach in Chapter 6 where I do not read specific poems but rather seek to identify two overarching image paradigms that relate to the problem of using sacrifice to depict the affect of experience.

The approach I take in this thesis considers Bataille's poetics as well as the context in which they evolved in order to explore how his poetics inform and are substantiated by the concepts that thread through his writings. The space in which this thesis is situated establishes Bataille as a literary writer, one whose poetics and poetry has not hitherto been acknowledged or engaged with in the critical literature. There is relatively little either in English or in French criticism that focuses on Bataille's literary output and even less that takes account of either his poetics or his poetry. However, given Bataille's own ambiguous and ambivalent attitude to poetry and his dismissal of it as a minor discourse the lack of critical attention should perhaps not be a surprise. In French, those who have written (books) specifically on poetry comprise Jacques Cels, Sylvain Santi and Marie-Christine Lala. Writing on Bataille's poetry is generally approached through his philosophical writing or through his fictional writing of which there is a great deal more and enjoys a much higher profile.

If there is a spectrum of critical writing on Bataille it might run from the readings taking account of textual ideology that characterise the theoretical approach of writing initiated by the *Tel Quel* journal to the purely aesthetic considerations undertaken in the

October journal and elsewhere. In between these poles are writings that focus on his philosophy, literature and politics all of which overlap or are shaded by different fields of enquiry. The first grouping focused on theory, consists of the *Tel Quel* writers, who engage with Bataille's *œuvre* by assessing its philosophical implications and positioning him in an intellectual narrative history as the heir to Nietzsche's rejection of moral categories and as a precursor to poststructuralism. In this narrative Bataille's corpus has largely been oriented around Foucault's reading in his seminal essay 'Préface à la transgression', published in *Critique* in a special issue dedicated to Bataille in 1963 that posits *transgression* as the lens through which to view Bataille's writings. Writers in the *Tel Quel* journal that featured interpretations of Bataille included Denis Hollier, Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva and Marcelin Pleyne and, more tangentially, Jacques Derrida. More recently critics such as Leslie Hill and Nick Land write within this sphere of interpretation in which Bataille is, broadly, perceived as a Nietzschean subversive, undermining preconceived philosophical and moral categories of knowledge. In the critical literature oriented towards philosophy and literature Maurice Blanchot, Suzanne Guerlac, Patrick Ffrench and Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons (who also translated *L'Expérience intérieure*) all engage with the literary expression and articulation of philosophical concepts and ideas in their writings. Interpretations that are more narrowly philosophical include Jean-Luc Nancy, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Surya, the latter also writing an authoritative biography. At the aesthetic end of the spectrum, writing on art theory and history, Hollier again, Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster and Georges Didi-Huberman all focus on Bataille's own subversive art journal project *Documents* and the concept of the *informe* as well as his critical writings on a wide span of art from antiquity to Manet.

Writing on the poetics and poetry situates this thesis within the small field of other critics who engage with Bataille's *œuvre* in regard to poetry, all of whom write in French: Cels, who is Belgian, Jean-Luc Steinmetz (who also writes on Rimbaud) Lala and Santi. That all these critics write in French reveals how different Bataille's reception has been in francophone countries to that in the Anglo-Saxon critical literature. In the UK and US Bataille has been engaged with primarily through the field of continental philosophy, albeit as a somewhat contradictory figure who is credited by Foucault as a pivotal figure for poststructuralism yet at once someone who undermines philosophical enquiry, especially in an academic context, as a means to approach the subject. Alongside this problematic theoretical reception, Bataille's literary presence in the anglophone world evolved in the counter-cultural scene from the 1960s onwards when translations of his sexually explicit fiction, notably *Histoire de l'œil* and subjective philosophy in *L'Expérience intérieure*, shaped his reputation as an atheistic, subversive quasi-Surrealist. Of the francophone writers, Cels and Lala are most similar in the approach I undertake in seeking to gauge Bataille's poetics as distinct from his fiction and his philosophy in order to delineate and clarify their

position and nature and in order to better identify the intersections and connections to the books that host them and the concepts they are simultaneously informed by and which they illuminate.² The point at which this thesis may then be situated on the spectrum of writing is within the literary grouping and the approach undertaken – and which I suggest nuances it from the French writers above – is to consider Bataille’s thought through his poetics and poetry rather than the reverse. All three have a distinct focus: writing practice in Santi, particularly in regard to automatic writing; the social-political implications of the poetics in militant opposition to language as an oppressive cultural phenomenon in Cels and, third, Lala who considers the impossible as a means to approach the paradoxical aspects of the poetics that negate representation and thus place absence or loss at the heart of Bataille’s anti-systematic thought, a concept which spreads beyond his poetics to infect economy, religion and eroticism.³

Suzanne Guerlac identifies Bataille as the key figure for the *Tel Quel* writers who provide an epistemological ‘break’ whereby their radical re-thinking of texts conceals ideological responses to history as well as social contexts. Transgression is central to Bataillean poststructuralist theory and Kristeva, for example, uses it to reconcile poetry to revolution: transgression, as a hermeneutic instrument, reveals the breaks, cuts, tears and violence inherent to yet concealed and encoded within writing from the late nineteenth century onwards, notably by Lautréamont and selected modernists such as Joyce.

[...] Bataille [is] the only figure who survives the ‘break’ of theory. To this extent he is a liminal figure. He belongs both to the generation of *Tel Quel* who reinvented transgression, and to the decades he shared first with Breton and then with Sartre. Because of this double historical inscription, Bataille opens a textual path back to these earlier figures and mediates broader links between *Tel Quel* and discourse it has suppressed or effaced.⁴

In privileging a literary interpretation over and above theoretical and philosophical ones, this thesis shares the strategy Guerlac outlines above by connecting Bataille’s literary output, in a historical view, via a thread to antecedents such as Rimbaud. This literary inscription also serves to delimit theoretical strategies of interpretation. Therefore, notable by its absence perhaps, is the concept of transgression: in its place is experience; the guiding principle that

² Cels’ book is part of the vogue of writing in the 1980s that seek to politicise Bataille in the wake of Kristeva’s work in attempting to radicalise Bataille’s concept of subjectivity. Other examples of which are Jean-Michel Besnier, *La Politique de l’impossible, l’intellectuel entre révolte et engagement* (Paris: La Découverte, 1989) and Francis Marmande, *Georges Bataille politique* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1984).

³ The direction in which studies of Bataille may be heading, at least in the United States, is indicated by a collection of essays from 2007, *Reading Bataille Now*, edited by Shannon Winnubst, in which Bataille is considered in the field of cultural studies, specifically areas such as ethics (in conjunction with Levinas), economics/geopolitics, feminism and queer theory.

⁴ Suzanne Guerlac, *Literary Polemics: Bataille, Sartre, Valéry, Breton* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 4.

links Bataille's projects back to Rimbaud's and acts as a matrix in which problems of representation are confronted in his poetics. However, theoretical perspectives and models that examine Bataille's writing practice are nonetheless useful to shaping my argument and, thus, Derrida and Nancy in particular but also Baudry (in regard to *Tel Quel's* reading of Rimbaud) and Kristeva inform the thesis at certain points.⁵ Derrida's seminal essay on Bataille characterises his confrontation with Hegelian dialectics as one that spills out to destabilise his writing, informing the structural reading of *L'Expérience intérieure* in Chapter 3. This reading highlights the subversive nature of poetic representation as a manifestation of discourse that fissures to create a non-discourse within it that repudiates the production and value of meaning. Nancy's theory of exscription, discussed in Chapter 5, I propose, substantiates Bataille's eroticism as the final stage of radical expression of representing the subject in the poetic project.

The parallel readings of Bataille and Rimbaud's writings thus distinguish the approach taken in this thesis from other accounts of either Bataille or Rimbaud. The critical literature stemming from *Tel Quel's* interpretative approaches have tended to ignore Rimbaud for the most part, focusing instead on Lautréamont and Mallarmé and emphasised Bataille's fictional writings rather than his poetic output. Rimbaud's presence in this thesis is thus not weighed according to his own terms – that is, I do not seek to advance any argument or reading specific to Rimbaud or his writing – but rather remains within parameters that illuminate Bataille's poetics. Nonetheless readings of Rimbaud that engage with him beyond his historical situation and beyond interpretative readings of his poetry are useful inasmuch as they present fresh perspectives that reveal inherent features of his corpus in terms that are contiguous to historical situations explored in this thesis, be they ideological, linguistic or political. Two relatively recent critical readings of Rimbaud that depart from his historical or biographical status to take account of the textual aspect of his project are Kristin Ross' work on Rimbaud as a quasi-socialist poet and Susan Harrow's exploration of subjectivity across a particular route within French poetry from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Ross uses the events of the Commune of 1871 and its non-hierarchical levelling of the privileged areas of Paris as a space to consider his poems' linguistic tactics as part of a broader political

⁵ Nancy's important essay on sacrifice in Bataille's thought determines to a large extent the argument here as it relates to representation (of subjectivity) in that, as Bataille thinks of sacrifice as a concept that ruptures epistemological and ontological categories, so it evolves to disrupt his own project; a movement that is (re)enacted in his poetry. 'Comme on le sait encore, Bataille ne voulut pas seulement penser le sacrifice, il voulut penser selon le sacrifice, et il voulut le sacrifice lui-même, en acte, et à tout le moins il ne cessa de se présenter sa pensée comme un nécessaire sacrifice de la pensée. Du même mouvement, le motif du sacrifice engage chez Bataille le geste sacrificiel lui-même, l'établissement de la communauté ou de la communication, l'art dans sa capacité de communication, et enfin, la pensée même.' Nancy goes on to conclude how the concept of sacrifice so dominated Bataille's thought that it became something Bataille could not think beyond. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'L'insacrifiable', in *Une pensée finie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990), p. 70.

strategy against poetic orthodoxy and social injustice. Harrow, in her book, considers how thematic content and formal structure reveal materialist frames of reference in Rimbaud's project, thus transforming his engagement with subjectivity. Harrow argues for the significance of material expressions of interiority as it appears after Rimbaud, in Apollinaire and Ponge's *œuvres*, as well as in the postwar poetry of Réda.

This thesis, then, uses Rimbaud's project as the point of departure to trace subjectivity as it becomes inscribed in poetic language; language that, because of ideological materialism, is driven to expose its own material nature. It is these material and corporeal inscriptions that I read as not only underlying Bataille's approach to experience in his poetics but also enabling his conception of experience to be subversively articulated in language. The legacy of Rimbaud's presence in Bataille's poetics also enables a reverse inscription to be identified in fresh readings of Rimbaud's poems that reveal precedent preoccupations with experience indexed to subjective corporeality and material vision. However it is also Rimbaud's presence – and Bataille's reading of his project as a sacrifice – that puts Bataille's project onto a different trajectory to that of Rimbaud's. Bataille's poetics militate against such cultural-ideological systems not only on political grounds or on aesthetic grounds – to challenge mimetic representation – but fundamentally, to challenge the economy of production applied to poetry. Rimbaud – and Breton and Sartre – all want to make poetry *mean* something beyond its textual, discursive value and to stand for certain ideals be they ideological, aesthetic or political. Bataille rejects this valorisation of meaning in poetry and of literary discourse being subordinated to work: his poetics work to apply sacrifice, initially, as an operation in representation that produces loss in experience but evolves beyond its conceptual presence to destabilise the textual fabric of his poetry and undermine the ontological basis of his subject. However, Bataille's poetics evolve to privilege sovereign experience in poetic discourse to establish an ontological depiction of the subject, a depiction I suggest, that is formed by confrontation with the unknown and the interior, affective currents of desire, guilt and terror that results. Rimbaud's presence distinguishes Bataille's poetics from Breton's, certainly in the 1930s, not only through opposing interpretations of Rimbaud's biographical significance but primarily because Breton focuses on continuing and reviving Rimbaud's project in Surrealism whereas Bataille focuses on the project conceptualised as a sacrifice and which then shifts the significance of the project to its ending. The dialectical implications of plunging into silence and nothingness – rather than ascending to an absolute knowledge – lead Bataille away from Hegel and Surrealism and toward the ghost of Rimbaud, listening to the silence his project left behind. Sacrifice and silence thus form two halves of the same operation in Bataille's poetics that seeks to ascertain an affectivity in the moment when the subject encounters – and desires to encounter – that lack within himself in the nothingness of

the unknown. To account for and, furthermore, represent this absent and silent nothingness as part of experience and lend it a value beyond meaning is the underlying problem that Bataille's poetics task poetry to resolve.

Part I – Ideology and Revolt

Chapter 1

Breton, Bataille and the Struggle for Revolt

Je m'étais figuré que Rimbaud ne procédait pas autrement.⁶

This first chapter covers the period from the late 1920s to mid 1930s, during which time Bataille neither thought about poetry nor wrote any poems and, as such, does not directly deal with Bataille's poetics but rather the historical context in which they developed. I aim to set out the background to Bataille's poetics in relation to the external influence of Surrealism that informed his thought. The three parts of this chapter elaborate, first: Breton's Surrealist account of Rimbaud from the point of the first manifesto in 1924 to the mid 1930s; second, an outline of Bataille's critique of Breton's idealist and revolutionary Surrealist project; and, finally, the proximity of Bataille's ideological position to Rimbaud's through a comparative reading of Rimbaud's poem 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs' and Bataille's article 'Le Langage des fleurs'.

I aim to show how Bataille's thought at this time develops in a context determined by Surrealism, how Bataille negatively defined his projects contrary to the dominant Surrealist project and how the consequences of this contestation may be seen in the development of his poetics. The difference between their positions may be identified by ideology: the well-known polemic between Bataille and Breton situates Breton's idealism against Bataille's materialism. My reading here does not seek to recapitulate this intellectual (and personal) polemic but rather to explore how their ideological positions during this period come to affect their reading of Rimbaud and, ultimately, their respective approaches to poetry. I suggest Breton's idealist approach, for the most part, ignores Rimbaud's poetic output – something which Benjamin draws attention to – and instead focuses on his biographical status as symbolic of revolt; Breton, as the epigraph suggests, interprets his illicitly glamorous, marginalised, Romantic life while a poet, ultimately, as an indication of political engagement. An engagement that legitimises and affirms Breton's own aims to (re)position Surrealism as a political project committed to revolutionary agitation. Bataille's position is materialist – trenchantly opposed to the overt politicisation of Surrealism as indicative of Breton's idealism – and thus rejects political engagement, in favour of interrogating idealist and moral representation within language – an approach that has a precedent in Rimbaud's project (another one would be in Lautréamont's corpus). Bataille's position here, I argue, establishes the fundamental line of thought that orients his subsequent thinking on poetry: his

⁶ André Breton, *Œuvres complètes I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 323.

materialism – specifically base matter or material that has no use and cannot inherently signify anything – engages with the materialist aspects of language in a repudiation of Breton’s idealism, idealism that is based on aesthetic and moral ascension. The repudiation of moral codes through aesthetic systems in language forms the basis of Rimbaud’s critique of Parnassian poetry and Bataille’s more general critique of literature. Their attack on idealism in literature therefore becomes a problem of confronting systems of representation: if mimesis in representation tends toward idealism and aesthetic systems that codify moral supremacy then mimesis is what must be subverted and, ultimately, displaced. The struggle with representation, begun along ideological lines and the rejection of idealism, develops to grow into Rimbaud’s *voyant* project and form the basis of Bataille’s poetics, and in both projects the material qualities of language remain defining.

In the first part of the chapter I read Breton’s interpretation of Rimbaud’s project in the first and second manifestos (published in 1924 and 1929 respectively), the essay ‘Qu’est-ce que le surréalisme’ (1934) and Louis Aragon’s *Traité du style* (1928).⁷ Breton name-checks Rimbaud among many others to create a parity between Rimbaud’s poetic project and biography and Surrealism in order to show that they possess the same characteristics of revolt and self-mythopoeia. This last characteristic highlights the similarity between Rimbaud and Breton’s self-conscious and evolving assessment of their own projects *as* projects; projects for which they made certain the stakes were high. In the second part, I establish Bataille’s reaction to Breton’s poetics in relation to the key issues that appear in Bataille’s texts, ‘La “vielle taupe” et le préfixe “sur” dans les mots surhomme et surréaliste’ (written at some point in 1929 or 1930) and, ‘La valeur d’usage de D.A.F. de Sade’.⁸ In these articles Bataille outlines a critique of Surrealist interpretations of revolt and myth. Following this, the third part suggests a way in which Rimbaud figures as a direct precedent for Bataille in a parallel reading of ‘Ce qu’on dit au poète à propos de fleurs’ and ‘Le Langage des fleurs’ that aims to highlight their shared ideological position through their critique of reactionary literature. The reading emphasises the precedent role Rimbaud plays for Bataille by broadening the scope of the argument to reveal how ideological differences – which Rimbaud represents – lead to the contested status of poetry and, thus, differences in writing practice.

⁷ The consideration of Rimbaud in Surrealism is guided by Breton’s interpretation. The focus in this chapter is on Breton rather than on other Surrealist poets. This delineation necessarily narrows the scope of this discussion, which would otherwise have to take account of numerous readings of Rimbaud and would be too diffuse. While Breton’s individual poetic activity is clearly representative of the Surrealist project it by no means forms the complete picture. In the same way, Breton’s engagement with Rimbaud is not the definitive Surrealist position; the reference to Louis Aragon in this chapter purports to broaden and nuance the position of Rimbaud within Surrealism and to show that the Surrealist consideration of Rimbaud was not uniform. The use of the terms Surrealism and the Surrealists on occasion is for convenience as well as reflecting Breton’s primary position within the movement but is not intended to conflate the movement of Surrealism with Breton himself.

⁸ This open letter was also written at an uncertain date between 1929 and 1930; a draft of the letter was first published in *L’Arc* in 1967.

Rimbaud's *œuvre* articulates the conflict between guilt and freedom; one that both Bataille and Breton struggle to resolve. Bataille's engagement with Rimbaud's poetic project veered towards language and linguistic strategies to revolt against cultural-linguistic repression. Benjamin's account below introduces the tension between Surrealist political ambitions and working, writing practice. Benjamin's analysis subtends my reading of Surrealism to show that, in its poetic as well as its visual incarnations, its representation of subjectivity and consideration of experience are somewhat more nuanced than is suggested by Breton's meta-Surrealist writings. Bretonian Surrealism and Bataillean Surrealism are irreconcilable on ideological levels but they nonetheless share an aesthetic style and broad political outlook. Breton's attempt to resolve the tension inherent in Rimbaud, I suggest, exposes the failures of his revolutionary project, yet it is these attempts at resolution that made Surrealism's engagement with psychology, language and representation so successful.

Breton's Rimbaud

Walter Benjamin writes in the 1929 essay 'Surrealism' on the significance of Rimbaud for Breton and, thus, his significance in Surrealism, by mapping out the interior forms and genealogy of revolt, or how Rimbaud suggested the Surrealist concept of revolt by making it a personal commitment:

[...] Breton had said right from the outset that he wished to break with a practice that places before the public the literary expressions of a specific form of existence while withholding that form of existence itself. More succinctly and dialectically: the realm of literature was being exploded from within in that a group of close associates was taking the 'literary life' to the outer limits of the possible. And that they may be taken at their word when they maintain that Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer* held no further secrets for them. Because that book really is the first document of the movement.⁹

In Benjamin's view, then, Rimbaud's major poem is less a literary text than a guide that exposes interiority as the form of existence literature had formerly neglected. The two key concepts *Une saison en enfer* initially delivered to Surrealism were imagination, in this poem hallucinatory and totalising, and revolt. Revolt however came to prove problematic for Breton and Surrealism, not only generally, because of the demands revolt makes to leap forwards to become a revolution but, specifically, for the Surrealists because revolt seems to diverge from their artistic praxis of seeking the reconciliation of opposing states rather than outright destruction or transcendence. Benjamin notes (in an assessment reminiscent of Bataille) how closely aligned Rimbaud and Breton's sense of revolt was for not only being anti-religious but specifically anti-Catholic:

⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism', in *One-Way Street and Other Writings* trans. by J. A. Underwood, (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 144.

Rimbaud is a Catholic [...] but by his own account he is so in his most wretched part, which he never tires of denouncing, of delivering up to his and everyone's scorn: the part that forces him to confess he does not understand revolt.¹⁰

The significance of Catholicism here is, I suggest, in abnegating individual will. What Breton overlooks, for all the polyphonic pronouncements of revolt made in *Une saison en enfer*, is that the revolt is internal and never directed outwards; Rimbaud does not overcome the guilt that Catholicism internalises and thus judges his poeticised existence of revolt a failure. The scale of what the revolt must overcome is of such magnitude, as it is described in *Une saison en enfer*, that Rimbaud's personae are not strong or committed enough to see the revolt through to the end. *Une saison en enfer* nevertheless identifies the sense of institutionalised guilt that Breton's revolt has to overcome. Freedom for the imagination first necessarily requires liberation from guilt. Subsequently the free individual must be able to live in a free society; that is, individual revolt and destruction of symbols (those of Catholicism) must be transferred to a large-scale social revolution and the transformation or reclamation of the supplanted symbols of the bourgeois order.

And this is their proof "that man's struggle for liberation in its simplest revolutionary form (which certainly is, specifically, liberation in every respect) is the only thing left worth serving". But will they succeed in welding this experience of freedom to the rest of revolutionary experience, which we must acknowledge because we once had it: to the constructive, dictatorial side of revolution? In a nutshell – will they bind revolt to revolution? [...] harnessing the forces of intoxication for the revolution – that is what Surrealism revolves around in all its books, in its every undertaking.¹¹

Benjamin's assessment of Surrealism poses the problem of how the dynamic of freedom and revolt inclines upwards to the revolutionary plane and how freedom and revolt can maintain their principles in the face of the perversely reactionary nature of revolution and its re-imposition of order. Benjamin's account generously reflects Breton's aspirations for Surrealism in which all Surrealist praxis is subordinated to revolutionary aims. The problem is the unstable, violent nature of revolt itself: Benjamin does not take account of revolt or aimless violence for its own sake, one of the tendencies within Surrealism even during its rational phase.¹² The tension between artistic praxis and revolutionary intoxication is one that Surrealism never overcomes and, I suggest, evidence of this tension is to be found in the majority of Surrealist *œuvres*.¹³ Benjamin writes that the revolt Surrealism enacted before

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹² In 'Critique of Violence' (1921) Benjamin does, however, address the problem of using violence in the struggle for political freedom.

¹³ In *Profane Illumination* Margaret Cohen reads Benjamin's account of Surrealism as 'politicised madness', focusing on the dual Surrealist interests in psychoanalysis and Marxism and Benjamin's critique of Marxism. Cohen also signals the significance of Bataille's writing on Surrealism and its

becoming problematically involved with the Communists has its roots in the revolt of Rimbaud (among others) but, more significantly, he implies that Breton disavows that these roots are poisoned with revolt, in Rimbaud's case, in the form of ambiguity, androgyny and self-loathing. Surrealism's aesthetic, I suggest, is far from being intoxicatingly celebratory and is instead one obsessed with tension, anxiety and unease, perhaps the results of these Rimbaudian symptoms which Surrealism represses within its own discourse.

In formal, linguistic terms Breton's reading of Rimbaud's corpus was influenced in many different ways, two of the most profound coming from diametrically opposed directions, negatively from Claudel and positively from Valéry. Claudel views Rimbaud's engagement with Christianity as a subjective account of spiritual devotion. The influence of Rimbaud's religiously themed writings on Claudel, most evident in the play *Tête d'or* (1890) did however represent a move to restore the spiritual element lacking from such works of historical-biographical interpretation of scripture such as Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, from 1863. Valéry's proto-scientific analysis from an interview given in 1926 is – despite his characterising Rimbaud's poetic model as a domain rather than a system – the one that guided Breton:

Rimbaud a découvert tout un domaine littéraire dans les harmoniques de nos sensations. Il ne s'oppose pas directement à Mallarmé. Un *domaine* ne s'oppose pas à un *système*. Ce sont des ordres différents. Il y a un système de Mallarmé et un domaine de Rimbaud.¹⁴

Breton reacted strongly against Claudel's religious interpretation of Rimbaud to the extent that he criticised Rimbaud's project itself for being complicit in Claudel's exegesis. Following Valéry, it is difficult to regard Rimbaud's *œuvre* as a holistic entity compared perhaps to the isotropic structure of the poems comprising *Les Fleurs du mal* and the ironic narrative form of *Les Chants de Maldoror*.

The fact that Rimbaud's *œuvre* was perceived as unfinished meant that everyone felt they could legitimately interpret its ultimate intent according to their own purposes. Breton felt that he was able to breathe new life into Rimbaud and to reclaim him as a prophet of revolt for Surrealism. Rimbaud, in Surrealist eyes, becomes more than a poetic phenomenon; he is an historical fulcrum, situated at a specific point, which eventually leads to Surrealism itself. Breton, who stated that Surrealism was a method and not a dogma, declares in the second manifesto that Surrealism's methodology did possess, or desired a terminus:

importance to post-war theorists and in orienting intellectual thought after the war. *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 13.

¹⁴ Frédéric Lefèvre, *Entretiens avec Paul Valéry* (Paris: Le Livre, 1926), p. 70.

Tout porte à croire qu'il existe un certain point de l'esprit d'où la vie et la mort, le réel et l'imaginaire, le passé et le future, le communicable et l'incommunicable, le haut et le bas cessent d'être perçus contradictoirement. Or, c'est en vain qu'on chercherait à l'activité surréaliste un autre mobile que l'espoir de détermination de ce point.¹⁵

Breton posits that the process of poetic enquiry eventually transcends ordinary communication to resolve internal contradictions by arriving at an end point, and that this process will finally determine the mystery of being. Breton advocates the extinction of contradiction, or at least contradiction *perceived* as such, in that poetry will be both communicable and incommunicable; I would suggest rather that Rimbaud attempts to make the incommunicable communicable by altering the relation between the subject and the world: 'J'ai essayé d'inventer de nouvelles fleurs, de nouveaux astres, de nouvelles chairs, de nouvelles langues.'¹⁶ Breton's resolution of contradiction and Rimbaud's exceeding of it may superficially seem part of the same process. However this arguably masks the fact that Breton's resolution is on an ideological level only whereas Rimbaud's transgressive excess or revolt *includes* poetry. Poetry in Breton's Surrealist revolutionary politics forms one part of a greater project in spite of Breton's refusal to, initially, see Rimbaud's poetic project as a failure. There is not only the failure of communication or of the poetic project enacted in *Une saison en enfer*; there is the less dramatic (and unreliable) confession made much later in his life.¹⁷ Rimbaud, then, ends his project with no regard for poetry whereas for Breton poetry remains central to Surrealism, evident in his defence of poetic vision in *Arcane 17*, published in 1944.¹⁸

Thus Breton's assessment of Rimbaud remains idealistic; one possible reason being, in light of Benjamin's reading above, Surrealism suppressed the guilt and tension inherent in Rimbaud's *œuvre*, Bataille explored it to the extent it defines his entire engagement with Rimbaud. The implications were that Breton linked Rimbaud's revolt to Marxist political struggle; Bataille read the interiority of Rimbaud's poetry as a project that provides the link between materialism, experience and language. Despite Breton's high-profile claims on

¹⁵ Breton, OC I, p. 781.

¹⁶ Rimbaud, 'Adieu', in *Une saison en enfer, Œuvres* (Paris: Garnier, 2000), p. 235.

¹⁷ 'Rimbaud only once referred to his poems in this late period [the late 1880s] they were nothing but *rinçures* [...] a thin gruel containing some undigested lumps of Hugo, Gautier and Baudelaire [...] In Cairo he is said to have talked [...] about the future of French literature: "the Villon-Baudelaire-Verlaine lineage had quickly run out of steam; all the really important work had been done in the novel, as it developed after Balzac and Flaubert".' Robb emphasises that these accounts are second-hand, sourced from acquaintances Rimbaud may have talked to and who were themselves not necessarily reliable. Graham Robb, *Rimbaud* (London: Picador, 2000), pp. 400-1.

¹⁸ 'On voit comme, en ce qu'elle pouvait encore avoir d'incertain, l'image se précise: c'est la révolte même, la révolte seule qui est créatrice de lumière. Et cette lumière ne peut se connaître que trois voies: la poésie, la liberté et l'amour qui doivent inspirer le même zèle et converger, à en faire la coupe même de la jeunesse éternelle, sur le point moins découvert et le plus illuminable du cœur humain'. Breton, OC III, pp. 94-5.

Rimbaud as an embryonic Surrealist and pseudo revolutionary, it is precisely on the status of poetry that Breton and Bataille diverge. The model of Rimbaud's self-destructive project then, I suggest, fundamentally determines Bataille's poetics; in taking account of the ideological, formal and philosophical aspects of Rimbaud's *œuvre*, Bataille's own poetry and poetics are identifiably Rimbaudian in tone, content and aim.

Breton's fascination with Rimbaud is evident in the span of the two Surrealist manifestos. In the first manifesto of 1924, Breton views Rimbaud primarily as a methodological inspiration:

La vertu de la parole (de l'écriture: bien davantage) me paraissait tenir à la faculté de raccourcir de façon saisissante l'exposé (puisque exposé il y avait) d'un petit nombre de faits, poétiques ou autres, dont je me faisais la substance. Je m'étais figuré que Rimbaud ne procédait pas autrement.¹⁹

Rimbaud then re-appears with a much higher profile made clear, first, by the lionisation of his life beyond and after his poetic career in the first manifesto: 'Rimbaud est surréaliste dans la pratique de la vie et ailleurs'.²⁰ Whereas Breton cites Rimbaud as a figurehead for Surrealism's anti-bourgeois posturing in the first manifesto, he is criticised in the second manifesto for ultimately not giving a meaning to this revolt; something that Breton was precisely attempting to do for the Surrealist movement at the time of writing, in 1929.²¹ In fact Breton's dismissal of Rimbaud in the second manifesto is not as categorical as it may seem; it is done on the principle of repositioning Surrealism in relation to the past rather than a spontaneous aversion to Rimbaud's poetry.²² Rimbaud is dismissed, as are many others including Bataille, although for the different reason that the second manifesto is concerned with breaking Surrealism's links to the past and instead focusing on both its present situation and its potential place in the future.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, OC I, p. 323.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

²¹ 'J'ai plus confiance dans ce moment, actuel, de ma pensée que dans tout ce qu'on tentera de faire signifier à une œuvre achevée, à une vie parvenue à son terme. Rien de plus stérile, en définitive, que cette perpétuelle interrogation des morts: Rimbaud s'est-il converti la veille de sa mort... Il suffit de laisser poser ces questions pour apprécier la fragilité du témoignage de ceux qui ne sont plus... ? En matière du révolte, aucun de nous ne doit avoir besoin d'ancêtres.' *Ibid.*, pp. 783-4.

²² Indeed several pages later Breton writes that Rimbaud's – now qualified – historical importance is as part of a previously hidden or minor literary discourse that has now, thanks to Surrealism, become exposed: 'Mais voyez de quelle admirable et perverse insinuation se sont déjà montrées capables un petit nombre d'œuvres toutes modernes, celles même dont le moins qu'on puisse dire est qu'il y règne un air particulièrement insalubre: Baudelaire, Rimbaud (en dépit les réserves que j'ai fait), Huysmans, Lautréamont pour m'en tenir à la poésie.' Breton's account here is of a similar note and timbre to Bataille's later analysis of Romantic and post-Romantic literary history, in *La Littérature et le mal*. Both their accounts grant literature a crucial transgressive role yet one which is necessarily limited; a minor point of distinction though is that Bataille's concept of the scope for writing is even more limited than Breton's. *Ibid.*, p. 802.

Inutile de discuter encore sur Rimbaud: Rimbaud s'est trompé, Rimbaud a voulu nous tromper. Il est coupable devant nous d'avoir permis, de ne pas avoir rendu tout à fait impossibles certaines interprétations déshonorantes de sa pensée, genre Claudel.²³

In Breton's view, Rimbaud is guilty for allowing a degree of ambiguity into his work that enables it to be interpreted in such an erroneous way. For Breton, the poet here seems to be of far greater value as a mythological cipher than for any meaning potentially delivered by his poetry. Breton seems to be indirectly implicated by Aragon, guilty of the crimes he accuses others of in *Traité du style*: ruining Rimbaud's worth as a poet by transforming Rimbaud's project into an empty posture of rebellion:

Le jeune homme à cette heure lit d'une façon toute crépusculaire. Mais qu'aime-t-il donc? Rimbaud. Voilà qui, à première vue, semble intéressant et encourageable... Maintenant tout est clair dans l'aventure rimbaldienne, pas un sale petit bourgeois qui renifle encore sa morve dans les jupons de Madame sa mère... Pas un ignoble petit rentrier, pas un fils d'officier, pas une graine de rond de cuir, pas un de ces imbéciles heureux à qui on vient d'offrir une motocyclette pour le jour de l'an, pas une fausse-couche élevée dans du papier des soies, pour qui Rimbaud ne soit un autre soi-même.²⁴

Aragon's tirade against the commodification of Rimbaud as something other than a poet is a tirade Breton echoes because Rimbaud's biography and then his silence, again, lead to silence being taken as poetic and as rebellious in itself.²⁵

Le succès de Rimbaud, puisque telle est la saloperie des faits qu'il peut être question du succès de Rimbaud est une grande partie due à la curieuse moralité qu'on prête à sa vie. Car ils ont si bien arrangé les choses, que la vie de Rimbaud de nos jours est prise à témoin contre la poésie même.²⁶

Here Aragon criticises Rimbaud's assimilation as a popular myth, a critique that reveals what the Surrealists were trying to oppose. It is from this stereotypical view of Rimbaud as *poète maudit* that Breton was trying to rescue him, so as to make him stand for poetry or, rather, so as to make his poetry stand for the possibility of Surrealist action. Breton characterises Rimbaud as a juvenile humorist as well as using Rimbaud as a starting point for Surrealist method, although in the second manifesto he castigates Rimbaud's project for its built-in failure or its failure to avoid failure.

In claiming Rimbaud as a figurehead to herald the possibility of Surrealist revolt, Breton's reading of Rimbaud does form the context in which Bataille first encounters him. Bataille, however, conceives of Rimbaud as standing for poetry itself and, furthermore, not only as representative but enacting a revolt, not against the social body as did Breton but

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 784.

²⁴ Aragon, p. 58.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

against the limitations of poetry itself. The success or failure of Surrealism rests on its ability to transfer its 'passion' into active revolution and to transmit it, violently, into the real world. This accounts, too, for Surrealism's shedding of the poet's solipsistic subjectivity to, instead, embrace communal struggle, much in the spirit of Ducasse's dictum: 'La poésie doit être faite par tous. Non par un'.²⁷ Rimbaud's statement *Je est un autre* is transformed, in the above formulation, as the ability of Surrealism to predicate a new social reality, except that the final end point for which Breton was aiming was not to be found beyond a psychical horizon or in a new language, as for Rimbaud, but among the people on the streets. Given this ostensible revival of Rimbaud as a proto-Surrealist, there remains the problem of how Breton and the Surrealists could account for Rimbaud's abandonment of his project. Rimbaud the historical figure, although in some ways an exemplary Surrealist hero cannot be separated from his *œuvre* or his abandonment of it, which remains problematic for Breton.²⁸ The terms of their engagement with Rimbaud allow them to circumvent many of these problems; this was done by dealing with Rimbaud as an image transmitted through history by Verlaine, Claudel, Valéry *et al* and by taking responsibility for the lacuna marked by Rimbaud's termination of his own project. In the second manifesto Breton integrated Rimbaud's principle of disorientation into Surrealism, despite having abrogated Rimbaud as inspiration in the same text. He then states the principles of Rimbaud's poetic project are *continued* in Surrealism:

Alchimie du verbe: ces mots qu'on va répétant un peu au hasard aujourd'hui demandent à être pris au pied de la lettre. Si la chapitre d'*Une Saison en Enfer* qu'ils désignent ne justifie peut-être pas toute leur ambition, il n'en est pas moins vrai qu'il peut être tenu le plus authentiquement pour l'amorce de l'activité difficile d'aujourd'hui seul le surréalisme poursuit.²⁹

As Jean-Luc Steinmetz points out, however, though the principle may have been resonant in Breton's thinking, the practice remains considerably more conventional:

Si Breton considère que le « surréalisme rend aux vocables tout leur pouvoir » encore faudrait-il s'interroger sur ce qu'est ce pouvoir. Transmettre ou modifier le monde? Il semble [...] que sauf exception, le surréalisme n'aille pas en deçà de cette unité de signification: le mot et le signe. La célérité même de l'écriture automatique n'enfreint que rarement les règles de la syntaxe. Elle ne « défie pas forcément la langue » qui reste, dans toute ces expériences, peu marquée par des élisions, prudemment stimulée par le jeu de mots [...] Loin de faire la table rase prévue, elle reste imprégnée par l'exemple de deux précurseurs considérables, Lautréamont et Rimbaud, dont rien ne dit, qu'ils pratiquèrent avant la lettre une telle écriture.³⁰

²⁷ Ducasse, 'Poésies II', p. 311.

²⁸ This is not the case for Lautréamont as Breton was the first to resurrect him from the libraries and bring him back into the public sphere; the Surrealists have a much stronger claim on him than on Rimbaud.

²⁹ Breton, OC I, p. 818.

³⁰ Jean-Luc Steinmetz, *La Poésie et ses raisons* (Paris: José Corti, 1990), pp. 93-4.

Steinmetz criticises Surrealism for not advancing the avant-garde subversion of the kind found in Lautréamont and Rimbaud. Surrealism is arguably in a paradoxical situation in regard to its praxis: the avant-garde exercise of automatic writing is, certainly in Bataille's view (albeit one formulated after the war) a genuine attempt to exist in the present moment, in that automatic writing is a sovereign and non-teleological practice. Automatic writing by implication cannot exercise any presence outside the present moment and is therefore unable to articulate Surrealism's antecedents and future projects, the two temporal zones in which Breton wants to situate Surrealism. The first manifesto, in broad terms, is concerned with establishing Surrealism's literary and intellectual (rather than artistic) legitimacy, whereas the second manifesto is very much preoccupied with Surrealism's future, linked to the contemporaneous political situation. The Surrealist consideration of the present is arguably subordinated to the future because Surrealist political revolt is teleologically influenced by a utopian strand of thought, prevalent in the left at this time. Revolt is here, then, both idealised and deferred. Furthermore, Breton is not instigating a new mode of engagement – against the challenges Surrealism faced: fascism, homogenous capitalism and religion – but reprising that of a nineteenth-century tendency to agitation. The revolt of Surrealism is always curtailed in its unwillingness to definitively destroy the past and move on from it. Breton, speaking after the war, contextualised Surrealism's position as a movement opposed to Symbolism but, in doing so, gave it the opportunity to establish its own history and, thus, its legitimacy: 'C'était à elle [Surrealism] de retrouver, de remettre en place la courroie de transmission.'³¹ Unlike the amorphous, ahistorical nihilism of Dada and destructive fury of Futurism, Surrealism adopted revolt only as a trope of historical precedence, rather than seriously deploying it as a method of working or as praxis in itself.

Using Reverdy's famous formulation of the Surrealist image, Breton is superficially following Rimbaud's method but not fully, as Breton surrenders poetry to objective chance, although he still maintained that poetry be evaluated in terms of its effects on the poet and the reader.³² Bataille, in contrast, seeks instead to dramatise this end point and to be affected by it, to experience and therefore – Bataille made clear, in the same sense of the *marvellous wound* – in Caws' term – to endure and to suffer it. Breton, from the beginning, conceived of Surrealism as a nouveau-mythic adventure: Aragon too, in 'Introduction à 1930' in *La Révolution surréaliste*, claims that Surrealism shares more with Romanticism than with other

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³² 'L'image... ne peut naître d'une comparaison mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées. Plus les rapports des deux réalités rapprochées seront lointains et justes, plus l'image sera forte – plus elle aura de puissance émotive et de réalité poétique...etc.' Reverdy, cited by Breton, OC I, p. 324.

strands of modernism.³³ Breton's turn to historical materialism only strengthens this conception, perhaps because it gave the Surrealist revolt a responsibility as well as a liberty, now that it was loosed from idealism. Bataille conceived of it as the genesis of an absence of myth; Surrealism was only pseudo-mythic but Bataille valorised absence itself: *any* negation was to be embraced.

The change in Surrealism's thinking from a pure idealism to a historical awareness also allows for a fresh perspective to open up and thus for Breton to re-evaluate the movement:

De 1930 à ce jour l'histoire du surréalisme est celle de l'effort accompli pour l'exalter dans le sentiment de son *devenir* propre, dont il doit un compte précis historiquement, en le soustrayant à ses dernières survivances tant d'opportunisme politique que d'opportunisme artistiques.³⁴

On one level, Breton is simply outlining the aetiology of Surrealism as well as the justification for this speech, later to become 'Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?' at this particular point in time in July 1934 in Brussels. Yet on another, deeper, level he reveals the imperfect tense in which Surrealism exists: since the first manifesto, Surrealism was always forward-looking; here, however, Breton acknowledges its new freedom, stripped of all artistic and political opportunism, it becomes synchronised with its methodological drive. He concedes that Surrealism's great struggle is not to reach a point of social liberation but to enact it; Surrealism, as a movement with an invented mythic past can use this mythic basis to determine the nature of the future. Breton reaffirms his commitment to this notion of Surrealism exceeding itself, only setting it out in practical, social-political terms in light of his philosophical justification. Surrealism's new position is, also, very much rooted in Rimbaud's own poetic concern; the essay 'Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?' is directly built upon Rimbaud, as Breton quotes a great deal from his letters and from *Une saison en enfer*. This concern is one that explores the tremors within perception and the mutability of objective reality that can be effected by revolt. 'Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?' is a world view distanced from the individual on a social-historical level, yet which still places the subject in a central, critical position.

Breton maintains this strategy of revolt by additionally situating it on a linguistic plane, through sublimating the guilt and violence that define Rimbaud's personae in *Une Saison en enfer*, in 'Nuit de l'enfer' and 'Délires I – Vierge folle'. Breton invokes Rimbaud to

³³ Aragon differentiates Surrealism's relationship with the objects of modernity, primarily machinery and mass-produced goods to that of the cubists and futurists. For the Surrealists these objects are already old and form part of a continuum of modernity rather than signalling a paradigm-shift towards the new: '[...] on conçoit que le surréalisme ne soit pas attaché à un moderne précis comme le furent le cubisme ou le futurisme... mais méthodiquement il s'exprime à travers le moderne de son époque'. Aragon, *La Révolution surréaliste* 12 (Paris: Gallimard, 1929), p. 62.

³⁴ Breton, OC II, p. 255.

serve in the cause of Surrealist political engagement, drawing a direct line between the Paris Commune and the Soviet experience:

Du cataclysme guerrier et social... la Commune de Paris ne pouvaient en effet manquer de surgir d'autres cataclysmes analogues dont le dernier en date a saisi plusieurs d'entre nous à l'âge même où Lautréamont et Rimbaud s'étaient trouvés jetés dans le précédent, dont le dernier en date a eu en revanche pour conséquence – et c'est là le fait nouveau, considérable – le triomphe de la Révolution bolchévique.³⁵

Breton draws a connecting thread through history, throwing in the names of famous poets rather haphazardly, to give direction to the new Surrealist aims, inspired by contemporary Communist revolutionary achievements. The rhetoric here does perhaps not clarify the problematic and fractious relationship between the Surrealists and the French Communist party in the early 1930s. In subsequent paragraphs, he quotes liberally from *Une saison en enfer*, including the phrase in which Rimbaud declared his 'horror of all work'.³⁶ Rimbaud's distaste for manual labour as a maxim for rejecting work is, by extension, a rejection of all social signifiers of conformity, such as school, the church and the family. Breton imbues the new Surrealist political volition with a kind of impotence:

Je dis que ce que l'attitude surréaliste, au départ, a eu de commun avec celle de Lautréamont et de Rimbaud et ce qui, une fois pour toutes, a enchaîné notre sort au leur, c'est le *défaitisme* de guerre.³⁷

The irrational exuberance has given way to a rational determination to effect social change; Breton was sensitive to the accusation that sedentary intellectuals only discussed change and did little to improve the real situation of the people. However, the threat of fascism could also be dealt with intellectually, as Breton makes clear, paraphrasing Lautréamont this time: 'De nouveaux frissons parcourent en effet toujours l'atmosphère intellectuelle: il ne s'agit que d'avoir le courage de les regarder en face'.³⁸ It is perhaps simplistic to characterise this change as Surrealism acting *for* something instead of acting *against* everything, yet it is clear that Breton sees political strife as an opportunity for combining the liberation of the mind with socialist agitation.

Thus Breton, in order to differentiate Surrealism from various other movements such as Symbolism and Dada, situates Surrealism historically. This historicism leads to Breton's narrative of Surrealism elevating itself to a level equal to that of its literary antecedents: a mythopoeic tendency defined Surrealism not only for its historical position but its revolutionary and political ambitions. Poetry thus becomes part of Surrealism's self-reflexive

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 'Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?', p. 226.

³⁶ 'J'ai horreur de tous les métiers.' Rimbaud, 'Mauvais Sang' in *Une saison en enfer*, p. 214.

³⁷ Breton, OC II, p. 227.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

ambition to agitate for social change; poetry embodied by Rimbaud as both a counter-cultural emblem of revolt as well as a more serious, historicised figure who – through his association with the Commune – also embodies the revolutionary potential of artistic projects. Breton's ideological stance enables him to use poetry to signal its subversive potential and subordinate it to a political project. That poetry is a means to communicate a political position, a position, furthermore, based on ideology, is radically different to Bataille's view of poetry and of project and it is Bataille's criticisms of Breton's Surrealist position that are analysed below.

The Useless Value of Poetry

Bataille's critique of Bretonian Surrealism serves the purpose of defining his own position as much as criticising Breton, often as a direct response to him. Bataille's assessment spills out into aesthetics as well as poetry: his essay 'Le Surréalisme au jour le jour' (1951) demonstrates that, in forming his views on poetry, Bataille has already been obliged to interact with Rimbaud as a Surrealist creation. In the second manifesto Breton refers to Rimbaud as a model and symbol of revolt, partly to instil the nascent Surrealist movement with some political currency, or the anti-bourgeois glamour of illegitimacy. Rimbaud is transformed from one avatar into another when the political situation surrounding Surrealism, primarily its links with the Communists and the problem of fascism, becomes its paramount concern. Rimbaud then becomes reincarnated as a symbol of both political dissent and commitment. Breton achieves this because, as is clear from the first manifesto onwards, he grants Surrealism a value – perhaps in reaction to the non-signifying credo of Dada – as an agent for aesthetic disruption and subversion. Bataille assigns Surrealism and poetry no such value. Where Breton criticises Rimbaud for terminating his poetic project, it is this same act of termination that Bataille later valorises in Rimbaud. Breton is determined to give this moment a use-value; Bataille is determined not to do so. However, Bataille's opposition during this period is only articulated in a tangential way in the article 'La Notion de dépense' (published in *La Critique sociale* in January 1933); his position is arguably not made fully clear until *L'Expérience intérieure* in which he writes: 'Le désœuvrement poétique, la poésie mise en projet, ce qu'un André Breton ne pouvait tolérer nu, que l'abandon voulu de ses phrases devait voiler'.³⁹ Breton idealises revolt to the point where it becomes a positive project on its own terms; for Bataille, revolt becomes an ongoing concern. Bataille's response to Rimbaud is thus a transmission of Rimbaud's negativity: if poetry is impotent then Rimbaud's willed sacrifice is the only way to give it meaning and give it a use, albeit an *impossible* one, to use Bataille's term. The question then becomes whether Rimbaud was perceived as becoming truly one with Surrealism as a prophet of contradictory

³⁹ *Ibid.*, OC V, pp. 62-3.

communication and instigator of political revolt, or whether Bataille's reading of Rimbaud is simply oppositional to Breton's or whether Bataille's interpretation can shed a novel interpretation on the character of Rimbaud's poetry and possibly on Rimbaud's attitude towards his own work. There is, then, the question of Bataille's engagement with Rimbaud and the extent to which it was already coloured by the Surrealist discourse. If so, then, to what extent does Bataille himself use Rimbaud as a means to undermine Breton's idealist project and does this contentious position become modified later on in Bataille's writings, during and after the war?

Bataille's first contribution to this polemic is in 'La "vielle taupe" et le préfixe "sur" dans les mots "surhomme" et "surréaliste"'. It was written sometime in 1929 or 1930 in response to the tirade in Breton's second manifesto.⁴⁰ It derides the Surrealist impulse of enabling a revolution through philosophy: 'Les archaïsmes peuvent être utiles aux conservateurs. Ils ne représentent dans l'esprit d'un révolté qu'une illumination icarienne.'⁴¹ This is an attempt to assign base matter a role in the Marxist concept of revolution, as base matter's value is precisely in its uselessness: it cannot be appropriated into systems of political control. As opposed to the model of Marxist upheaval, Breton valorises revolt even in its most undeniable, materialistic habitat: the bodies of the proletariat. Bataille's account is perhaps simplistic, especially in its consideration of Nietzsche, given Bataille would later defend him against others who draw the facile conclusions he himself does in this article. Bataille also makes the argument, in relation to myth, which accuses Surrealism of disingenuously not only making any distinction between materialism and idealism but, furthermore, of deliberately conflating materialism as idealism in order to fill the void of atheism with a new myth:

La même tendance double se retrouve dans le surréalisme actuel qui conserve, bien entendu, la prédominance des valeurs supérieures et éthérées (nettement exprimée pas cette addition du préfixe *sur*, piège dans lequel avait déjà donné Nietzsche avec *surhomme*). Plus exactement même, puisque le surréalisme se distingue immédiatement par un apport de valeurs basses (inconscient, sexualité, langage ordurier, etc.), il s'agit de donner à ces valeurs un caractère éminent en les associant aux valeurs les plus immatérielles.⁴²

This is not the myth Surrealism generates to elevate itself in a different sense but an unsatisfying simulacrum, one invalidated by denial of its negative composition. Bataille is also opening another front in the attack, devaluing Surrealist revolt not only in aesthetic terms but also in political terms. Bataille is therefore attacking Rimbaud through association with

⁴⁰ It was to be published in 1930 in the journal *Bifur* yet as it ceased to exist before the article could be published it did not appear until 1968, in *Tel Quel*.

⁴¹ Bataille, OC II, pp. 101-2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Breton's arbitration of history and appropriation of literary function. It is, in effect, the same kind of accusation Breton levelled at Claudel. For Bataille, the question is whether Rimbaud's silence is a failure of will or is actually an indication of an unreserved will and indeed, whether the willed abandonment of poetry for real life can be regarded as a failure. The philosophical site of Bataille and Breton's conflict can be usefully conceptualised in the *point*, referred to already above; it is the 'end point' for Breton but something much more unstable and harder to pinion in terms of its meaning for Bataille. Mary Ann Caws describes Breton's conception of the point as sublime:

[...] the *point sublime* is the place at once abstract and precise, where all the contraries are identified, that is, a metaphoric *double* of surrealist poetry in its most subtle, difficult, illogical state. [...] I, the double of the other, demonstrates a total alienation from the self which Breton, referring to Rimbaud, calls the 'marvellous wound'. Suffered it is therefore passive; the opposite of positive action or work of poetry on the world, it nevertheless provides the framework for the dictation of the unconscious, and for the revelation of dream⁴³

Caws highlights the doubled, or doubling, nature of Surrealist poetry, categorising it as a positive project but, seemingly, only in relation to its capacity to engage with the mind or unconscious. As discussed above, this is the aim Breton set out in the second manifesto and which he threads through his entire *œuvre*, notably providing the philosophical structure for *Les Vases communicants* but, most importantly, indicating that the point Surrealism (Surrealist poetry) is seeking out is *irrational* – the antithesis of its methodical examination of the mind. Surrealism's aim was to represent the irrational drives of humanity yet, at once, to exalt them as part of its project to effect social change. The ideological difference, then, becomes a linguistic distinction and, ultimately expressed in differing writing practices. Marie-Christine Lala, in her book *Georges Bataille, Poète du réel*, notes that Breton's point at/in which all contradictions disappear is indicative of the hierarchical, mythic-Icarian tendency in Surrealism to expose opposites, specifically in automatic writing – where the writer poeticises the mind but maintains the form and principles of *literature*:

Par conséquent, toutes les oppositions ne sont pas à mettre sur le même plan. Contrairement à Breton dont la formule citée mêle tous les éléments (vie et mort, réel et imaginaire, etc), Bataille discerne des degrés dans les oppositions des termes contraires. La contradiction du haut et du bas est essentielle en termes de haut et de bas matériel (par « bas-matériel », il faut entendre: l'inconscient, la sexualité) mais l'opposition entre noble et ignoble qui la recoupe, résultant d'un jugement moral prononcé, ne peut pas être considérée au même niveau, sous peine d'amalgame.⁴⁴

The gradation of values Lala nuances here are not opposites so that they may be collided or annulled but higher and lower forms of base matter, pointing to the essential terms that are

⁴³ Caws, *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism*, pp. 15-6.

⁴⁴ Marie-Christine Lala, *Georges Bataille, Poète du réel* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 88.

unable to be absorbed and countered by their opposites but remain, as useless and irreconciled. The question of the nature of the material thus becomes a question of writing and of literature. Poetry is the discourse that demonstrates most clearly the difference in writing practice between Bataille and Breton; poetry therefore is another front on which Bataille criticises Breton, Surrealism and his approach towards poetry:

C'est précisément en cette volonté d'agitation poétique, plutôt, que dans une technique dialectique littéralement puérile, que repose l'idéalisme asservissant: soit, si malheureuse en toutes choses, de s'en remettre aux régions supérieures de l'esprit; la haine de la vulgarité, de la basse vulgarité décomposant tout d'un mouvement rapide – laissant les trésors de l'esprit à la merci des premiers porcs – l'ombrageuse aristocratie, l'ascèse mentale, c'est avec de telles nécessités, à la fois puritaines et conventionnelles, que commence une hypocrisie qui n'a pas l'excuse d'une valeur pratique.⁴⁵

Wilful idealism leads to a distorted idea of poetry. By categorising 'higher' and 'lower' attributes of consciousness and work, the lower ones are susceptible to being reclaimed through dishonest and hypocritical means bereft of any practical purpose. This is evident, according to Bataille, in Surrealism's narcissistic reflections on its own psychoanalytic, literary experiments. Automatic writing is an attempt to write the currents of the imagination and to do so while in a trance or other hypnagogic state. The poet has to abdicate any active role in pursuing linguistic harmony, rational expression or poetic formulae in his attempt to replicate thought, as well as representation of the dream, the irrational unconscious or, as will be examined below, the damaged brain of a psychiatric patient. Breton's acknowledgment of Hegel as guiding the actions and ideals of Surrealism is the valorisation of reason and a rational discourse in the face of a mobile, volatile world. In the second manifesto, Breton acknowledges such a Hegelian system, which he has previously articulated as the rationale at the heart of Surrealism: 'Or, je ne crains pas de dire qu'avant le surréalisme, rien de systématique n'avait été fait dans ce sens, et qu'au point où nous l'avons trouvée, pour nous aussi *sous sa forme hégélienne la méthode dialectique était inapplicable*.'⁴⁶ Breton is therefore not only questioning the inapplicability of the dialectic within poetry but the reasons why it could not be applied to social agitation. Breton's embracing of the Hegelian system can therefore contain the forces of its contradictions by expressing their very forms, those of disintegration and reintegration. Marx has legitimised Breton's search for the end point so that idealism comes to be superseded by historical materialism: 'la nécessité d'en finir avec l'idéalisme proprement dit, la création du mot *surréalisme* seule nous en serait garante... de

⁴⁵ Bataille, OC II, p. 106.

⁴⁶ This citation is part of a long passage that Breton quotes again in 'Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?' in 1934. Breton, OC I, pp. 793-4.

la nécessité de ne pas nous en tenir au développement enfantin'.⁴⁷ In a sense Breton envisages Surrealism as *exceeding* itself by adopting the same trajectory in reaching the end point. However, from that point onwards Surrealism's mythic pose was to be taken at face value, thereby making Breton's position an easy target for Bataille and the dissident Surrealists. Surrealism's predilection for developing a state of self-consciousness seemed dishonest, as they retained an idealist, 'Icarian' stance rather than attempting to engage with material reality and to proffer more than a moral position. In 1930, Breton was satirised as Christ on the cover of 'Un Cadavre', accused of being more concerned with his own martyrdom to the idealist, Surrealist religion than artistic or political engagement.

In the article 'Précipités surréalistes (à l'ombre du préfixe sur)', from 1991, Denis Hollier comments on Breton's admiration for Marx's dialectical materialism, marrying it to poetic determinism. Hollier considers them to be symbiotic within Surrealism although reaching their highest and clearest pitch of expression in Lautréamont and Sade. Hollier notes that Breton's intention was to keep Lautréamont and Sade safe from the corruption of purification Rimbaud has undergone and to prevent them from gaining an exchange value. At the same time (between 1925 and 1930), in, 'La valeur d'usage de D.A.F. de Sade', Bataille accuses the Surrealists, again, of doing to Sade what they have already done to Rimbaud, which is to merge aesthetic value with use-value.⁴⁸ Hollier notes, however, that use-value as a break in communication is consonant with pleasure because it is the result of an incommunicability in the work; that is, pleasure is experienced on its own terms because the work's internal logic does not refer to anything beyond itself. Bataille draws together the attraction and mutually interdependent values of the sacred and profane, expenditure and loss and filth and beauty, into a concept he terms *heterology*.⁴⁹ It is this notion of heterology that informs the useless, unexchangeable nature of use-value, a notion to which Breton does not subscribe. Breton had already clarified, in 'Légitime défense' from 1926, that there was an unqualified and profound connection between poetry and revolution. Surrealism is not a rarefied experiment in literary creation but an engaged and dynamic revolt against a bourgeois commodification of words:

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 794.

⁴⁸ This was an unpublished and unfinished open letter, which Bataille himself thought lost. It was would perhaps have been included in Bataille's unexecuted book on Surrealism. In OC II, pp. 54-72.

⁴⁹ Lala highlights how heterology enables the difference between Breton and Bataille's practices of writing to be brought into sharp relief: 'Les questions de la communication (le communicable et l'incommunicable), de la représentation (le réel et l'imaginaire), du temps (le passé et le futur), ne peuvent donc pas être mises sur le même plan que le haut et le bas. Cette dernière opposition met en jeu les termes contraires d'un système, tandis que les trois autres sont des conséquences pratiques pour le sujet, engageant non plus seulement un mode de fonctionnement, mais une réflexion philosophique. Le système de l'hétérologie que Bataille forge depuis la mise en œuvre de la *différence non logique* dans l'écriture se sépare radicalement de la conception sublimante d'un « brillant intérieur et aveugle » selon Breton.' Lala, p. 89.

Nous avons toujours déclaré et nous maintenons que l'émancipation du style, réalisable jusqu'à un certain point dans la société bourgeoise, ne saurait consister dans un travail de laboratoire portant abstraitement sur les mots. Dans ce domaine comme dans un autre, il nous paraît que la révolte seule est créatrice et c'est pourquoi nous estimons que tous les sujets de révolte sont bons. Les plus beaux vers d'Hugo sont ceux d'un ennemi irréductible de l'oppression... Baudelaire maudissait Dieu et Rimbaud jurait ne pas être au monde.⁵⁰

Breton writes that because of poetry's very irreducibility, it remains entrenched against any kind of assimilation into conventional (bourgeois) discourse. Breton has therefore made poetry a catalyst of the revolution rather than just the puppet of revolt. Bataille was later to dismiss Breton's grand dreams of revolutionary fervour channelled through poetry; he accuses the Surrealists of playing at being revolutionaries and, in so doing, uses their own icons against them:

Les révolutionnaires russes se demandèrent s'ils étaient d'authentiques révolutionnaires: ils le furent. Les surréalistes savaient qu'ils ne pouvaient être authentiquement Rimbaud, et ils étaient en eux-mêmes certains d'être aussi loin de la révolution que de Rimbaud.⁵¹

This dismissal of Surrealism's revolutionary authenticity – written long afterwards, in 1951 – raises the question of Bataille's own position in regard to poetic authenticity and its potential for engagement with the real world. Surrealism until this point did not have any political legitimacy and could only gain any traction in order to effect change when it began to subordinate aesthetic practice to political project. It jettisoned its previously irrational idealism in favour of the dialectic of historical materialism and a mythically-determined affirmation of its own contradictory mechanisms. Bataille remained unconvinced by this and his conception of poetry is thus radically opposed to Breton's. Where Breton saw poetry as just one, albeit exalted, component in the great Surrealist struggle for a utopia, Bataille never combines poetry with action. Like Rimbaud, Bataille sees poetry's nature as irrational: it was to strip away anything that was considered poetic. Poetry is a machine that should be set to destroy the myths Breton was so keen to erect around it. It is this line of thought that leads to Bataille's later conception of poetry as a violent sacrifice or holocaust of words.⁵²

Bataille is sensitive to the same restlessness Breton detects in Rimbaud: the irrational need to exceed the limits of the potential of poetic experience. In terms of poetry, where Breton imposes his own Hegelian system of rational historicism on poetry to determine change, it remains, for Bataille, the exact opposite of this impulse: an irrational means to transgress literary values, changing nothing and only destroying itself in the process. The system of Breton and the anti-system of Bataille are irrevocably opposed to each other.

⁵⁰ Breton, *La Révolution surréaliste* 8, (Paris: Gallimard, 1926), p. 33.

⁵¹ Bataille, 'Le Surréalisme au jour le jour', OC VIII, p. 175.

⁵² '[...] la poésie... est... le sacrifice où les mots sont victimes.' *Ibid.*, OC V, p. 156.

Furthermore, Breton's account of poetry in its revolutionary aspect is still inextricable from any aims in the social sphere; Breton writes

Quelle qu'ait été l'évolution du surréalisme dans le domaine politique, si pressant que nous en soit venu l'ordre de n'avoir à compter pour la libération de l'homme, *première condition de la libération de l'esprit*, que sur la Révolution prolétarienne, je puis bien dire que nous n'avons trouvé aucune raison valable de revenir sur les moyens d'expression qui nous sont propres et dont à l'usage il nous a été donné de vérifier qu'ils nous servaient bien. Passe qui voudra condamnation sur telle image spécifiquement surréaliste que j'ai pu, au hasard d'une préface, employer, on n'en sera pas quitte pour cela avec les images. « Cette famille est une nichée de chiens. » (Rimbaud.)⁵³

Bataille's reaction to Breton's idealism thus forms the basis for his own assessment of revolt. By developing his critique through an emphasis on materialism, he echoes the concerns of Rimbaud's poetry, concerns that form the basis of his major project *Documents*. I suggest then, as analogous to Breton's affirmative reading of Rimbaud as a mythic figure in poetic history, that Bataille takes the end of Rimbaud's writing as analogous to the end of this myth, the dialectical precedent for his own concept of the absence of myth.

Bataille's first interaction with Surrealism then, is also the beginnings of his interaction with Rimbaud. Bataille's interaction with Rimbaud is not only distinct from Breton's in its methodology but in its essential aims; for Breton poetry can assist in communicating the Surrealist revolution, but for Bataille the term *communication* refers to something beyond project or revolt and certainly in the case of poetry, beyond language. Poetry is, of course, formed from language but it expresses something else beyond the meaning of the words within it. As I discuss in Chapter 2, later on in the 1940s, Bataille does not consider poetry in purely formalist terms (what is poetry and what is not poetry and nor – at this stage – poets as social-political figures) but rather in terms of communicating an inexpressible experience. This experience also overlaps with an evocation of the sacred. The sacred, according to Bataille, was a feeling once common in primitive religion as a momentary communion of the community and their sense of mortality, usually felt in the event of a sacrifice or other ritualised experience. Breton's Surrealism is a secular project, in which part of its revolt includes an anti-clerical tendency, considering Rimbaud's *œuvre* as explosively critical of religion and its institutions, in which binary dualisms are annihilated in a revelatory instant.⁵⁴ Bataille's reading of Rimbaud's project, outlined later in *L'Expérience intérieure*, represents the incorporation of the negativity of materialism as a means to experience the continuous flows between opposites in momentary slippage and

⁵³ Breton, OC I, p. 803. The quotation from Rimbaud is taken from 'Délires II' in *Une Saison en enfer*.

⁵⁴ Though of course Breton and his leadership of Surrealism were heavily criticised for precisely being too dogmatic and pseudo-ecclesiastic, notably in the articles 'Le Lion châtré' (1929) and 'Un Cadavre' (1930).

misrecognition (or transgression) of subject-object categories. Breton's insistence on a totality of experience distorts the true Surrealist state, according to Bataille.

Marvellous and Monstrous Flowers

Bataille's position at this time – in relation to writing, to poetry and to aesthetics – is articulated in his deconstruction of mythic symbolism in 'Le Langage des fleurs', published in *Documents* in 1929. This is a position, I suggest, that has as one of its precedents, Rimbaud's poem from 1871 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs', a kind of lyrical manifesto advocating the destruction of poetry as mimetic idealism. *Documents* is Bataille's response to the idealist and mythopoeic Surrealism of Breton; its agenda was to expose the repressed traces of primitive and even of mythic materialism as a riposte to myth and idealism. Michel Surya's reading places Breton and Bataille in binary opposition before subsequently claiming that love (a term not clarified any further) is in fact an expression of shame or another manifest perversion that engenders it. It is therefore, *only* a monstrous love (a love monstrously deformed by shame) that can approach the psychological truth of its condition in any meaningful way:

André Breton fit du surréalisme l'instrument du *merveilleux*; la haine où, prétendait-il, il était tenu, le ridicule où tous le précipitaient, il leur voulut justice... A l'autre pôle, Georges Bataille fut de *Documents* l'instrument du *monstrueux*... C'est au plus bas, au plus vil, au plus souillé que Bataille, avec tout ce qu'il y eut avant lui d'hommes écourés d'une fuite si lâche, cherche de l'existence l'ininterprétable vérité: 'Ce qu'on aime vraiment, on l'aime surtout dans la honte'. L'amour du merveilleux dit *Non*, profondément, à l'existence: il témoigne contre elle.⁵⁵

Bataille sees Surrealism's recreation of myth as reality as misguided, not least because it ruins the precept of myth; if myth has become real then reality, because it is reality, cannot be mythic. Surrealism's *becoming* is Breton's response to the perceived attenuation of the sacred in (modern, Western) society, while Bataille does nonetheless fetishise silence; the absence of myth is the ground on which to build a new structure of the sacred. Rimbaud's sacrifice of his own poetry is thus also the sacrifice of one form of communication. According to Bataille, communication is required in order to give sacrifice meaning as well as to represent its own negation. Myth on the one hand and material-realism on the other are two ideologies that write that their own version of representation. The tension between the two is that which motivates Rimbaud's scathing critique of beauty as a symbolic paragon in 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs' that, in poetic discourse, disfigures depiction through aesthetic signs and additionally inscribes an oppressive moral authority into its representational discourse. Poetic discourse grounded in beauty becomes static, reactionary and isolated from the real-

⁵⁵ Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille, la mort à l'oeuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), pp. 156-7.

world language from which it develops. I suggest this poem offers an ideological consideration of material realism through its linguistic subversion and subversively uses poetry to undermine mimetic poetry and to critique categorical subjectivism.

Rimbaud's poem may then be seen as a subversion of poetic rhetoric but it has also been interpreted, not least in Kristin Ross' study *The Emergence of Space*, as the site where a rhetorical strategy prefigures and determines a political aspect. Some of Rimbaud's early poems display an implicit social consciousness (in, for example, 'Le Forgeron', 'Chant de guerre parisien' and 'Les Mains de Jeanne-Marie') but in 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs', the literary critique is ironically undertaken through politically charged language, one of the reasons Rimbaud strongly appealed to the Surrealists. Ross connects Rimbaud's adolescent and marginal vernacular to his cultural context, shaped most dramatically by the Paris Commune of 1871, implying that poetic language is encoded by and intrinsic to social environment rather than distinct from it. Ross' readings of Rimbaud are undertaken in regard to *social space* which is a way of 'mediating between the discursive and the event'.⁵⁶ Ross accounts for social space as a kind of Lefebvrian vision of *everyday life* and it is everyday life – articulated in exalted terms in *Une saison en enfer* – that Ross sees in Rimbaud's poetry: 'Moi! [...] je suis rendu au sol, avec un devoir à chercher, et la réalité rugueuse à étreindre!'⁵⁷ Ross detects this everyday life in his poetry, beginning her account in the poems influenced either politically or culturally (and usually both) by the real-world events of the Commune. Everyday life is opposed to both subjective, overtly phenomenological readings as well as objective, structural accounts; everyday life represents a third 'space' that shelters both the subjective and objective.⁵⁸

'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs' is, according to Ross, a subversion of the Parnassian idea of an hermetic and rarefied poetic space, communicated through Rimbaud's deliberate misuse of geography and, more generally, parodic employment of scientific discourse, particularly botany and taxonomy. The poem articulates a perception that the marvellous is a systematic denial of reality. 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs' was included in his letter of the 14th July 1871 to Théodore de Banville and, dedicated to him, the poem reveals Rimbaud's ambivalence at this moment; still a young, provincial poet eager to

⁵⁶ Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 8.

⁵⁷ Rimbaud, 'Adieu', p. 235.

⁵⁸ As such, Ross' readings are tangential to my own; my analysis aims to analyse the relation between the subjective and objective in the matrix of experience in Rimbaud's project rather than delineating a separate, politically overdetermined space in which to consider his poetry. This is not to claim that politics – in a very general sense – does not interest Rimbaud or that social-political concerns do not explicitly motivate some of his poems but, from an experiential perspective, the social-political is not a privileged term of contention. The social-political aspect is, of course, significant when considering ideological influences but, I suggest, as is the case with the discussion in this chapter, the political aspect belongs to the contemporaneous milieu rather than Rimbaud's historical situation.

demonstrate his knowledge of poetic discourse yet the poem is at once a pointed parody of the Parnassian poetic style and mocks its thematic obsession with flora.⁵⁹ The second stanza of the second part mentions Banville by name:

Quand Banville en ferait neiger,
Sanguinolentes, tournoyantes,
Pochant l'œil fou de l'étranger
Aux lectures mal bienveillantes!⁶⁰

The poem's scope widens to critique the entire practice of poetic tradition, driven to degrade not only its mimetic task but also its own purpose, with its relentless obsession with beauty (fourth to sixth stanzas):

Des lys! Des lys! On n'en voit pas!
Et dans ton Vers, tel que les manches
Des Pécheresses aux doux pas,
Toujours frissonnent ces fleurs blanches!

Toujours, Cher, quand tu prends un bain,
Ta chemise aux aisselles blondes
Se gonfle aux brises du matin
Sur les myosotis immondes!

L'amour ne passe à tes octrois
Que les Lilas, – ô balançoires!
Et les violettes du Bois,
Crachats sucrés des Nymphes noires!⁶¹

In the first part Rimbaud begins to describe a garishly excessive, grotesque world bursting with flowers, taking the word of Grandville as well as other Parnassians such as Mendès literally. He then goes on to castigate the poets for their arbitrariness – 'De Lotos bleu ou d'Helianthes' – alloyed, meaninglessly, to sententious clichés of 'sujets saints/ Pour de jeunes communiantes!', the flowers compounding rather than distracting from the synthetic, staid and reactionary verse.⁶² In the third part (stanzas 16 to 19) Rimbaud's narrator directly accuses the Parnassians of deliberate obfuscation, misrepresentation and ignorance, asking:

Ne peux-tu pas, ne dois-tu pas
Connaître un peu ta botanique?

Tu ferais succéder, je crains,
Aux Grillons roux les Cantharides,
L'or des Rios au bleu des Rhins, –
Bref, aux Norwèges les Florides:

⁵⁹ 'Toujours les végétaux Français,/ Hargneux, phtisiques, ridicules' (lines 37-38), Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, p. 115.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-5.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 115-6.

Mais, Cher, l'Art n'est plus, maintenant,
– C'est la vérité, – de permettre
A l'Eucalyptus étonnant
Des constrictions d'un hexamètre

La!... Comme si les Acajous
Ne servaient, même en nos Guyanes,
Qu'aux cascades des sapajous,
Au lourd délire des lianes!⁶³

The *marvellous* becomes its own reality, ignoring that of the exterior, and is seduced by its own nonsensical reformulations of the world according to the ideal.⁶⁴ Rimbaud's virulently sarcastic 'Cher' is a plea to the poet to refrain from ruining the potential that poetry has to find a balance between beauty and 'ugliness' as, without that, beauty becomes grotesque if there is no objective measure by which to judge it conveyed in the fourth part (stanzas 24 and 25):

Incague la mer de Sorrente

Où vont les cygnes par milliers;
Que tes strophes soient des réclames
Pour l'abattis des mangliers
Fouillés des hydres et des lames!⁶⁵

The suggestion that poetry should not be myopic to its own potential, therefore becoming its own parody, is succeeded by the suggestion that it only finds something closer to an authentic voice when confronting something which does not necessarily conform to aesthetic convention, something yet strange and new that Rimbaud outlines in the fifth part (stanza 35 and stanzas 37 to 39):

Toi, fais jouer dans nos torpeurs,
Par les parfums les hystéries;
Exalte-nous vers des candeurs
Plus candides que les Maries...

[...]

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 116-7.

⁶⁴ Ross highlights the 'spatial' element of language but differentiates her spatial reading from a typically Saussurian one. Saussure's linguistics emphasise the relation between signifier and signified (rather than reference) creating a system of signified elements that play with each other in a supra-social, extralinguistic space, distinct, according to Ross, from everyday life. '[In] Rimbaud's poem [there is] another kind of spatiality at work. Rimbaud's linguistics is more concerned with the problem of reference [...] of denotation, than with signification'. The use of the possessive pronoun (arguably also satirising colonial practice of using definite articles to emphasise territory as possessions) 'nos Guyanes' is denotational rather than connotative, pointing to a specific geographical location, in contrast to the prevailing nineteenth-century Orientalist appropriation of 'other' names to create an imagined scene comprised of clichés and stereotypes. Ross, p. 88.

⁶⁵ Rimbaud, pp. 117-8.

De tes noirs Poèmes, – Jongleur!
Blancs, verts, et rouges dioptriques,
Que s'évadent d'étranges fleurs
Et des papillons électriques!

Voilà, c'est le Siècle d'enfer!
Et les poteaux télégraphiques
Vont orner, – lyre aux chants de fer,
Tes omoplates magnifiques

Surtout, rime une version
Sur le mal des pommes de terre!
– Et, pour la composition
De Poèmes pleins de mystère⁶⁶

Rimbaud himself conjures the strange imagery suitable for the 'age of hell', in songs of iron and of electric butterflies, sublimating the arbitrary signs of decorative, aesthetically-determined poetry to re-assess the interior essence of banal and ordinary objects from 'everyday life', to use Ross' term, in an attempt to resituate received standards of beauty. The poem diagnoses an obsession with beauty to be as pathological as one with ugliness and filth; its compressed octosyllabic measure within a pentameter rhyme, mostly avoiding any florid language of its own, conveys Rimbaud's exasperation at the weird simulacrum of beauty, which hovers over and undermines poetry. It is in these stanzas that the perspective as well as the tone of the poem changes abruptly, arguably slipping into didacticism but, nonetheless, approaching something like a manifesto for poetry. Ross points to stanza 38 that signals the appearance of the body, albeit synecdochically, hitherto absent in the poem:

His body has changed. At stake, here, in other words, is not mere "thematic" change – the substituting of economic questions for aesthetic or picturesque ones. Instead, in this complex corporeal allegory of technology, the natural and the technological adhere as tightly to one another as they do in neologisms contemporary to Rimbaud such as "steamhorse" or "horse-power": developed technology is fused with the natural, living creature and from that site will emanate another hybrid, vaguely Whitmanian formation: a song of steel.⁶⁷

The blurring of aesthetic vision and interpenetration of distinct categories radically projects the poem's vision into a proto-Surrealist space that predicts the literature and social-cultural concerns of the twentieth (and twenty-first) century. The First World War would, however, mutate the liberating potential described in this poem into profound anxiety concerning the dynamic between the human and technological. By preferring categorical blurring of referents, rather than linguistic mimesis, the poem points to the destinations that can be explored by poetry. By crossing the boundaries of the stable framework of the sign and the

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20.

⁶⁷ Ross, pp. 92-3.

signified body – venturing further than the imagined travels to the projected, pseudo-imperialist fantasy of exotic lands – poetry can and should plunge deeper into the psychological territories that remain unknown.

In Bataille's 'Le Langage des fleurs', he performs a similar category shift, although it is not to replace the flower as an arbitrary symbol of beauty – and thus of morality – but to debase it. Rimbaud's repudiation of an aesthetic, poetic economy based on arbitrary signs is to initiate a discourse based on social-cultural referents from the poet's immediate environment. However, this does not imply a constriction of vision or a lack of spiritual compassion but the reconstitution of the subject to show how he is already inextricable from his surroundings on intimately physical, personal and political planes. Bataille's strategic rejection of aesthetic signifiers and their arbitrary moral authority remains abstracted (i.e. purposed to philosophical ends rather than to question poetic, linguistic representation) although he does consider flowers *as* objects, thus implicitly acknowledging language contains the roots of morality. In metaphorically picking apart the flowers Bataille implies the primacy of the referent over and above the signified as instrumental in exposing flowers as *things*; their essence is organic and material and, as such, no different to the manure-soil from which they grow and depend upon.

The use of flowers as material signifieds of beauty is precisely the same aspect Bataille scrutinised ascribing the ontology of Surrealist idealism to a naïve philosophical and spiritual projection, of perfectionism. Bataille links the random beauty of flowers to that of women, a natural, almost accidental and immutable truth: a sign camouflaged by its own signified:

Sans doute il est impossible de rendre compte à l'aide d'une formule abstraite des éléments qui peuvent donner cette qualité à la fleur. Toutefois, il n'est pas sans intérêt d'observer que si l'on dit que les fleurs sont belles, c'est qu'elles paraissent conformes à ce que doit être, c'est-à-dire qu'elles représentent pour ce qu'elles sont, l'idéal humain.⁶⁸

This article reveals how the polemic at this time, based on ideological divergence, affects Bataille's assessment of literature and art. What is at stake in this divide, beyond the political surface currents of Surrealism, is the status of representation and its capacity to depict truth autonomously and independently of moral principles within a mimetic system.

Beauty engenders and determines this effect of desire while simultaneously disavowing it. In this way, idealism cannot grant meaning or form to any object or action opposed to it. Bataille proceeds to figuratively pick apart the flowers in exactly the same way as Rimbaud, in an attempt to strip them of their mystique. In Bataille: 'la plupart des fleurs

⁶⁸ Bataille, OC I, p. 175-6.

n'ont qu'un développement médiocre et se distinguent à peine du feuillage';⁶⁹ in Rimbaud (stanza 29): 'Les fleurs, pareilles à des mufles'.⁷⁰ Bataille's flowers obscure an inherent sexual character represented by their aesthetically unappealing interiors: 'les fleurs les plus belles sont déparées au centre par la tache velue des organes sexuels';⁷¹ in Rimbaud an aesthetic, ersatz banality is celebrated (stanza 31): 'Trouve des Fleurs qui soient des chaises!'.⁷² Bataille goes on to indicate that flowers are, as all earthly organisms, rooted in material reality and dirt and that any perceived immutable perfection is deceptive: flowers droop impotently, back to earth, when they die and this downwards trajectory thus undermines their moral 'standing':

Il est impossible d'exagérer les oppositions tragi-comiques qui sont marquées au cours de ce drame de la mort indéfiniment joué entre terre et ciel, et il est évident qu'on ne peut paraphraser ce duel dérisoire qu'en introduisant non tant comme une phrase, mais plus exactement comme une tache d'encre, cette banalité écœurante: *que l'amour a l'odeur de la mort*. Il semble, en effet, que le désir n'ait rien à voir avec la beauté idéale, ou plus exactement qu'il exerce uniquement pour souiller et flétrir cette beauté qui n'est pour tant d'esprits mornes et rangées qu'une limite, un *impératif catégorique*. On représenterait ainsi la fleur la plus admirable non, suivant le verbiage des vieux poètes, comme l'expression plus ou moins fade d'un idéal angélique, mais, tout au contraire, comme un sacrilège immonde et éclatant.⁷³

Here too Bataille is dismissive of the unreal, *angelic* expression of beauty and idealism through flowers, in conventional discourse; he proposes moreover that the essence of beauty is not narcissistic resolution but something inexpressible: 'an ink stain'. Bataille is not only repudiating Surrealism's moral idealism but calling the representation of anything based on a moral or idealist system into question. It may be argued that 'Le Langage des fleurs' (published in *Documents* number 3 in June 1929) inserts Bataille's concept of the *informe* into the contested debate on art, although the concept itself is not defined in the 'critical dictionary' until number 7, published in December 1929.⁷⁴ Bataille may be seen to move ahead from Rimbaud at this point, where 'Le Langage des fleurs' asks questions about representation that Rimbaud in the poem 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs' does not. It is not until later that Rimbaud begins to interrogate and subvert mimetic representation notably in 'Voyelles'. In 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs' the aim is to address the

⁶⁹ Bataille, p. 176.

⁷⁰ Rimbaud, p. 118.

⁷¹ Bataille, OC I, p. 176.

⁷² Rimbaud, p. 118.

⁷³ Bataille, OC I, p. 176-7.

⁷⁴ Johanna Malt defines the *informe* as not only the absence of form but its negation: 'Formlessness, or rather the *informe* is not simply the absence of form but its denial. It is the recalcitrant, repressed, chaotic inevitability of matter, resistant to control and to meaning that inheres within all form.' Malt, p. 192.

problem of the moral hierarchy and to depict beauty as a random characteristic like any other in nature in the last stanza of the fourth part (stanza 33):

Sers-nous, ô Farceur, tu le peux,
Sur un plat de vermeil splendide
Des ragoûts de Lys sirupeux
Mordant nos cuillers Alfénide!⁷⁵

Rimbaud, in a pseudo-alchemical process, makes this new substance something ambiguous, either a means of distilling the flower's beauty, or else a new means of transforming it into an exchange commodity, as Bonnefoy's reading of the poem makes clear:

Les sucs, venant, d'un au-delà de la forme, nous font penser à l'être qui se révèle. Le tangible, le nutritif dans ce que n'était qu'agrément, disent la valeur enivrante de l'Inconnu. Et dégrader l'être en utile et le lyrisme en commerce a une valeur polémique, contre la stérile beauté.⁷⁶

Rimbaud's polemic results in the potential for something new, or at least, the introduction of an unpredictable unknown, Bataille's however, rests at castigating any substitution of organic forms for philosophical or moral concepts; except, of course, when those concepts are opposed to any moral exaltation. Idealism is synonymous with the marvellous and where Rimbaud's plea is to develop the art of poetic metaphor and rediscover the objects of reality, Bataille's intransigence results in the flowers' petals thrown into liquid manure, depriving them of even their symbolic power and returning them to their fundamental, soluble formlessness. For moralists and aesthetic traditionalists, the flower symbolises the double of human beauty and the perception of beauty as natural yet also precious. Bataille strips away any doubling capacity because it represents – as for Rimbaud – the failure of lyric poetry and, furthermore, the failure of metaphor, even, perhaps, casting doubt on the veracity and capacity of language. Ross, in her discussion of the poem notes that: 'Poetic discourse replaces the "referent"; the word "flower" eliminates the flower. Poetic language speaks of things in their absence rather than in their presence.'⁷⁷ This is significant for the *voyant* project Rimbaud would later develop in his poetry in regard to the subject. The subject becomes delineated by his experience of language, social-cultural context and history, all of which alienate and attenuate the subject. In my analysis of Rimbaud's significance for Bataille's poetics, the subject is equally dispossessed by his inner experience, experience that comes to stand for the subject so that the subject becomes defined and situated by his desire rather than by his physical presence. His physical being, however, remains the place where the destructive and disarticulating effects of desire are depicted.

⁷⁵ Rimbaud, p. 119.

⁷⁶ Yves Bonnefoy, *Rimbaud par lui-même* (Paris: Seuil, 1961), p. 55.

⁷⁷ Ross, p. 89.

Breton, however, seeks to collapse the barriers between the beautiful and the real. Surrealism's faith in automatism stems from its ability to trace the interface between the conscious and unconscious and to shed, in a sense, the representational aspect of language in a way that echoes Bataille's Sadeian gesture of discarding morality like so many petals being thrown into manure. If Breton could find a resonance in Rimbaud's demand that poetry 'exalt us' by redefining the ontological limits of the real within poetry, rather than through the degraded mimetic representation Rimbaud decried, the second manifesto made no such concession to Bataille's attack on idealistic flowers. Breton accuses him of concealing an ideology, that his unreasonable – irrational – opposition to all systems of representation is merely an affectation. For Breton, Bataille's projects (such as they were, comprising by that time *Histoire de l'œil*, *Aréthuse* and *Documents*) were only a conduit to disseminate his pathological obsessions with death and decay.⁷⁸ Breton in questioning, essentially, Bataille's commitment to revolt, is avoiding the fact that revolt does demand an obsessive devotion and that the communication of maintaining a coherent vision of the revolutionary state is overwhelmingly problematic.

Bataille generously reappraises automatic writing after the war, noting the positive implications of its sovereign, affirmative praxis. Automatic writing is not only a means to source the Surrealist point of annulled contradictions but an active investigation of interweaving states.⁷⁹ In the first manifesto Breton militates against the fantastic giving ground to the real, simply because the real is marvellous – there is no distinction:

Pour cette fois, mon intention était de faire justice de la *haine du merveilleux* qui sévit chez certains hommes, de ce ridicule sous lequel ils veulent le faire tomber. Tranchons-en: le merveilleux est toujours beau, n'importe quel merveilleux est beau, il n'y a même que le merveilleux qui soit beau. [...] Ce qu'il y a d'admirable dans le fantastique, c'est qu'il n'y a plus de fantastique: il n'y a que le réel.⁸⁰

The concept of automatic writing is his response to Rimbaud's call for the poet to be a seer, it is the agency of continuation of the *voyant* project, for which it necessarily demands the poet be actively seeking a representative account of reality untainted by subjectivity. Therefore,

⁷⁸ 'Le cas de M. Bataille présente ceci de paradoxal et pour lui de gênant que sa phobie de « l'idée », à partir du moment où il entreprend de la communiquer, ne peut prendre qu'un tour idéologique. Un état de déficit conscient à forme généralisatrice, diraient les médecins. Voici en effet, quelqu'un qui pose en principe que « l'horreur n'entraîne aucune complaisance pathologique et joue uniquement le rôle du fumier dans la croissance végétale, fumier d'odeur suffocante, sans doute mais salubre à la plante ». Cette idée, sous son apparence infiniment banale, est, à elle seule, malhonnête ou pathologique (il resterait à prouver que... Hegel... et Baudelaire, et Rimbaud, et Marx, et Lénine se sont, très particulièrement conduits dans la vie comme des porcs).' Breton, OC I, p. 320.

⁷⁹ Foster also describes the significance of automata – including the tranced automatic writer himself – in Surrealist iconography, as symbols of at once realised and confounded desire, containing both erotic and thanatic elements.

⁸⁰ The second part is a footnote and forms part of Breton's commentary on Lewis' *The Monk*. Both of these quotations reappear in 'Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?' Breton, OC I, pp. 319-20.

rather than seeing poetry as symbolic of the death of communication, poetry is the restorative action to renounce the mythic framework of Surrealism. This framework is arguably destabilised by the internal contradiction of standing for wilful irrationality but communicated through hackneyed signifiers of beauty and clichéd symbolism. Perhaps the distinction between Breton's form of revolt and Rimbaud's is that Breton's has an aim – despite remarks of the kind written in the second manifesto stating that a pure Surrealist act is to shoot at people in the street randomly – whereas Rimbaud's is an unstable force that transforms conventional notions of representation itself.

Poetry, according to Bataille, can approach the same feeling as a shared ritual: of illuminating a common sense of belonging and thus of community, if only fleetingly. It is this sense of the sacred that Rimbaud writes about in 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs'. Rimbaud praises the modern world and the mundane objects that, while not conventionally beautiful, are all the more precious for their symbolic value: communication (telegraph poles); community and belonging in eating humble foodstuffs from the land (potatoes).

However the theoretical, thematic violence in 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs' will dominate Bataille's engagement, following the precedent of Rimbaud and the progression from theoretical violence to the violence of sacrifice. Bataille therefore sees in Rimbaud's poetic project a precedent for the confirmation of his own avowed hatred of poetry (also hatred, in its genitive inflection: the hatred *of* poetry, expressed most cogently in 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs' and elaborated on by Bataille in *L'Impossible*). This progression will determine Bataille's consideration of poetry as ambiguous, paradoxical and violent: poetry communicates ambiguously and violently because it enacts the paradox that it communicates its own negation, represented by silence. It is these concerns of communication and silence, myth and violence as well as the key concept of sacrifice that will be explored in the following chapter in Bataille's unmediated and direct engagement with Rimbaud during the 1940s in *L'Expérience intérieure*, *L'Impossible* and *L'Erotisme*.

Conclusion

The ideological polemic between Bataille and Breton that lead to a more personal and vitriolic dispute on the issue of pathological creative practice, camouflages their aesthetic similarity, as Benjamin's account of Surrealism demonstrates, yet, I suggest, this like aesthetic does not extend as far as their writing practice. The polemic under discussion in this chapter – or rather the writings that emerged from the period of the dispute – demonstrate that, despite the overarching discord, resonating along ideological lines, Surrealism was not a monolithic or static project. Breton's Surrealism shifted its idealist focus from a literary-historical sphere to a social-political one, increasing the intensity of its political engagement. Breton did subordinate poetic idealism to a political project the implications yet, ironically,

the consequences for Surrealist writing practice were an increased emphasis on the materiality of language. Bataille's polemical relation with Breton during this period must be viewed in light of his repositioning after the war; this additional perspective onto their respective writing practices reveals greater nuances within Surrealist practice and a greater proximity in their position, primarily in regard to a materialist or non-representational approach to language. Breton was unable to communicate revolt without his ideology giving way to historical materialism. The state of Surrealism as one that recuperates psychopathological reactions to existence may be one reason why Breton, in 1934, made the semantic point of distinguishing a new *rational* Surrealism.

I suggest that amongst other things Bataille is reacting against Breton's appropriation of Rimbaud as an insufficient response to the poetic system Rimbaud set in motion. In instigating this opposition to the Surrealists, Bataille is able to highlight the negative potential inherent in Rimbaud's work that Breton ignores (up to a point). Bataille, at this time, avoids active judgements on Rimbaud's *œuvre* and the questions of whether his silence is a passive or active gesture, whether Rimbaud created a myth able to move beyond absence and silence, or whether he enables a refutation of the abject and absent poet. Hal Foster, in his reading of Surrealism, notes that Breton's project to find and fix the point of non-contradiction is hampered by the Surrealists' own vexed perception of themselves.⁸¹ Foster sees Surrealism as haunted by the uncanny and, therefore by death; yet, as is made clear in 'Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?' (as well as in the second manifesto) Surrealism is also obsessed by the aura of history. Breton has instigated the Surrealist myth in reference to Rimbaud, among others, by means of the Paris Commune, yet Surrealism was haunted by inaction, because of its desire for revolutionary action and liberty. Foster suggests that Surrealism's turn to the Marxist-Hegelian dialectic – Breton's post-1925 rational Surrealism – reveals desire to be more like a political movement than a religion and it is this disjunction and disavowal of darker, more troubling aspects of desire that accounts for Breton's own abandonment of Rimbaud the poet and his adoption of the biographical-historical Rimbaud from the Commune.

Rimbaud's project, from the point of the *voyant* letters takes the form of a project that reaches its highest expression in *Une saison en enfer*. This contains the link between language and the subject in two shifts, of which the first is the linguistic shift from a monophonic to a polyphonic mode thus triggering the second shift, the disintegration of the monadic subject into a multifaceted subjectivity. This messy indistinction is arguably unappealing to the Surrealists, who preferred instead to analyse the fissiparous nature of morality and logic

⁸¹ 'The paradox of surrealism, the ambivalence of its most important practitioners, is this: even as they work to find this point they do not want to be pierced by it, for the real and the imagined, the past and the future only come together in the experience of the uncanny, and its stake is death.' Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1993) p. xix.

rather than the subject. Foster analyses this as a process of sublimation, perhaps related to Surrealism's failure to enact a revolution of its own.

It is at this point where sublimation confronts desublimation that surrealism breaks down [...] such is the stake of the split between official Bretonian and dissident Bataillean factions circa 1929 [...] Although both groups recognise the uncanny power of desublimation, the Bretonian surrealists resist it, while the Bataillean surrealists elaborate it – especially [...] along the line of its imbrication with the death drive.⁸²

Foster's assessment seems to align Bataille with Breton in seeking a resolution to contradiction, yet Bataille's fusion is predicated not on the individual subject but on the destruction of the link between subject and object. Breton's unifying model symbolises the transcendence from history he wants to achieve through transformation of the real, therefore elevating the individual onto a plane of Hegelian reconciliation, between practical and theoretical knowledge. For Breton, poetry communicates a discourse of unity but for Bataille poetry represents the impossibility of unity. Whereas Bataille disavows any connection, Breton valorises the mind rather than the body. Lala goes further than Foster's Bataillean reading of Surrealism to emphatically state that there is no contiguity between Breton's Surrealism and the parodic, subversive Surrealism of Bataille:

Il n'y a pas de conciliation des contraires, pas de réduction à la commune mesure, pas d'identité possible de l'être... l'être ouvre sur la mort... Ce moment irréductible, l'écriture de Bataille ne le ramène pas à l'analogie par le biais de la métaphore et de l'image, comme le font les surréalistes en préservant l'illusion symboliste. Sans cesse elle l'arrache au recouvrement qui le menace.⁸³

Lala points to the unstable nature of Bataille's poetic writing, in contrast to the Surrealist tendency – in what is, I would suggest, a reductive reading of Surrealist poetic and visual practice – that attempts to recuperate meaning through coherent linguistic forms, most visible in symbols and metaphor. Bataille affirms that the Surrealist revolt against history is impotent. The stage at which Breton leaves Rimbaud in the early 1930s is as a figure of revolt, of communal revolt – literally in the Commune – as a conscript to carry the Surrealist revolution to term, is a very different stage to that which Bataille will engage with him. Bataille's own shadowing of Surrealism has the effect of infecting Breton's affirmative dialectic of transformation with the material fact of death, subverting Breton's continuous sublimation of the sexual to the aesthetic.

The arguments in this chapter have sought to show how Bataille's criticisms of Bretonian Surrealism were instrumental in the development of Bataille's poetics and,

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁸³ Lala, *Georges Bataille*, p. 88.

furthermore, in distinguishing his own writing practice, a practice set against mimetic representation through an emphatic consideration of materialism and a poetics that militates against poetry. Their respective ideological approaches condition their radically opposed readings of Rimbaud, readings that also determine their approach to poetry. The major distinctions that arose from their polemic centre on the status of poetry and the role of project. In contrast to Breton's adoption of Rimbaud's project as the precursor to Surrealist revolution, Bataille views Rimbaud's project as curtailed and terminal, conceptualising this terminus as a sacrifice. The Surrealist subject is one who is ready for the psychological revelations that accompany the achievement of political revolution and freedom; Bataille's conceptualisation of the subject, which will be explored in Chapter 2, radically departs from external, social-political engagement and turns inwards. Where this chapter read Rimbaud's presence in Breton's Surrealist manifestos and political essays, the next chapter will read Rimbaud across Bataille's generically disparate writings spanning the 1940s to 1950s.⁸⁴ In these texts, poetry does not function as an idealist catalyst to transform an artistic project into a revolutionary one but as the very means to sacrifice the concept of project and do so by turning poetry into a record of articulating subjectivity dominated, in turn, by this sacrificial impetus.

⁸⁴ The first reference to Rimbaud after this period comes, some time after, in the article 'Le Sacré', published in *Cahiers d'art* in 1939: 'Certainement la possibilité d'assigner maintenant un objet définissable à une tentative aussi étrange tient davantage à son échec qu'à des moments de réussite fugitive. Une amertume insensée et une aversion arrogante pour soi-même en ont été les résultats les plus accomplis. Ce sont de tels résultats – le seul nom de Rimbaud les symbolise en tant qu'ils rendent à peu près tout méprisable.' This description marks Rimbaud in an antagonistic stance with his project, in a struggle of individual will within *himself*. This struggle has been internalised until the point it resurfaces again in dramatised form in his *Une saison en enfer*. Bataille, OC I, p. 562.

Part II

Sacrifice, Form and Experience

Chapter 2

Sacrifice and Project: The Experience of Reading Rimbaud

But it takes more courage to make an end of it than to make a new verse:
that is something all physicians and poets know.¹

Subsequent to Bataille's initial engagement with Rimbaud largely delineated by Surrealism, it becomes less overtly mediated and spans three books: *L'Expérience intérieure* (1943), *L'Impossible* (1947) and *L'Erotisme* (1957).² The analysis in this chapter has a central place in the thesis as it is in these writings that Bataille delineates the poetics and elaborates the major terms through which the poetics are defined and that, to greater or lesser extents, will orient the readings of his poems in Part III. The terms that emerge to shape the poetics are *inner experience*, the *impossible* and *eroticism*. All of these terms are considered in relation to the *subject* and the poetics consider the *experience* that of the subject; the poetry Bataille writes is an articulation – and disarticulation – of the subject's presence in language.³ Experience and the subject are thus the determining concepts that guide the readings of Bataille's writing in this chapter. Their interrelation provides the context for poetry to operate according to Bataille's sacrificial model of representation. Rimbaud's presence in this chapter is determined by the specific book, he is explicitly named and central to the discussion in *L'Expérience intérieure* yet Rimbaud only exists in the manuscript of *L'Impossible* before being referred to once – albeit in a vital, determinant sense – in *L'Erotisme*. *L'Expérience intérieure* is the site of Bataille's most consistent and overt consideration of Rimbaud and where he reads Rimbaud's project as a sacrifice. This reading that links sacrifice to poetry is key to any consideration of the poetics.

In relation to the problematic of representation outlined in Chapter 1, representation in these books is not an externalised engagement but an internalised experience of corporeality. The subject thus becomes the means of depicting the affect of the experience of sacrifice, the sacred and the unknown. Sacrifice or the experience of sacrifice is an attempt to confront and account for the unknown – to feel the edge of death, or the infinite universe beyond the

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 180.

² *L'Impossible*, published in 1962, was the new title given to the edition originally published as *La Haine de la poésie* in 1947.

³ The *subject* is a term used here to denote *being* – the latter itself not a term privileged by Bataille (in the way Sartre does, for example) – as the human being's physical presence in experience, in relation to the object or the other.

limited and finite nature of being – and to depict or evoke this experience within representational systems. This experience, according to Bataille is necessarily one so overwhelming and dazzling that it cannot be articulated or represented, at least, in logical or rational terms. Poetry is thus bound to sacrifice because poetry functions as the linguistic expression of the subject in sacrificial experience: the communication of an obscure experience of the sacred in language that affects the logic and representation in poetry; inner experience is that of the subject exposed to the limit of his own existence. Poetry is the representation of this experience in its sacrificial function to alchemise words into communicating their material presence; this operation works through an unrestricted loss of meaning in the poem. The loss of meaning radically transforms the nature of poetic language as it seeks to recuperate a communication of exposure to the unknown as an experience of the subject's own destructive, terrifying anguish and guilt.

The significance of *project*, referred to in Chapter 1, is developed in *L'Expérience intérieure* and thus becomes more visible in this chapter. Bataille's writings have often been noted for their incompleteness, unorthodox form and pseudonymous authorship, which critics have suggested indicate the sacrificial principle operating on the level of writing, or project.⁴ Rimbaud's project, I suggest, introduces this principle of binding the writer-as-subject to his writing-as-object. Their inextricable link enables Bataille to conceive of poetry as discourse that operates in a sacrificial mode, not only thematically and symbolically but formally as well. Given sacrifice is a means to resolve depiction of subjective experience – or, in other words, to expose the subject's interiority in affective, sensational terms in relation to the unknown in experience – poetry does not depict scenes of sacrifice or of death (for the most part) but enacts them through language. Poetry thus perverts logical and rational language – in this context of experience poetry is not necessarily a critique of *beautiful poetry* or *literature* – but rather communicates the sacrificial imperative of the loss of meaning and gives sacrifice an exchange function. In the emphasis on the materiality of language, as considered in Chapter 1, this not only subordinates normative ideological and aesthetic signifieds but highlights their objective presence as that which sacrifice uncovers or exposes: poetry, then, in Bataille's sacrificial poetics acts as a system of exchange that seeks to balance loss without reserve – words without meaning – yet still to represent this sacrificial violence of experience in the non-sensical detritus of the poem. The poetics, ultimately, demand the destruction of the logic through poetic language, a demand that leads to the negation of representation and of poetry. The epigraph highlights that the decision to put an end to something is more morally worthwhile than sustaining it; a psychological consideration (as an aspect of subjectivity Bataille largely avoids with the exception perhaps of the more personal

⁴ Leslie Hill writes on 'sacrifice of sacrifice', which I discuss in Chapter 6.

writing in *Le Coupable*) that recognises the cost of an act which is sacrificial. Such a gesture avoids submission to the idea of a project and can therefore be considered as something like a sovereign action in Bataille's term. Rimbaud's sovereign act was due not only to the sudden termination of his writing but the perception that his poetry incorporated a movement towards its own end. This is the reason, I suggest, why he occupies a central position in Bataille's thinking on sacrifice and on the sovereignty of poetry that becomes apparent at the point of its abandonment.

The terms in this chapter are read as they develop as concepts in Bataille's writing – and the titles of his books conveniently signal their primary conceptual focus – in chronological order and to assess them through the consideration of poetry and how poetry informs the development of Bataille's subject. The two key concepts of experience and the subject are explored first, in order to orient the readings of Bataille's poetics across his writings. The first part, 'The Problem of Experience and its Expression', considers the somewhat nebulous concept of experience to try and elaborate its meaning in regard to the subject and to poetry. Bataille's experience is, broadly, considered as an anti-philosophical means of investigating subjectivity and its presence in the poetics is a means to trace the subject moving to the limit of experience in language, that is, poetry is the best (albeit problematic) way of representing this movement to the limit.

The consideration of the subject underlies every part of Bataille's enquiry and this crucial aspect of his thought is discussed through the terms *Je* and *ipse* in the second part, 'Je est l'ipse'. Bataille's concept of the divided subject, one half the rational being known to himself and the *ipse*, the other, unknown half in which Bataille considers the *ipse* the most significant. The subject, as the means to represent experience, is portrayed as the site of a dynamic struggle between the *je* and *ipse*, a paradigm recognisable from Rimbaud's *Je est un autre*, conceiving of the subject as a fissured and unstable being (and, of course, similar to Freud's theory of the mind comprising the ego and the id). The significance of the *ipse* – in contrast to Rimbaud's conceptualisation in which the *Je* remains the determining figure – is to reject the rational, contemplative *Je*: it is the *ipse* that conveys the experience of the subject. In regard to the poetics, the *ipse* reflects the irrational discourse of poetry; the *ipse* as the disavowed part of the poetic *Moi*, disturbs and disrupts the conventional stable position of the subject in poetic discourse.⁵

The reading of Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau ivre' aims to show how the emergence of

⁵ Santi notes how the *Je/ipse* dynamic affects and informs the reading of Bataille's poetry: 'La manifestation de l'*ipse* à travers l'écriture poétique transforme la lecture en une chute dont on ne saurait trop facilement se relever.' Santi characterises the *ipse* as 'savage', a quality that enables the depersonalisation (or dehumanisation even) of the subject in Bataille's poetry and fiction thus, presumably, contributing to the effect on the reader noted here. Sylvain Santi, *Georges Bataille, à l'extrémité fuyante de la poésie* (Amsterdam & New York: Faux Titre, 2007) p. 271.

subjectivity is fundamental in his understanding of experience in the poetic project; I suggest the poem represents the most significant engagement with the subject before *Une saison en enfer*. The treatment of subjectivity in these two poems is critical in understanding how subjectivity – as unstable and irrational – threads through the poetics formally and thematically.

Following the reading of the poem, the subsequent three sections engage with Bataille's books, beginning with *L'Expérience intérieure*. *L'Expérience intérieure*, broadly, deals with, first, Bataille's assessment of Rimbaud's project and, second, the relation of poetry to sacrifice. His reading of Rimbaud's project is, initially, rather critical and ambivalent – arguing, on the one hand, Rimbaud failed because his vision of experience was too feminised, in other words, his poetry did not engage *actively* enough with experience (and chance) to overcome the weakness of ordinary poetry and the affectation of literature. On the other hand, Rimbaud's sacrifice of his project informs the anti-project of inner experience and, furthermore, reveals how the book itself shares the same formal and generic paradigms of Rimbaud's poetry, particularly *Une saison en enfer*.

In *L'Impossible* there is no reference to Rimbaud except in the manuscript, in the section entitled 'La Maladie d'Arthur Rimbaud'. However in this hidden sense Rimbaud implicitly determines Bataille's project to the extent that in the third part, 'Etre Oreste', Rimbaud prefigures and informs the role of Orestes. Orestes is the figure who comes to represent poetry for Bataille in *L'Impossible* and who stands for the poetic archetype, nominally Rimbaud, who confronts the impossible nature of being – the guilt and anguish Breton disavowed – as a result of his unforgivable matricide. The Orestes myth also introduces the theme of revolt into Bataille's poetics; in a reaction against the Surrealist tendency to subordinate poetry to political ends, Bataille discusses this poetic revolt in mythical terms. The reading of *L'Impossible* thus branches out into two distinct fields of meaning of the impossible: first, in relation to poetry the impossible becomes a term that refers to that unknowable experience of the limit which poetry evokes and which profoundly affects its form and context; second, the impossible allows for an implicitly psychological perspective onto the concept of experience. The second aspect of the impossible is elucidated by the figure of Orestes who is exposed to the impossible – through his revolt in the act of matricide – and the realisation that the impossible is not only an external space (the night) in the moral form of punishment and exile but something that is within the subject as well as without: the impossible is both known and unknown, a subversion and confusion of objects, categories and identity. The impossible is thus not nothingness or burning chaos but that which interweaves the known and unknown, sense and non-sense to maintain them in a dynamic that the subject perceives in his experience at the limit. The confusion and misrecognition of experience that the impossible engenders is further elaborated in

L'Erotisme, the exegesis of which, I argue, revolves around the poetic expression of the corporeal aspect of impossible experience.

Eroticism is a somewhat contradictory conceptualisation of an experience of the other that fundamentally inscribes experience in physical being. The subject is ostensibly affirmed by the other yet his identity is effaced by this very experience and his corporeal being is ruined by the encounter in a momentary slippage between the *continuous* (the subject or corporeal being) and the *discontinuous* (the unknown or death): the condition of eroticism. Bataille, furthermore, subtends eroticism to be an experience of the sacred, in which the subject experiences a revelation of being in a discontinuous state; expressed in the exposure of misrecognition of death in the other's existence. Eroticism is initially defined through the linguistic operation in poetry – specifically Rimbaud's poem 'L'Eternité' – that functions in relation to the impossible, moving from the known to the unknown thus confusing and subverting the clear existence and relation between subject and object as well as, significantly, the subject's relation to his own corporeal being. Eroticism thus may be read as an experience that internalises and objectifies the process of sacrifice by explicitly introducing the hitherto unavowed dynamic between desire and death: the subject's desire drives him to sacrifice his subjective coherence, a desiring compulsion that is irresistible and distorting to such a degree that the other is misrecognised as death. Eroticism therefore moves away from the violent moment of sacrifice and its context that posits a definite subject and object to open out to indistinction and misrecognition, the implications of which for Bataille's poetry is a turn away from the abnegating representation of the unknown through sacrifice and towards parodic representation based on metonymy.

There are thus two main threads that comprise the argument in this chapter: first, to define and situate Bataille's singular terms he uses in the three books under discussion here and to show how they inform and shape the poetics. Alongside the analysis of these terms are the underlying consideration of Rimbaud's project and the significance of his project *qua* project, his engagement with subjectivity in 'Le Bateau ivre' and the implications of both for Bataille's thought on sacrifice and subjectivity. The second thread is how the development of Bataille's subject is affected by representation – or rather its subversion – within experience, experience then nuanced as an exposure to the impossible and as an exposure to the other in eroticism.

The Problem of Experience and its Expression

Experience is Bataille's concept that attempts to articulate subjective expression beyond that of philosophy or theology. Its difficulty stems from the fact that it is delineated by the subject. Experience operates through the subject in his realisation that the unknown forms an intrinsic part of their being; it is an experience that is not useful by any measure, indeed, it is an

unreserved expenditure of energy, one of loss without gain. That is, experience which is sovereign does not have any meaning, it is defiantly *meaningless* and, derived from the mystical desire to know God yet divorced from it, Bataille's experience seeks something beyond a deity because this only presents a delimiting marker and repressive foreclosure to sovereign experience.

Rimbaud is initially brought into Bataille's *récit* in *L'Expérience intérieure* because his (Rimbaud's) poetic project prefigured the movement of inner experience: towards and up to the extreme limit of experience. Furthermore, Rimbaud inscribed this experience into the intertextual *récit* of *Une saison en enfer*, thereby inextricably linking writing to the subject. Rimbaud's term – *vision* – may be seen as similar to Bataille's term *expérience* in that they both privilege perception over contemplation and conceptual thought. Rimbaud's poetic project not only forms a precedent for the processes of inner experience but provides a means of representing them. To better situate Bataille's experience it can be contrasted against five other accounts of experience given by Maurice Blanchot, Martin Jay, Julia Kristeva, Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons and Jean-Luc Nancy.⁶ Blanchot's account refers to Rimbaud (comparatively with Lautréamont) and Jay refers to Baudelaire to reveal how Bataille's experience differs from experience interpreted in social terms as manifestations of historical developments in Baudelaire's *œuvre*. Kristeva, Boldt-Irons and Nancy all focus on assessing the problem of experience Bataille's writings pose, which is, very broadly, that experience – and thus the subject – cannot be meaningfully articulated through language. Kristeva's essay from 1973, 'L'Expérience et la pratique', suggests the problem of representing experience is, fundamentally, a problem of the representation of being. Kristeva's theoretical, semi-psychoanalytical approach situates the subject's libidinal presence as experience – physical expressions such as those Bataille often refers to such as crying, laughter, eroticism etc. – that are negatively expressed in language and suppressed by discourse. Boldt-Irons discusses the problem of representation of sacrifice asking, given Bataille's interpretation of sacrifice means the destruction of both subject and object, how can language frame this mutual erasure of subjective and objective terms within it? Nancy's analysis, based on his reading of one of Bataille's poems, suggests a response – one inspired by the termination of Rimbaud's project – which is to give silence a meaning.

Blanchot, writing in 1949 in *Lautréamont et Sade*, proposes that writing is the process or act of the writer committing themselves to their writing. Using *Les Chants de Maldoror* as

⁶ Kristeva and Nancy are given the most space in these summations because, in the case of the former, her writings are not only rather complex, of which the essay here is only part of her work on Bataille and on poetics, and thus requires not only more space to elucidate her position – and thus situate my own position – but to give a theoretical grounding to the concept of experience. In regard to Nancy, his essay provides a reading of one of Bataille's poems that subtends the important elements within my argument; namely poetry, experience and silence.

an example of *lucid* writing, Blanchot argues that Lautréamont's work moves so far beyond his own subjective experience that there is no trace left or, in Blanchot's terms, nothing autobiographical to obscure the text's lucidity. Blanchot's critique highlights the nature of experience in its dynamic relation to writing in Rimbaud's project and may be used to clarify Bataille's own reading of experience. Lautréamont's text, for example, is lucid in that it is evidence of his own commitment to disavow experience as subjective. Blanchot undertakes a comparative reading of *Les Chants de Maldoror* and *Une saison en enfer*:

[...] *Les Chants de Maldoror* paraissent l'exemple le plus remarquable de ce genre de travail, le modèle de cette sorte de littérature qui ne comporte pas de modèle, plus frappant [...] que *Les Illuminations* de Rimbaud – celles-ci, en quelque sorte trop fortes pour l'esprit, ne lui laissent que le souvenir de son éblouissement – et qu'*Une Saison en Enfer* qui plutôt qu'une expérience est le récit d'une expérience.⁷

Blanchot's reading is critical of Rimbaud because unlike Lautréamont he does not transform experience into a lucid text. The *Illuminations* are the inarticulate trace or memory of this failed or aborning attempt in which the lucidity becomes dazzling or blinding; the meaning is lost to the text's internal psychical sensations. However, I suggest that Bataille's conception of experience is precisely modelled on the failure to communicate lucidly and, as such, maintains that the *récit* and experience are inextricable; the one is an integral part of the other.⁸ Rimbaud's texts are necessarily obscure rather than lucid and it is this obscurity that is the index of his experience. *Une saison en enfer* is a mediated experience communicated by means of the generic fluidity and instability in which experience is inscribed palimpsestically. The poem moves along a temporal axis upon which Rimbaud manipulates genre and reflects his own experience back upon itself. Rimbaud's ironic mediation of writing always precedes and overlays experience. This method exposes the difficulty of communicating experience and, in these terms, *Une saison en enfer* can be described as an experience of approaching the end of writing. Before this point, Rimbaud had already outlined the means of becoming a poet or *voyant* in the letter of 15th May 1871: 'Puisqu'il a cultivé son âme, déjà riche, plus qu'aucun! Il arrive à l'inconnu, et quand, affolé, il finirait par perdre l'intelligence de ses visions, il les a vues!'⁹ This statement reveals the teleology in Rimbaud's method. In a model that forms the precedent for Bataille's own negative enquiry Rimbaud's enquiry into experience as means to reach an objective truth is based on doubt and uncertainty, eventually

⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *Lautréamont et Sade* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1963), p. 91.

⁸ Blanchot, in a footnote positioned at the end of this quotation, does however acknowledge that this criticism is limited as, by other measures, Rimbaud's poetry cannot be separated from his own experience: 'Mais il faut l'ajouter aussitôt: en Rimbaud, par d'autres voies, la poésie est l'expérience même.' *Ibid.*

⁹ The centrifugal expansion of the poet's consciousness here is in marked contrast to any number of Baudelaire's poems where the subject remains central and experiences the visions unfolding in an unknown, imagined space such as 'La Vie antérieure' or 'Le Voyage'. Rimbaud, *Correspondance*, p. 68.

leading to the final point where the project is abandoned. This concern regarding the inadequacy of language accounts for Bataille's interest in the dynamic of writing and the writer, that is, the relation between writing and experience and the question of how writing communicates the experience of writing itself.

The second account of experience tends to more historical-philosophical concerns in Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire's poetry as an expression of the *Erlebnis* of modernity. Benjamin analyses a period of historical transition, the mid to late-nineteenth century, in which Baudelaire examines the metaphysical problem of evil. As the index of experience in Baudelaire's system, Benjamin reassigns evil to be the manifestation of historical (capitalist) processes. Bataille's inner experience is of a different kind however; rather than a residual metaphysical concept, Bataille seeks to elaborate a sovereign system of experience. Furthermore, experience enables a trans-historical means through which the subject could interpret these actions in relation to himself, rather than as remaining subject to moral or universal paradigms. However, Martin Jay, in his article, 'Limites de l'expérience-limite: Bataille et Foucault', uses Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire as a case to argue against a reductive or naïve conceptualisation of experience:

Certains penseurs ont privilégié l'une aux dépens de l'autre – Martin Buber l'*Erlebnis*, Walter Benjamin l'*Erfahrung*; les post-structuralistes les rejettent toutes les deux. Cette condamnation inclut la recherche d'une authenticité perdue dans le monde moderne à laquelle conduit la même nostalgie de présence, le même désir d'une immédiateté qui n'a jamais et ne pourra jamais exister.¹⁰

Rimbaud, like Bataille, confronts the struggle of communicating the *Erlebnis* of experience in the written form of a project.¹¹ Bataille's experience, as Jay notes, conditioned as a non-psychological, obscure reflection of the subject, is furthermore influenced (negatively) by modernity as a factor that has altered subjective perception of religion and the sacred. In 'Le Sacré', an article published in *Cahiers d'art* in 1939, Bataille recognises that authentic experience is predicated on its insubstantiality:

[...] il est nécessaire d'insister sur le fait qu'il n'a jamais pu être question de quelque réalité *substantielle* et... au contraire, il s'agissait d'un élément caractérisée par l'impossibilité qu'il dure. Le nom d'*instant privilégié* est le seul qui rende compte... de ce... qui fuit aussitôt apparu et ne se laisse pas saisir.¹²

Art and poetry appear in Bataille's account as a way of fixing this instant, although, at this stage, Bataille is clear about the limited power of poetry in claiming that poetry can only

¹⁰ Martin Jay, 'Limites de L'Expérience-Limite: Bataille et Foucault', in *Georges Bataille – après tout* (Paris: Belin, 1995), p. 39.

¹¹ The term *Erlebnis* broadly means lived experience, particularly one that is inexpressible or ineffable. In contrast *Erfahrung* is an experience based on normalised perception and interpretable fact.

¹² Bataille OC I, p. 560.

evoke these moments rather than lending any substance to what momentarily appears. This article largely reiterates Bataille's anti-idealism in stating that the sacred is beyond aesthetic or moral categories. This conceptualisation of the sacred as a space beyond language holds open the possibility for art to engage with reality almost in opposition to the sacred and, therefore, to become an autonomous text rather than an artefact. This dynamic opposition thus allows for art to engage with the lost effect of the sacred more convincingly. However, it must be the sacred that is evoked because to objectify this space is a strategy that is doomed to fail, as Bataille notes below:

Certainement la possibilité d'assigner maintenant un objet définissable à une tentative aussi étrange tient davantage à son échec qu'à des moments de réussite fugitive. Une amertume insensée et une aversion arrogante pour soi-même en ont été les résultats les plus accomplis. Ce sont de tels résultats – le seul nom de Rimbaud les symbolise en tant qu'ils rendent à peu près tout méprisable...¹³

Despite Bataille's taking account of history and modernity he nonetheless situates his experience within the sacred and thus as sovereign. In this way his consideration of experience is very different to that meaningful kind which Jay identifies in Benjamin and others. Bataille's experience is opposed to Baudelaire's historically conditioned *Erfahrung*; remaining trans-historical and aimless.

Kristeva's essay 'L'Expérience et la pratique' places Bataille's writing amidst a historical situation (in the years following 1968) that is one of social-political instability marked by contention of symbols of bourgeois value that literature is obliged to confront yet, in doing so, to maintain a unified, recognisable conception of the subject.¹⁴ Kristeva's interpretation of experience informs the argument here by connecting experience to language via the subject. Kristeva dismisses formalist categories as means to approach Bataille's writings but, which are nonetheless, deployed in poststructuralist, linguistic and philosophical exegeses to, instead, privilege the subject:

On comprend ici qu'il ne s'agit pas, chez Bataille, de *pensée*, d'*écriture* ou de *discours*, au sens formaliste de tous ces termes. Il s'agit de l'*expérience* qui est toujours une contradiction entre la *présence* du sujet et sa *perte*, entre la pensée et sa dépense, entre la liaison (Logos) et sa séparation.¹⁵

Experience, then, is a paradoxical concept that affirms the subject and at once negates his

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 562.

¹⁴ In Bataille's practice of writing, the subject in fiction, identified by Kristeva, is one who accedes to his own physical presence (as alterity or psychosis) constituted by conflicting desires and, within the fictional *récit*, confronts the collapse of his own identity. It is a collapse however that is one stage of an ongoing process of renewal; a kind of transgressive operation that operates across fields of meaning in language, articulated by the physical experience of the subject and represented in poetic language, as distinct, however, from poetry.

¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, 'L'Expérience et la pratique', in *Polylogue* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1977), p. 119.

presence. Language is the medium that allows the subject to construct his identity – through what Kristeva terms the *symbolic* – yet at once is haunted by pure, pre-verbal energy or desire that must be expressed in the *semiotic*, the opposing concept that refers to the drives the subject discharges into language. Above Kristeva identifies ‘Bataille’s subject’ – between ‘the word and its separation’ – as the principal problem confronted in *La Somme athéologique* which is how to derive meaning from experience that is beyond language and thus incapable of being inscribed in discourse (or other philosophical system). Kristeva’s partial solution, specific to Bataille’s writing it seems, is that reading it along *thematic* structures enables the subject – or the subject’s experience – to be grasped as a material presence constituted by heterogeneous expressions of laughter, desire and eroticism. This thematic ordering, however, has the side-effect of excluding poetry, in regard to which, Kristeva quotes Bataille’s dismissal of poetry as juvenile and lacking the necessary violence to expose the subject in a moment of *thetic* confrontation through which he has been represented in various thematic expressions. Kristeva’s term *fiction* thus differs to poetry as the *récit* that can represent the subject. Fiction is the product of the subject’s anterior, unspoken desire that is structured and mediated by language. The subject is thus unified in language in a process that echoes the first, original moment of experience in the oedipal complex in which desire and the resulting anxiety are recognised as mutually sustaining and inextricable and, furthermore, inextricable within the identity of the subject. This moment is the one that Kristeva supposes is the original realisation of experience as affirmation of identity and, at once, the negative source of subjective instability: this disjunction plays out in the fictional *récit*:

C’est dire que la structure narrative reprend les éléments antérieurs et les organise en les médiatisant par le langage, bien sûr, mais structuralement, par le *désir* pour le parent-pole de transfert dans la famille. Le récit est donc la structure sémiotique qui correspond à l’unification du sujet dans sa relation oedipienne par le désir et la castration qui s’y articule. [...] Contrairement aux récits « objectifs », « historiques » ou simplement romanesques qui peuvent être aveugles à leur cause et ne faire que le répéter sans savoir, l’« opération souveraine » consiste à « méditer » [...] sur la cause oedipienne de la fiction et donc du sujet désirant-récitant. Elle consiste comme le fait Bataille, à *représenter par des thèmes* – et donc pas seulement à introduire « poétiquement » par la déchirure et les modifications de la structure linguistique – ce que l’oedipianisation du sujet a refoulé; elle consiste donc à représenter les « énergies libres », circulent à travers le corps du sujet lui-même ou vers les corps morcelés des partenaires sociaux (parents ou autres).¹⁶

Kristeva’s analysis here highlights two significant concepts that inform my argument both in terms of the nature of Bataille’s experience and – clarified in the following quotation – how the subject is depicted in poetry specifically and, generally, the distinction between poetry and fiction (or any other kind of textual discourse). Bataille’s fiction is a product of

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

desublimated desire, that is, his writing disarticulates the unified subject by depicting him as the product of his desires. They articulate a *jouissance* in which the subject confronts language – as the autogenerative product of his unrepressed oedipal desire – in heterogeneous (physical) inarticulation and collapse. This is not the only effect of thematically determined representation however, because the subject's desire is manifest through his speaking or enunciating it is, therefore, this convergence of expression as desire that situates the energy of desire in the body of the subject. It is, according to Kristeva, an articulation founded on poetic language, thus arriving at a distinction between poetry and poetic language:

Le récit est donc une structure dont le désir est l'économie. C'est ce qui le distingue de la poésie dont, pour Bataille, l'économie est celle d'un « décrit » : le langage poétique serait une irruption violente de la négativité dans le discours, qui dénonce toute unité et détruit le sujet en détruisant la logique; il sombre dans la « nuit ». Cette négativité sans stase est un rejet, une destruction qui s'est détournée de tout objet, dans le vide, sans désir [...] L'expérience intérieure n'est là que pour faire de la négativité autre chose que du désir: une jouissance. La jouissance est la traversée de la représentation et du désir qui émerge de la nuit pulsionnelle, grâce à la *logique maintenue*¹⁷

Poetic language is a violent irruption of negativity in a discourse whose economy is valued according to desire. Poetic language, in an economy of experience is a useless, irreducible *jouissance* – one that is still based on the representation of subjectivity but a representation determined by desire. Experience of *jouissance* is therefore stable and able to sustain its inherently irrational nature by the oddly termed 'maintained logic', an internalised logic that does not conform to desire but perverts it fully as it emerges from the night: the unknown in Bataille's system; the desublimation of repressed desires in Kristeva's analysis.

A different approach to the representation of experience is explored by Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons in her article 'Sacrifice and Violence in Bataille's Erotic Fiction', in which she explores the similar problem of depicting sacrifice in fiction. Experience and sacrifice are, of course, conjoined in inner experience: they both operate upon and through the subject; thus, according to Bataille, sacrifice is the absolute experience of subjective affect.¹⁸ Boldt-Irons suggests the Bataillean sacrifice is all-consuming and is an affect that risks being transferred to the reader. This certainly corresponds to Bataille's reading of sacrifice in Rimbaud's project – and, I suggest, Rimbaud's understanding of his own project albeit not in the same

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-3.

¹⁸ 'In both *L'Expérience intérieure* and *L'Erotisme* Bataille declares that his view of sacrifice is to be distinguished from that of others: his view entails the loss of the sacrificer and witness along with the victim, whereas traditionally, the former are not lost *along with* the victim, for they profit from the latter's loss and return to continuity. It is this *mutual* loss of witness and victim in sacrifice that Bataille hopes to realize in his erotic fiction...' Boldt-Irons is concerned with the effect of writing and, as such, is not relevant to the argument at this point but is more pertinent in relation to her consideration of the image and thus I refer to her again in Chapter 6. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons, 'Sacrifice and Violence in Bataille's Erotic Fiction: Reflections from/upon the *mise en abîme*', in *Bataille: Writing the sacred*, ed., Carolyn Bailey Gill (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 91.

terms – in which the subject (the poet) and the object (poetry) are sacrificed. Nonetheless, the paradigm of sacrificial violence under discussion here is not anthropological but a conceptual and dialectical process that is inscribed within Bataille's understanding of project, poetry and language and is used as an enduring metaphor for representing the effect of the subject's exposure to death.

It falls to poetry, then, to fulfil a dual function and to represent the recuperation of meaning from experience as much as it is to enact or the sacrifice of words. Because of this tension, I suggest, poetry highlights the nature of language that militates against the communication of what is at stake and that the possibility of this failure – of the impossibility of true communication – itself engenders the desire to communicate.¹⁹ Any experience words communicate will be that of the process of communication itself and not the original experience.²⁰ Bataille outlines the paradox of the word silence in that it is its own defeat when uttered; its meaning disappearing behind the enunciation of its expression: 'Tel est en nous le travail du discours. Et cette difficulté s'exprime ainsi: *le mot silence est encore un bruit, parler est en soi-même imaginer connaître, et pour ne plus connaître il faudrait ne plus parler.*'²¹ This paradox is the problem of discourse whereby knowledge cannot be articulated through communication *per se* but must be made objective, to exist independently and autonomously, depicted as the subjective experience of the self.

Jean-Luc Nancy cites one of Bataille's poems in his article 'Posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps':²²

L'alcool
de la poésie
est le silence
défunt.²³

Nancy is ostensibly writing about the silence left behind by Rimbaud and he characterises language as the mediation between soul and body that is, as a dialogue. In this dynamic then, where does silence fit in? Nancy further suggests that the silence left behind by Rimbaud is less an abrupt dialectical shift into silence than the revelation that poetry presents truth as a kind of never-ending process of newness or progress. This re/presentation of a religious truth is an illusion, one in which Rimbaud realised poetry is fully complicit; it must therefore look beyond the existing structures of poetry in order to purge itself. Nancy's evaluation of

¹⁹ That this cyclical process could be easily annexed to the activity of prayer explains to some degree the religious character Claudel ascribed to Rimbaud's *œuvre*.

²⁰ In *Méthode de méditation*, Bataille states, perhaps more clearly: 'Je ne puis parler d'une absence de sens, sinon lui donnant un sens qu'elle n'a pas.' Bataille, OC V, p. 199.

²¹ *Ibid.*, OC V, p. 25.

²² Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps', in *Poésie* 50, (Paris: Belin, 1989), p. 115.

²³ Bataille, 'L'Etre indifférencié n'est rien', in OC III, p. 372. The poem was written in 1949.

Rimbaud's project is thus more positive than Bataille's; poetry is judged successfully in regard to its ability to expose not the limitations of language as Bataille has it but the limitations of philosophical and religious enquiries about truth. Bataille's poem illustrates Nancy's formulation of how poetry is the dialogue between interior and exterior modes of meaning, as well as illustrating his own theory that silence can be situated and given presence, as a desired object within poetry. In this way silence may be communicated as part of the function of inner experience. According to Nancy, silence is a natural or inherent product of the harmonics of the poetic phrase; this means, contrary to Bataille that the end of poetry does not equate to silence as the end of discourse:

Les derniers mots, ici, n'enchaînent pas sur le silence. Ce qui enchaîne est toujours, d'une manière ou d'autre, discours. Il n'y a pas ici de discours de la poésie. Au contraire, il est coupé court à tout discours de, et dans, et par la poésie. C'est la poésie interrompue, même pas achevée. Même pas expirée, et impossible à embaumer. "Dans une âme et un corps", cela ressemble, à s'y méprendre, à une formule pour l'outre-tombe, et pourtant, il n'y a rien de tel ici. Ni mort, ni résurrection, et rien que la vérité de l'adieu.²⁴

Nancy reads Rimbaud's silence as a suspended departure from poetry rather than the end or death of poetry; poetry still exists within discourse to take account of this departure. That is, the meaning of this ending of poetry does not reside in the ending itself but in what it posits: silence. This silence is however one in which a future poetry will be able to account meaningfully for this interruption. In Bataille's poem silence does not exist as its own category as a kind of full stop that indefinitely interrupts language: within the terms of the poem it is matched to alcohol. Alcohol's ambiguous function is the hidden fire in the bloodstream of poetry that dominates and guides expression yet which cannot itself be expressed: it is the dead or suspended silence. Poetry's expression is itself determined by this absence within it.

In the 'Ebauche d'une introduction à l'expérience intérieure', Bataille grants words a mobile quality: 'Je ne donnerai qu'un exemple de *mot* glissant. Je dis *mot*: ce peut être aussi bien la phrase où l'on insère le mot, mais je me borne au mot *silence*.'²⁵ Poetry enables the meaning of certain words to slip from objectivity into interior subjectivity, from usefulness to uselessness, where they reveal their secret meaning. The sense of the object they once signified is dissipated and replaced by silence: 'entre tous les mots c'est le plus pervers, ou le plus poétique: il est lui-même gage de sa mort'.²⁶ This paradoxical signification characterises

²⁴ Nancy, p. 115.

²⁵ Bataille, OC V, p. 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, A quality Bataille explores in *Histoire de l'œil*, where certain objects – themselves slippery and slick (e.g. an eyeball) – slide through the text, metonymically transforming into other similarly shaped objects. Each metamorphosis communicates either a different aspect or an expression of the same, underlying psychosexual pathology.

Bataille's entire approach to language within the scope of the project of inner experience: language fails precisely because of this tendency to slippage, disguising but never resolving the gulf between experience and its articulation. Poetry therefore operates this contradictory process within language, as it is itself the expression of this momentary contradiction of slippage that alters words in sliding from external objectivity (thought) to internal subjectivity (experience). This suspension of interpretation, a kind of muting of language, allows for Bataille to steer a path between the absent object or signifier of religion and the subject, thus left isolated in this absence; a dynamic that communicates inner experience, discursively signified as both ecstatic and silent. The quotation below demonstrates how Bataille places silence on the same plane as language; they must exist symbiotically in order for authentic experience to be reached:

La poésie est malgré tout la part restreinte – liée au domaine des mots. Le domaine d'expérience est tout le possible. Et dans l'expression qu'elle est d'elle-même, à la fin, nécessairement, elle n'est pas moins silence que langage. Non par impuissance. Tout le langage lui est donné et la force de l'engager [...] L'expérience ne peut être communiqué si des liens de silence, d'effacement, de distance, ne changent pas ceux qu'elle met en jeu.²⁷

Bataille draws on the link between poetry as communication and language as the expression of experience that gives rise to a tension, where silence can only convey experience in its capacity to alter the expression of that experience. To reach the limit, or for communication to express an original position (that of the extreme limit) it must negotiate this tension between silence (uselessness) and words/language (usefulness) but this struggle also implies the negation of communication.

For Bataille to give meaning to Rimbaud's sacrifice of his poetry, the problem of how to account for silence and then negotiate its incorporation into communication is one of the central problems Rimbaud's project raises. Rimbaud's project may be considered as the emergence of the subject into poetry itself and this emergence thus becomes the defining feature of Rimbaud's project. Indeed *L'Expérience intérieure* is also the text in which the problem of representing experience comes to be recognised as a problem of representing being. Bataille introduces a linguistic tactic of the subject divided between the *je* and the *ipse*, a system that gives a value to the silent, unknown and irrational part of the subject; one that is illuminated by its presence in poetry. A division that may arguably be traced directly to Rimbaud's *Je est un autre* whereby the subject's rational part must account for and experience the other unknown part of himself. Bataille's *ipse*, however, stands for the irrational part of the subject and is thus, in a break from Rimbaud, a negation of identity.

²⁷ Bataille, OC V, pp. 41-2.

Je est l'ipse

Given Bataille writes against writing and against the concept of literature, the status of the personal pronoun must be accounted for. If compared to Rimbaud's divided self, how does Bataille's similar system of the *je* and *ipse* affect subjectivity and how does it represent the subject? The *ipse* might be considered the shadow of the *je*, as Santi notes, citing Bonnefoy:

[...] Bonnefoy pêche certainement par trop d'univocité quand il considère que la dépense requise par Bataille se fait inmanquablement au bénéfice de la subjectivité. Le lent cheminement qui, à travers la poésie même, conduit à la plus grande conscience, ouvre à une perte qui est loin d'assurer ou de renforcer la légitimité et l'intégrité de celui qui écrit [...] l'apparence universelle du 'je' philosophique, du cogito, y est sans cesse renvoyée à la sauvagerie de *l'ipse*.²⁸

Where Bonnefoy sees the status of the *je* retrenched, Santi sees it compromised. However, I suggest Bataille maintains a tension between the two. That is the *ipse* stands for the subject but at the same time for the effacement of the subject. This effacement works through the broad metonymic operation that creates a poetic parity between objects, including the personal pronoun. The *je* in conjunction with the *ipse* therefore stands for a reversal of the position of the subject as he had been depicted in conventional poetry of the nineteenth century, including *Une saison en enfer*. In 'Mauvais Sang' Rimbaud remembers this vanished subject, one who is informed by memory, history and myth:

Je ne me souviens pas plus loin que cette terre-ci et le christianisme. Je n'en finirais pas de me revoir dans ce passé [...] Qu'étais-je au siècle dernier: je ne me retrouve qu'aujourd'hui.²⁹

The distance from paganism and the subsequent disavowal of Christianity implies a revelation of subjectivity in that the subject, inasmuch as he can be interpellated by social systems such as religion, may also be re-invented beyond the reach of such systems. Rimbaud's model of subjectivity in *Une saison en enfer* re-presents the subject outside of time, as a subject that is a creation not only of personal memory and experience but collective experience and history. This allows for the subject to re-present itself in an experience of auto-creation as a rejection of transcendence. This experience is conditioned furthermore by hell, that is, paganism as an atemporal space.

However, instead of opening out to the universal and thus to the reader, Bataille's *je* conceals the *ipse* that confuses this relation, rendering the poem nonsensical as well as accentuating its abstract, opaque quality. The *ipse*, as the unknown quantity destabilising the subject, therefore infects the written work of the author, notably in *L'Expérience intérieure*

²⁸ Santi, p. 252.

²⁹ Rimbaud, p. 406.

with its *récit* disrupted by the poems articulating a subjective instability. The poems of this text frame the *ipse* derived from the absence of God, which is juxtaposed only as a consequence of the death of God: 'ô Dieu mort/ ô Dieu mort/ Moi'.³⁰ Following this, in the last section, the existential question is asked or supplicated when the subject questions himself in the face of God's absence and allows the realisation that the *ipse* opens out to the impossible:

Qui suis-je
pas 'moi' non non
mais le désert la nuit l'immensité³¹

The subject is alienated from himself in the void between the end of the *je* and the beginning of the *ipse*: *je* is the limit of the subject and the *ipse* the space beyond this limit. The *ipse* furthermore, collapses the distance between the reader and text that accounts for the claustrophobic sensation the poems create. The strategy of foregrounding the word and subordinating its meaning significantly reduces the space for the reader to read the poem beyond the immediacy of the word's presence. This attempt to articulate the immediate, circumventing the plurality of meaning, is central to Bataille's writings. The split subject is perhaps more an ideological device that explains the fragmented expression of his poetry. Furthermore, it accounts for the transgressive impulse, as a middle term between the irrational force of desire and language as a logical system that cannot account for this irrationality, except partially, in the trace left behind in poetry. The divided subject links the dynamic of Bataille's own writing to Rimbaud's, particularly regarding problems of representation and failure, problems I address further below in Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau ivre'.

Le Bateau ivre

It is perhaps difficult to assign Rimbaud's poetry a definitive formal character; Hugo Friedrich, in his reading of 'Le Bateau ivre' describes Rimbaud's language and use of metaphors as disrupting poetic norms:

L'ensemble est servi par une technique poétique qui traite l'ensemble du texte comme une métaphore totale qui ne parle pas du bateau et jamais d'un « moi » symbolisé... ce genre de métaphore que nous dirons « totale » deviendra un moyen stylistique qui dominera toute la poésie à venir.³²

The conceit of the absolute metaphor is problematic because it raises the possibility of metaphor essentially rendering itself invisible. That is, if the representation, symbol or

³⁰ Bataille, OC V, p. 121.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

³² Hugo Friedrich, *Structures de la poésie moderne*, trans. Michel-François Demet (Paris: Denoël & Gonthier, 1976), pp. 94-5.

signifier (the boat in this case) eclipses the original image or signified (the subject) that it represents, then what remains of the function of metaphor? Friedrich characterises this kind of radical totalising of subjectivity as a transformative moment in poetic discourse. Two brief elaborations can be given as to its significance within Rimbaud's thought. First, the absolute metaphor is the legible, linguistic manifestation of Rimbaud's dictum *Je est un autre* and second, it is a move towards the destruction of representation in which the absolute metaphor does not signify a new language or transcendental meaning but is in fact the destruction of stability and the haemorrhaging of meaning.³³

Bataille certainly conceptualises Rimbaud's project as a process that becomes self-destructive and which leads Rimbaud not only to the edge of writing, represented by the absolute metaphor, but to the ontological limit of being as a writer and poet. 'Le Bateau ivre', written in September 1871 addresses this difficulty of the subject's experience that has ceased to be defined by utility and is exposed to the unknown, symbolised by the rivers that flow to the psychologically limitless space of the seas, here in the second and fifth stanzas:

J'étais insoucieux de tous les équipages
 Porteur des blés flamands ou de coton anglais.
 Quand avec mes haleurs ont fini ces tapages
 Les Fleuves m'ont laissé descendre où je voulais.

[...]

Plus douce qu'aux enfants la chair des pommes s ûres,
 L'eau verte pénétra ma coque de sapin
 Et des taches de vins bleus et des vomissures
 Me lava, dispersant gouvernail et grappin.³⁴

The poem acts as a record of consciousness transforming – at once evolving and regressing – into self-awareness and, concretised in the metaphor of the boat from a useful object to a useless one, into a literal vessel of sensual experience.³⁵ Rimbaud describes the boat's passive

³³ Rimbaud's well-known phrase, cited in two separate letters from May 1871, conveys Rimbaud's idea that the poet be a seer, meaning his writing becomes psychologically informed (which, in more technical terms, means poetry is less mimetic) and that his poetry is a record of his experience. Experience is the mark of the *autre* in that the poet's own sensations are invoked in poems, questioned and explored with a view to questioning the interlinking dynamic between poetry, experience and subjectivity. In philosophical terms, the phrase refers to Descartes' original introduction of the mind-body dualism; Rimbaud claims, further, that the mind is unknown to itself. This unknown quantity is essential in contributing to the poet's vision. Arthur Rimbaud, *Correspondance* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2007), p. 68

³⁴ Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, p. 128.

³⁵ Roland Barthes writes on Rimbaud's boat as an object in the genealogy of literary precedents, notably the *Nautilus* of Jules Verne in his short essay 'Nautilus et bateau ivre'. The literary boat is a symbol of a 'superlative house' in that it is primarily a habitat and only secondarily a mode of transport. The boat is a comfortably hermetic space that creates the illusion for the sailor to be able to claim mastery and possession over nature: 'Dans cette mythologie de la navigation, il n'y a qu'un moyen d'exorciser la nature possessive de l'homme sur le navire, c'est du supprimer l'homme et de laisser le navire seul; alors le bateau cesse d'être boîte, habitat, objet possédé; il devient œil voyageur,

ritual cleansing, as if before a sacrifice, through a reflexive description of framing experience around consciousness, where the subject reaches the limits of the possible (in the sixth stanza):

Et dès lors, je me suis baigné dans le Poème
De la Mer, infusé d'astres, et lactescent,
Dévorant les azurs verts; où, flottaison blême
Et ravie, un noyé pensif parfois descend;³⁶

Rimbaud conceptualises this process as the subject becoming aware of itself within the world and as a part of the world. This then enables the boat's consciousness to separate itself from that of the poet's and from poetic discourse, represented metaphorically by the sea which, then, itself refers to the poem's communication of experience as beyond any meaningful expression: 'd'incroyables Florides'.³⁷ Existence, as the predicate of reality, is here conceived of as a poem, where the sea is the vast unknown repository of sensation. This portrayal of experience as poetry is one of the few instances where Rimbaud obviates the problem of relating experience to form, by fusing consciousness and its environment; it is a synchronised existence, open only to the universe and vision, that is, it is a representation that posits its own reality:

J'ai rêvé la nuit verte aux neiges éblouies,
Baiser montant aux yeux des mers avec lenteurs,
La circulation des sèves inouïes,
Et l'éveil jaune et bleu des phosphores chanteurs!³⁸

In the tenth stanza, the verb *dreaming* is, unusually, used transitively, amidst – and undistinguished from – a stream of others verbs: 'J'ai vu', 'Je sais', 'J'ai suivi'. The repeated, emphatic use of the first person pronoun positions the subject as the agency of a desire that gives the unknown meaning as an approach to a space or awareness beyond subjective experience. Rather than being a passive depiction of consciousness, the dream *creates* the green night: it actively creates its own reality so the distinction between what the boat dreams

frôleur de l'infinis; il produit sans cesse des départs.' Rimbaud's boat revolts against its literary predecessors by liberating itself from its subordinate function as symbol and instrument of man's possession of nature and instead enables the boat to plunge into the psychological experience of terrifying isolation as the means to explore the limits of experience: 'L'objet véritablement contraire au *Nautilus* de Verne, c'est le *Bateau ivre* de Rimbaud, le bateau qui dit « je » et, libéré de sa concavité, peut faire passer l'homme d'une psychanalyse de la caverne à une poétique véritable de l'exploration'. Barthes' shift of emphasis from the vessel as a representation of man's power to its physical presence in communion with the ocean ironically stipulates the boat's physical object-hood as that which enables the shift to its subjective, phenomenological condition. Nonetheless, taking account of the boat as subject is key to developing its unmediated experience and has certainly determined nearly all subsequent readings since, including my own. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957), p. 92.

³⁶ Rimbaud, p. 129.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

and experiences is blurred if not entirely suspended. In this sense, 'Le Bateau ivre' may prefigure the strategy pursued fully in 'Voyelles', written a year later in 1872, where colours not only stand for a clarity and purity of vision, they synaesthetically represent a quasi-phenomenological and unmediated subjectivity within the poem.³⁹ The use of colours – of which there are five in the two stanzas quoted directly above – may be characterised as an attempt to enfold the unknown (the sea) within the known (the boat). Rimbaud is striving to change not only the perception of the world through the subject but to exceed the Romantic portrayal of the natural world and collapse the distance between the universe and the individual. The subject bleeds out into the world as an instrument of pure perception, registering or internalising a series of unreal phenomena that lead eventually to the realisation of its own finitude. The trajectory of the subject – that may be read as a microcosm of Rimbaud's entire project – in this poem, beginning at known experience, ends in the realisation that the seas bring nothing but an empty transcendence. The horror of this revelation is articulated as memory, parodying childhood, where the boat yearns for a puddle and a distorted image of a boat – itself – in another existence; it has reached the end of known experience by denying it and finally submitting to its own fate:

Si je désire une eau d'Europe, c'est la flache
Noire et froide ou vers le crépuscule embaumé
Un enfant accroupi plein de tristesses, lâche
Un bateau frêle comme un papillon de mai.⁴⁰

The subject has moved from external experience, the sea-as-poem, to an interior self-reflexive experience. This shift, which represents an attempt to supersede consciousness, fails as the boat has only replicated an image of itself, in a kind of inner exposure to itself. The last verse contains a further nuance in the subject's perception when the boat directly addresses the sea – 'Je ne puis plus, baigné de vos langes'.⁴¹ This address may be read as an attempt to re-bridge the gulf between the subject and object. This signals that the boat's consciousness is the reason for its submergence at the limit of itself, that is, the failure of its will. The reading of 'Le Bateau ivre' shows the gesture of Rimbaud's *Je est un autre* in the implied destruction of the subject, because of the loss of self-recognition. In more Bataillean terms the subject, initially located in the text – that is unconnected to the boat – assumes the physicality of being as well as the signifier of a symbol. 'Le Bateau ivre' depicts the subject as merging into his own self-reflexive writing of himself. The image of the toy boat in the penultimate verse

³⁹ Colours feature less pervasively as symbolic markers of delineated subjects in *Une saison en enfer* but they nonetheless function in the same way. Below however, the natural world is named and as such, implied to be distinct from the subject: (in 'Délires II'): 'Enfin, ô bonheur, ô raison, j'écarterai du ciel l'azur, qui est du noir, et je vécus, étincelle d'or de la lumière *nature*.' *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

signals the transformation: the boat is no longer a boat but consciousness itself, one that disintegrates. The subject submits and succumbs to the symbol of the boat, disintegrating and bleeding out, signalled by the reversal of passive and active modes of perception and the loss of such perception depicted in the use of colours. The subject and the symbol become one, a technique Rimbaud uses and subverts in the intertextual model of *Une saison en enfer* in which the subject becomes the symbol himself, of the poet, of poetry and of experience. The subject submits to the signified subject in moving through experience to the extreme limit of being, the same paradigm Bataille would use in using the subject as a marker of textual instability at points throughout *L'Expérience intérieure*.

The Will to End

In this chapter, the reading of *L'Expérience intérieure* forms the first half of a reading that is continued in Chapter 3, where the implications of representing sacrificial subjectivity are explored within its generic composition and formal structure. Briefly, *L'Expérience intérieure* highlights the quality of the poetics – and Bataille's writing in general – in which the content of sacrificial subjectivity comes to affect the form of the writing. The form of writing is one of failure: sacrifice in this sense is negatively valorised as the gesture that avows failure and termination. The sacrifice of the subject is enacted textually as the failure of language to complete the representation of experience. The failure and sacrifice of writing – in the form of project – is, I argue, the way in which Rimbaud's presence determines Bataille's thought on poetry in this book.

L'Expérience intérieure comprises five main sections revolving around the second, central, section of 'Le Supplice', which in journal form records Bataille's own inner experience. Preceding this is a brief 'Avant-Propos' and the longer 'Ebauche d'une introduction à l'expérience intérieure'. Following 'Le Supplice' are two sections that contextualise the experience Bataille records. The third part 'Antécédents du supplice (ou la comédie)' and the fourth, 'Post-scriptum au supplice (ou la nouvelle théologie mystique)' describe the genesis of using experience as a philosophical enquiry and an overview of philosophers whom Bataille feels an affinity towards respectively. The fifth and final section, 'Manibus date lilia plenis' contains two poems, 'Gloria in excelsis mihi' and 'Dieu'.

The first mention of Rimbaud in 'Le Supplice' is somewhat ambiguous yet nonetheless links the particular nature of Rimbaud's project to the broader concern of poetry. The most problematic point is that Bataille is quite critical of Rimbaud and his poetic project. Bataille identifies a tendency to indecision in Rimbaud's turn away from poetry that he characterises as a failure:

Pour aller au but de l'homme, il est nécessaire, en un certain point de ne plus subir mais de forcer le sort. Le contraire, la nonchalance poétique, l'attitude passive, le dégoût d'une réaction virile, qui décide: c'est la déchéance littéraire (le beau pessimisme). La damnation de Rimbaud qui dut tourner le dos au possible qu'il atteignait, pour retrouver une force de décision intacte en lui. L'accès à l'extrême a pour condition la haine non de la poésie mais de la féminité poétique (absence de décision, le poète est femme, l'invention, les mots, le violent). J'oppose à la poésie l'expérience du possible. Il s'agit moins de contemplation que de déchirement. C'est pourtant "d'expérience mystique" dont je parle (Rimbaud s'y exerça, mais sans la ténacité qu'il mit plus tard à tenter fortune. A son expérience, il donna l'issue poétique; en général, il ignore la simplicité qui affirme – velléités sans lendemain des lettres – il choisit l'évasion féminine, l'esthétique, l'expression incertaine, involontaire).⁴²

Bataille here refers to Rimbaud's poetic project in general and obscure terms as well as arguably broaching, albeit in a coded way, the issue of Rimbaud's homosexuality. This first reference to Rimbaud puts many questions into play: what is Rimbaud being criticised for (and how) and how does it relate to Bataille's view on poetry? The first two sentences set out the opposing positions in relation to the ontological status of poetry and expose the tension within Bataille's analysis of Rimbaud. The first sentence reveals the Nietzschean aspect of Bataille's inner experience: to reach the limit of being, the subject ('man') must not passively submit to chance but actively accept it. Opposed to this affirmative, sovereign movement is poetic lassitude and passivity: a poeticised, aesthetic and positively valorised consideration of pessimism. In other words, inner experience relies on the subject's manifestation of his own will, the will to both move towards and *be* at the limit of his possible experience. Rimbaud's failure then was turning his back on poetry in order to rediscover his own agency because poetry was leading him astray, in Bataille's view, weakening him because poetry is itself weak and passive. More precisely, the criticism is not so much directed towards his decision to give up, in order to find his reserve or capacity for decisiveness but at Rimbaud's misunderstanding of the nature of poetry. This is because, according to Bataille, going to the limit requires precisely the kind of decision or will to end Rimbaud *did have* but of which he was not sufficiently cognisant.

The following sentence expands Bataille's view that it is poetry that obscures vision and has a debilitating effect upon the will but he specifically names this attitude as poetic *femininity*.⁴³ Bataille draws a distinction between poetry – presumably a normative kind – and a corrupted, feminised poetry characterised by indecision and passivity, the very qualities Rimbaud falls prey to in, ironically, trying to preserve his will. In other words, Rimbaud should not have given up in order to preserve his decisiveness because his decisiveness was

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴³ This section of 'Le Supplice' establishes a gendered poetic paradigm where the male will is active and the female lack of will is passive. The misogyny in this section echoes a residual tendency in Bataille's writing to postulate the male as active and the female as passive, most notably in *L'Erotisme*. What can be offered in Bataille's defence is that he may have had Nietzsche's ideas on poetry in mind, thus inheriting a context in which the status of women and erotic desire are no less contentious.

the very quality he needed to give meaning to his experience and thus his project. An additional ambiguity may be seen in relation to Rimbaud himself and his relationship with Verlaine: Rimbaud could be accused of having been feminised by poetry and his being a poet, symbolised by his relationship with Verlaine. Rimbaud's project, because of its methodology of using experience, may inexorably move to the dead end of passive, feminine poetry and thus never have been able to successfully resolve or enact the philosophical problems it asked. According to Bataille, as he comments in the next sentence, Rimbaud did not make the distinction between the two modes of poetry; Bataille opposes the experience of the possible to poetic femininity (although the syntax does not make it completely clear which mode of poetry Bataille is referring to). Bataille's critique is focused on poetry, which, as the expression of the approach to reach the limit of experience, weakens the very capacity of subject's will to maintain his enquiry. The ambiguity in Bataille's position becomes more pronounced in the following sentence in which the criticism directed at the feminised poet or subject for being raped by words, seems to be positively valorised.⁴⁴

There is then a tension between the two modes of poetry Bataille considers that does not seem to be resolved. The experience of being torn apart is essentially the same, the difference being in attitude or approach: a feminised or poetic condition is a passive submission and the implicitly male or normative condition is a willed or active engagement with contingency. In the last part of the quotation Bataille characterises Rimbaud's – half-hearted – mystical experience as an experiment and claims that Rimbaud himself was more concerned with an aestheticised poetic expression of experience rather than committing unreservedly to the demands of his project, necessarily resulting in its extreme instability or destruction, existing without the certainty of success or the promise of a future. However, given Bataille's stress elsewhere is on the sovereignty of experience that exhausts itself in the instant, the ambiguity here lies in his very idea of the *project*: at once a *projection* into the future and a pre-ordained failure; project remains a ruin of the instant of experience.

The questions this raises then are, first, how does Rimbaud's project relate to poetry and, second, how does Rimbaud's project relate to Bataille's inner experience? To better answer these two questions, I briefly recap Bataille's analysis so far: Rimbaud is, in simple terms, criticised for not reaching the limit of the possible by means of his poetic project because he gives up. Bataille does not elaborate his critique in terms of cause and effect however, and it remains unclear as to whether Rimbaud's act of giving up betrayed his

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, took a similar view of poets, characterising them as mendacious as well as symptomatic of the 'eternal feminine' (borrowing Goethe's term): 'But given that someone said in all seriousness that the poets lie too much: well he is right – we do lie too much. We also know too little and are poor learners: so we are obliged to lie [...] And because we know so little, the poor in spirit are pleasing to our hearts, especially when they are young females! And we are desirous of those things that the old females tell each other in the evenings. We ourselves call that the Eternal Feminine in us.' Nietzsche, p. 110.

project, thereby corrupting his poetry's active, willed maleness or whether he gave up because his poetry was already unable to approach the limit of the possible (thus why he had to retreat into himself to reassert his decisiveness because he had already recognised that he was being dominated (raped) by words). Without reference to any part of Rimbaud's corpus here it is difficult to situate Bataille's critique, although it seems clear that he is criticising Rimbaud for not overcoming the weaknesses inherent in poetry, that is, the feminine mode of poetry. Rimbaud's poetry may thus be described as androgynously ambiguous: evident in the fluid identities in *Une saison en enfer* and particularly the semi-autobiographical assumption of the female role in 'Délires I – 'Vierge folle'. For poetry to succeed in reaching the limit of the possible, Bataille seems to imply, poetry must move beyond elusiveness and ambiguity, rejecting its own worst tendencies: Rimbaud's poetry thus may be said to contain both female and male elements. The nature of his poetic project is such that his own experience ultimately determines poetry's capacity to reach the extreme limit. Therefore his poetic project enacts the experience the subject is subordinated to – and who is thus ruined by – aesthetic expression.

In the notes to *L'Expérience intérieure* Bataille outlines the result of this overcoming or absorption of the feminine mode into the male: 'Dans la solitude et le renoncement à la poésie le génie poétique abandonne la féminité, devient mâle, et c'est tant qu'il efface tout, qu'il résout au silence profond, qu'il est mâle.'⁴⁵ Here Bataille returns to the consideration of silence, explicitly labelling silence as male in opposition to a female discourse or poetic expression. This statement and others like it point to a more generous appraisal by Bataille, leading to statements that see Rimbaud's termination of writing more positively in the manuscript for *La Haine de la poésie*, by which point Rimbaud is praised for definitively driving that frothy *aesthetic* aspect within poetry to ground by having taken it to its limit.

In Rimbaud's letter of the 13th May 1871 he famously sets out the means to reach the poetic limit: 'Il s'agit d'arriver à l'inconnu par le dérèglement de *tous les sens*'. However, further in the same letter, he writes: 'C'est faux de dire: Je pense. On devrait dire: On me pense.'⁴⁶ The first part of Rimbaud's formula corresponds, broadly, to Bataille's descriptions of inner experience yet the second quotation may indicate that Rimbaud's project was never one based on the subject's dissolution but on a detached vision of subjective instability. Poetry, in this sense then, always has to be abandoned, yet *decisively* enough so that Rimbaud's poetic project may only be made sense of and accounted for in the wake of its destruction.

The trajectory of moving from a subjective, monadic experience to a dissipated, universal one is evident in 'Le Bateau ivre', as I argue above, which describes this process of

⁴⁵ Bataille, OC V, p. 455. These notes come at the end of the fourth part 'Post-Scriptum au supplice'.

⁴⁶ Rimbaud, *Correspondance*, p. 84.

the dissolution of the subject's stable, coherent form, to bleed out into oceanic dissipation and subjective dissolution. 'Le Bateau ivre' does move beyond the elusive ambiguity criticised by Bataille to a process whereby the drunken boat dreams its own visions. Rimbaud here seems to confirm Bataille's reading that he valorises the objective domain of the possible rather than an interior trajectory analogous to aesthetic pseudo-experience. Contemplative femininity is the passive mode of the subject in one sense, yet it is entirely antipathetic to the struggle to reach the limit of the possible through the communication of experience. Poetry, then, according to Bataille should be an instrument of the will, a weapon of virile clarity rather than feminine ambiguity. However, inner experience as Bataille describes it below is itself ambiguous and obscure and seems far from this implacable male manifestation of the will:

Je ne puis, je suppose, toucher à l'extrême que dans la répétition, en ceci que jamais je ne suis sûr de l'avoir atteint que jamais je ne serai sûr. Et même à supposer l'extrême atteint, ce ne serait pas l'extrême encore, si je m'endormais.⁴⁷

Bataille favours *repetition*: the act of moving towards the extreme limit can only be carried out in a repeated act. I suggest that this indicates that desire is essential to inner experience; yet because Bataille avoids this term in *L'Expérience intérieure*, it remains disavowed and suppressed until he acknowledges it, within the context of poetry, in *L'Impossible* (as well as *L'Erotisme*). Arguably it is the figure of the subject who masks and absorbs the effects of desire and enacts its functions in *L'Expérience intérieure*.

Desire nonetheless operates as the dynamic agent because, as Bataille himself formulates it, the unknown is approached repetitively. However, the *will* is distinct from *desire* in the lexicon of inner experience because the will is not the definitive condition of the subject; it is too symptomatic of a subjective coherence. Bataille's discussion of Proust demonstrates that desire seeks to possess the object and that this leads to the subject's own dissolution; profound desire means that the object is lost, which in turn destabilises and destroys the subject's unity. If the will is masculine and desire feminine, then it is the feminine mode of experience – that is, desire – which enables the subject to access the impossible because the impossible must be desired as an object if the subject's desire is not to become a meaningless exposure to nothingness, as Bataille would later outline in *L'Impossible*.⁴⁸ The movement towards the extreme limit is engendered by desire; where, by contrast, will is the overcoming of indecision and weakness, desire is its failure and breakdown – the capacity inherent in desire to detract from the aim of reaching the limit exposes desire's own inability to sustain itself to the end; Bataille can never be sure if he has

⁴⁷ Bataille, OC V, p. 53.

⁴⁸ In *Une saison en enfer* (and elsewhere) Rimbaud's more sympathetic view of the feminine subject is expressed as part of the poem's polyphonic disjunction, where the narrator – in the usual interpretation, Rimbaud *vis-à-vis* Verlaine – assumes a female persona in 'Délires I'.

reached the limit but, in any case, he falls asleep. Thus the very nature of inner experience is failure; this is the role desire plays when, if the subject reaches the limit, he risks misrecognising it, which in turn ruptures the communication between the subject and the object.⁴⁹ It is this tendency towards failure, as Bataille expresses it in *L'Impossible* that makes poetry complicit in the expression of the unknown within language. This may be seen in the generic shifts into poetry in *L'Expérience intérieure* that subvert the sense of project. Failure is thus accounted for in Bataille's projects, in his poetics, under the guise of this ambivalence.

As Bataille notes further on (in 'Post-Scriptum au supplice'), 'Le plan de la morale est le plan du projet'.⁵⁰ Poetry thus becomes the most suitable means of expression for inner experience, because it too, like sacrifice, militates against its position within discourse and therefore abdicates any moral authority: 'Le sacrifice est immorale, la poésie est immorale.'⁵¹

Si la poésie introduit l'étrange, elle le fait par la voie du familier. Le poétique est du familier se dissolvant dans l'étrange et nous-mêmes avec lui. Il ne nous dépossède jamais de tout en tout, car les mots, les images dissoutes, sont chargés d'émotion déjà éprouvées, fixées à des objets qui les lient au connu.⁵²

Poetry is the mode Bataille most closely associates with inner experience because it expresses the paradox of male will and female desire wherein desire undermines the will of the subject. Poetry introduces the unknown in the guise of the known and thus – rather than the destruction of project – it is rather an articulation of the failure and falling apart of project.⁵³ Poetry's movement towards the unknown is attributable to the male will yet it is always vulnerable to being corrupted by feminised, aesthetic uselessness, thus rendering it mere literature: 'Ce que je vois: la facilité poétique, l'allure diffuse, le projet verbal, l'ostentation et la chute dans le pire: vulgarité, littérature'.⁵⁴ The equivalence of a kind of degenerate poetry to literature parallels the description of the feminisation of poetry. Rimbaud's project, although Bataille does not explicitly state it at this stage, is ultimately a positive precedent for his own because Rimbaud's failure of will destroys the lyrical ideals surrounding poetry. Rimbaud's failure exposes the tension within poetry, conceived as desire and will in this

⁴⁹ The destruction of the self and other dynamic is similar in method but not identical in its effects to Rimbaud's method of *Je est un autre*, which instead, displaces the *Je* rather than destroying all relation between the two.

⁵⁰ Bataille, OC V, p. 158.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵³ 'Nous ne sommes totalement mis à nu qu'en allant sans tricher à l'inconnu. C'est la part d'inconnu qui donne à l'expérience de Dieu – ou de poétique – leur grande autorité. Mais l'inconnu exige à la fin l'empire sans partage.' That poetry is analogous to religious discourse in its privileged position of accessing the unknown perhaps gives Rimbaud's gesture all the more power. Rimbaud's end of writing is dialectically equivalent to the death of God; the sacrifice proves its uncontested power and, at once, the limit of this power in its termination. The consequences of this gesture must be delivered in new and different terms – a new language or discourse – to the one that has been superseded in the gesture of sovereign authority and violence. *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

analysis, which Bataille would later conceptualise as the known and unknown, as well as valorising the view that it is poetry's capacity to delineate the unknown that gives it its power.

Bataille's analysis of Rimbaud's project therefore exposes the ambiguities and contradictions in his own views on poetry. It then becomes a question of how to account for the moment of rupture that Rimbaud's project – and its termination – articulates in regard to inner experience. The figure of poetry is Rimbaud and the significance of his abandonment of poetry is that it is analogous to the operations of poetry itself: in which its own capacity to approach the extreme limit sets up the sovereign moment of an expression of self-destruction and abdication. Poetry attains its sovereign status by militating against normal communication. Even the impossible, the extreme limit, resists the useful, moral project and its contentious expression allows it to supersede the demands made of it, even by poets themselves.

In 'Le Supplice' Bataille outlines how poetry remains the best way to articulate experience, as it is a discourse that subordinates the subject to its form. The form of poetry does not allow for any movement of the subject, instead poetry collapses in upon itself. Poetry is therefore positioned to circumscribe the negative or the unknown; in describing the universe, consciousness and so on, it endures its own exposure, yet can also articulate its own limitations and horizon, as in 'Le Bateau ivre'.⁵⁵ This tendency becomes more pronounced, according to Bataille, in approaching the extreme limit. The object in poetry, in this sense, is altered to an unrecognisable degree, to the point of transcendence without meaning:

On ne peut rien savoir de l'homme qui n'ait pris forme de phrase et l'engouement pour la poésie d'autre part fait d'intraduisibles suites de mots le sommet. L'extrême est ailleurs. Il n'est entièrement atteint que communiqué (l'homme est plusieurs, la solitude est le vide, la nullité, le mensonge). Qu'une expression quelconque en témoigne: l'extrême en est distinct. Il n'est jamais littérature. Si la poésie l'exprime, il en est distinct: au point de n'être pas poétique, car si la poésie l'a pour l'objet, elle ne l'atteint pas. Quand l'extrême est là, les moyens qui servent à l'atteindre n'y sont plus.⁵⁶

Bataille here again emphasises poetry's inability to express the extreme limit as poetry, as a literary genre, because it represents a false summit. Where ordinary literature, in Bataille's schematic represents the illusion of totality and the image of mimetic reality, poetry dispenses with all illusion, ironically, by a complete immersion in unreality. As Bataille writes, once the limit is reached, the means by which it was accessed have disappeared. Only by sacrificing his project could Rimbaud then access the extreme limit in terms of experience. According to Bataille, then, the loss of project links poetry directly to the ambiguous nature of inner

⁵⁵ Steinmetz calls 'Le Bateau ivre' an absolute poem because it represents the interior trajectory of the poet's solitary, internal journey to the limit of their own capacities as well as, arguably, the capacity of language. Steinmetz, p. 31.

⁵⁶ Bataille, OC V, pp. 63-4.

experience and which confuses the usual connotations of negativity associated with anguish. In the quotation below, from 'Le Supplice', Bataille emphasises that Rimbaud's poetic project did not have a defined beginning or end but, rather, imploded to achieve its most profound expression beyond poetry:

Le dernier poème connu de Rimbaud n'est pas l'extrême. Si Rimbaud atteint l'extrême, il n'en atteint la communication que par le moyen de son désespoir: il supprima la communication possible, il n'écrivit plus de poèmes.⁵⁷

Bataille valorises experience here, in opposition to intellectual thought, as the disruption of communication and of the logic of language. Poetry is the means by which experience is exposed: it is the absence left behind by sacrifice that reveals the unknown. If anguished experience contributed to the production of *Une saison en enfer*, then Rimbaud also posited the possibility of experience beyond anguish, that is, anguish or guilt that forms the basis of the subject's experience of religion. Bataille suggests that Rimbaud 'suppressed possible communication', possibly because language is as unstable, unreliable and ambiguous as the experience it attempts to communicate. It is unclear, then, what – if anything – motivates the termination of communication, if anguish posits the final flowering of articulation of experience then its role in engendering silence must also be considered. It depends perhaps on which of the two scenarios outlined below is the more plausible:

Le refus de communiquer est un moyen de communiquer plus hostile, mais le plus puissant; s'il fut possible, c'est que Rimbaud se détournait. Pour ne plus communiquer, il renonça. Sinon c'est pour avoir renoncé qu'il a cessé de communiquer. Personne ne saura si l'horreur (la faiblesse) ou la pudeur commanda le renoncement de Rimbaud. Il se peut que les bornes de l'horreur aient reculé (plus de Dieu). En tout cas, parler de faiblesse a peu de sens: Rimbaud maintint sa volonté d'extrême sur d'autres plans (celui surtout du renoncement). Il se peut qu'il ait renoncé faute d'avoir atteint – (l'extrême n'est pas désordre ou luxuriance), trop exigeant pour supporter, trop lucide pour ne pas voir. Il se peut qu'après avoir atteint, mais doutant que cela ait un sens ou même que cela ait eu lieu – comme l'état de celui qui atteint ne dure pas – il n'ait pu supporter le doute.⁵⁸

The first possibility is that Rimbaud no longer wanted to communicate and therefore stopped writing. The second is that he wanted to renounce writing or just give up, which entails the cessation of communication. Bataille, in acknowledging that it was more likely the second option, affirms his earlier idea of Rimbaud's will forcing itself to shape experience and condition his destiny. If it was not weakness that prompted Rimbaud's disavowal of poetry it was an acknowledgement of the limits of language to articulate a certain form of experience. Poetry, having led the subject to the brink of non-knowledge, reveals the brink to be a state of

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

confusion and ambiguity – as essentially unrecognisable – qualities anathema to Rimbaud.⁵⁹

The last mention of Rimbaud in *L'Expérience intérieure* takes account of the perception of others regarding Rimbaud's abandonment of poetry and voyages within and beyond Europe; 'Même des esprits simples sentirent obscurément que Rimbaud recula le possible de la poésie en l'abandonnant en faisant le sacrifice achevé, sans équivoque, sans réserve.'⁶⁰ Not only did Rimbaud take poetry to the limit for himself but he also raised the stakes for all poets subsequently. No other writer can proceed in the same way and is able, without being in bad faith at least, to approach the limits Rimbaud had: 'La mauvaise conscience pouvait tout à coup se traduire en attitude humble, puérile même, mais sur un autre plan que celui de l'art, le plan social.'⁶¹ Bataille, obliged to contextualise Rimbaud historically in this instance, connects Rimbaud's poetic achievements with the meaning given by the sacrifice of his *œuvre*, by those such as Breton, in claiming Rimbaud's gesture of incompleteness for their own respective causes. Bataille's thinking therefore centred on Rimbaud (perhaps to avoid being in bad faith himself) and the meaning his sacrifice has as an absence or as a shadow beyond discourse: 'De la poésie, je dirai maintenant qu'elle est [...] le sacrifice où les mots sont victimes.'⁶² In the notes of *L'Expérience intérieure*, in a key statement, Bataille elaborates on the mechanics of sacrifice – in poetry – as an operation that not only requires the destruction of the object in the moment of sacrifice but one that impoverishes or weakens the sacrificial mechanism so that not only is the object destroyed but the subject as well:

L'importance profonde de la poésie, c'est que du sacrifice des mots, des images, et du fait même de la misère de ce sacrifice [...] elle fait glisser de l'impuissant sacrifice des objets à celui du sujet. Ce que Rimbaud sacrifia ce n'est pas seulement la poésie objet mais le sujet poète.⁶³

Here Bataille crystallizes the relation between writing as object and the writer as subject in which the sacrifice of the subject-poet posits the sacrifice of writing as project and, thus, the destruction of poetic discourse. What is additionally introduced into the dynamic between poetry and sacrifice is that poetry becomes the catalyst that initiates the failure of sacrifice, in which seemingly, sacrifice fails specifically because it does not manage to preserve anything; it is thus the instrument of its own annihilation.

The argument as far as the reading of *L'Expérience intérieure* proceeds may be

⁵⁹ It is irrelevant to Bataille whether the last poem referred to was the last one Rimbaud wrote chronologically 'Rêve' or the last one in order of (future) publication ('Genie' in *Illuminations*) as the meaning Bataille draws from Rimbaud's last poem is that it marked the end of the poetic project; in that its meaning is created by the creation of the absence of words/project.

⁶⁰ Bataille, OC V, p. 171.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

schematised in three stages: first, Rimbaud failed to communicate his *voyant* project in a subjective mode because he himself was weak and lacked the force of will to access the extreme limit; this will was mitigated by a passive, 'feminine' tendency, which risks the non-recognition of the desired object or aim, so that what the subject desires to experience – the unknown – will be unrecognisably altered by the very force of its desire. Second, the will of inner experience may be perceived as *desire*, which reveals the repetitive nature of inner experience is not a will for annihilation but a desire to experience the unknown. This desiring current within inner experience becomes transferred to the level of writing and textual representation in the form of project. The failure of project and collapse of linguistic representation within is that which poetry can communicate: the inner experience of the unknown results in the ruin of poetic language in poetry, in other words, the sacrifice of the subject inexorably leads to the destruction of the poetic project as object. Third, the sacrificial operation in poetry objectifies poetry and destroys its poetic aspect (resulting in the attenuated form and opaque style of the poems). Yet, paradoxically, poetry maintains its sovereign potential to communicate its own failure; the precedent that is dramatised in *Une saison en enfer* in a culmination of the *voyant* project followed by its collapse and the subject's dispersal into polyphony. 'Le Bateau ivre' is a representation of this process of desiring the unknown and that it is depicted as a failure. It is a failure because the new perception of the subject is inevitably damaged and destabilised by encountering the unknown. The contamination of the known by the unknown, eventually, implicates the subject himself; the boat mimics the operation of memory and nostalgically conceives of itself as an object – not as a subject.

The twin ideas of failure – the failure of poetry – and the collapse of the conventional sacrificial model in the spreading of violent destruction to the subject and object lead to their reconfiguration in *L'Impossible*. Poetry is no longer the unstable element of destruction but a *moyen terme*; a conduit of the impossible in a contagion of sense and non-sense within poetic discourse. Sacrifice becomes a way of thinking subjective experience as a revolt in which the impossible is a way of mediating the unknown nothingness to which sacrifice exposes the subject and, at once, a representation of the unknown that is within the subject, unavowed in the emotions of guilt and anguish. Bataille, in *L'Impossible*, is adopting the tropes of philosophy and the avant garde, not least of the Surrealist project, by representing transgression and destruction through mythic analogy. In the same way that Rimbaud cites Prometheus (whom he also models himself upon) as the figure who – in Aeschylus' version of the myth – revolts by stealing the secret of writing, Orestes revolts against societal and divine law by committing matricide. Orestes thus stands for poetry as a moment or event of transgression that results in exposure to the unknown, represented by his exile and torment. It is the figure of Orestes that guides the reading of *L'Impossible* below and his evocation of

subjectivity, through representation of revolt and failure in poetry in regard to Bataille's concept of the impossible, has profound linguistic and implications for the poetics.

The Myth of Rimbaud and the Crime of Orestes

In regard to *L'Impossible* the reading here focuses primarily on the third part of the book 'Etre Oreste' and, in particular, the notes that form the draft manuscript, entitled 'La Maladie d'Arthur Rimbaud'. Beyond this manuscript Rimbaud is not mentioned by name in the published text of either *La Haine de la poésie* or the revised edition, *L'Impossible*. Rimbaud is thus replaced by Orestes and Rimbaud's absence from the published book may be metaphorically seen as the reflecting the divergence of poetry from literature in the poetics – poetry's revolt against the functional certainty of ordinary language – but, at once, emphasises poetry's proximity to myth. It is therefore myth that provides the register which assesses the status of the impossible in Bataille's literary economy (or poetics). The reading of *L'Impossible* situates poetry's relation to: first, to literature (the *moyen terme* that evokes the impossible) and, second, to myth (the revolt against social and moral codes). Bataille advances his thinking on poetry and its relation to the impossible leading from his own analysis of Rimbaud's project, specifically Rimbaud's *voyant* letter: 'On peut aussi essayer de s'en approcher par l'exercice de la poésie: c'est l'équivoque ou l'évocation; reprendre l'analyse à partir de celle de Rimbaud, perdu la tête etc. c'est la confusion des moments, le vouloir aller trop vite'.⁶⁴ Rimbaud's project – aimed at recuperating experience in an objective mode – is, in the poet's confusion, a rush to the limit of meaning; the very nature of experience is destabilised by desire.

In *L'Impossible*, then, poetry has a doubled and arguably contradictory nature, on the one hand, according to Bataille's analysis of Rimbaud's project, it is a *moyen terme* that, in its linguistic subversion, evokes the impossible and, on the other hand, by way of the conjuring of Orestes, it is an assertive act of revolt against the body of language motivated by hatred and which enables poetry to represent the instability of the subject in experience. In Marie-Christine Lala's article 'The Hatred of Poetry in Georges Bataille's Writing and Thought', which gives a reading of *L'Impossible*, she considers the problem of the impossible, initially, as one of representation, the same problem that attends sacrifice in *L'Expérience intérieure*.

⁶⁴ '1 L'existence de l'homme mise en question et au-delà de la nature. 2 La lettre de Rimbaud. 3 La nuit: a) le poétique comme moyen terme entre le monde logique et la nuit, b) la nuit comme simple expérience du vide de la poésie; c) la véritable nuit exige le déchirement la destruction de tous les moyens termes et non seulement de la poésie, d) le pouvoir qu'a la poésie d'évoquer la nuit Oreste. 4 La nuit d'Oreste. L'auteur et l'auditeur (peu importe) posent pour la fiction poétique un au-delà de l'existence logique. Cet au-delà peut-être placé devant soi comme spectacle: pas d'équivoque. On peut aussi essayer de s'en approcher par l'exercice de la poésie: c'est l'équivoque ou l'évocation; reprendre l'analyse à partir de celle de Rimbaud, perdu la tête etc. c'est la confusion des moments, le vouloir aller trop vite. 5 Faire l'expérience du possible pour l'homme est peut-être seulement ramasser les possibles tracés, ne plus les laisser traîner. Aller au bout de qui est offert.' Bataille, OC III, pp. 533-4.

She also explores the problem of the impossible in regard to its position in Bataille's system of communication and 'the nature and existential status of the impossible object of exchange'.⁶⁵ Her use of the phrase 'hatred of poetry' does not, however, signal a consideration of the poetics or of poetry (albeit not without assigning the poetics a privileged place in Bataille's thought) but rather a rhetorical tactic that enables her to place the *hatred of poetry* as the precursor of the later concept the *part maudite*, and which infects all of Bataille's other systems of thought – philosophy, religion and economics – with the same problem: how to recuperate meaning from non-productive work, that is, from work that does not produce meaning or signification. The secondary consideration in this discussion is to read Rimbaud's deranged *voyant* project as parallel to Orestes' revolt under the same diagnosis of madness and desire in order to generate another perspective on the dynamic between poetry and the impossible. The *hatred of poetry* here is embodied by Orestes whose matricidal crime manifests the irrational, unknown part that exists within the subject, usually repressed, and which dazzles Orestes when confronting the night of the impossible: the impossible becomes that part of himself he cannot contemplate in any rational condition and is only visible in such acts of crime, triggered by hatred.

The reading here therefore situates the poetics as a means to take account of Bataille's turn to mythic-literary discourse against the backdrop of the discussion in Chapter 1 and Breton's appropriation of Rimbaud as a 'Surrealist' semi-mythical figure. The reading specifically focuses on how Bataille conceptually and intrinsically relates poetry to experience rather than viewing poetry as a means to articulate experience as he does in *L'Expérience intérieure*. As such, I do not focus here on the *hatred of poetry* – although that is crucial to his interpretation of Rimbaud's project as well as to the reading of the Orestes myth – but rather how the problem of representation of the impossible generally is engaged with by poetry in its configuration of experience. Bataille's approach in *L'Impossible* binds the impossible to the poetic aspect of its own limits, thus requiring the mythic perspective that reveals the sovereign and moral aspect of poetry – Orestes is a poetic figure (anti-hero) – whereas in *L'Expérience intérieure* poetry communicates an experience based on the paradigmatic moment of terror in the realisation of death in sacrifice. In 'Etre Oreste' the price of the sovereign condition of poetry and its revolt is the assumption of Orestes' guilt at his matricide: revolt is posited by its failure and morality is conditioned by an unbearable crime.

The figure of the subject in 'Etre Oreste' is portrayed as a mythic construct: the first key point in my reading is to show that, following from Bataille's reading of Rimbaud's project as the ruination of poetry (and of literature) poetry may be distinguished in

⁶⁵ Marie-Christine Lala, 'The Hatred of Poetry in Georges Bataille's Writing and Thought', in *Georges Bataille: Writing the Sacred* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 105.

L'Impossible by its affirmation of the subject through his revolt. Second, this revolt (depicted by Lala as a 'trial') considered as sovereign experience, places the subject in confrontation with the unknown; Bataille uses the simile of the night in his reconfiguration of the Orestes myth. To retain his subjective presence and coherence (to avow and survive his guilt) in the face of the unknown is the impossible condition of subjectivity. The impossible is thus, I suggest, both the defining existential condition of the subject and his desire for the unknown – the other or the object – and at once the linguistic deferment that supposes this unrepresentable experience. Lala notes that the object – in the subject's experience of the unknown becomes recognised as a lack – the subject's own desire for the other becomes unmasked as desire for his own annihilation; the other assumes the unknowable nature of death, the night: 'The impossible uses the object-as-lack as a medium to translate something irreducible, which makes it impossible to render it directly accessible'.⁶⁶ Absence – or silence – is one of the key concerns of Bataille's poetics and it is one, I suggest, articulated in the poetic tactic of deferment (evident in parody, obscenity and eroticism): poetry is not itself the impossible 'object of exchange' but – in its radical perversion of literature, irreducible uselessness and depiction of subjective experience – poetry does open out to the impossible in crossing from *sense* (ordinary language or literature) to *non-sense* (poetic *jouissance* and subversion).

As noted in 'La Maladie d'Arthur Rimbaud' poetry, at this stage, is not considered as a manifestation or a trace of an experience at the limit of being but an equivocation and ambiguous expression of this experience, evoking the impossible rather than destabilising subjective experience. Lala's article joins the concept of the impossible to the status of poetry by displacing poetry outside useful exchange economies, where it attains its deferred, 'accursed' position:

The narrative [of 'Histoire de rats' and 'Dianus'] constantly repeats the same process, playing with the object-as-lack, and the problem of death, once situated in this way within language and the speech-act, throws into high relief an unbridgeable distance. However hard it is this tension must be maintained because it keeps man moving in the right direction [...] There is in this experience of the void such a trial that the experience of writing cannot be dissociated from the experience of loss, for without the dramatization of existence such experience would remain inaccessible.⁶⁷

Lala notes that tension is intrinsic to questioning the extent to which literature – in communicating experience – puts itself as an object at risk, its stake is losing its own coherence and its very purpose; literature which exceeds itself and haemorrhages out of the economy of communication then *becomes* something else beyond meaning: the madness of the deranged poet or a matricidal crime as a sign of revolt. Language itself reaches a limit –

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

the disappearance of the narrative – the presence of the subject – is reconstituted as poetry. The ‘object-as-lack’ would demand an excessive response in attempt to repolarise it as positive but then this process, as Lala refers to it, a ‘trial’ is doomed to replicate and represent and, even, in Rimbaud’s sacrifice, enact this lack as loss. The gesture of *Je est un autre* in this context, therefore implies a destruction of the subject because of the loss of self-recognition, that is, identity. ‘Le Bateau ivre’ depicts the subject reconfigured as a symbol of his own self-reflexive discourse. The image of the toy boat in the penultimate verse signals the transformation: the boat is no longer a boat but consciousness itself, one that disintegrates. Recognition and desire will form the core elements of the third part of Bataille’s reading of Rimbaud’s project, in *L’Erotisme*.

In ‘La Maladie d’Arthur Rimbaud’ Bataille refers to Rimbaud’s letter of 13th May 1871, in which Rimbaud’s term *derangement* appears as an essential stage in the process of poetic development: ‘Le poète se fait *voyant* par un long, immense et raisonné *dérèglement de tous les sens*. Toutes les formes d’amour, de souffrance de folie.’⁶⁸ This emphasis on self-knowledge as the essence of becoming a poet/*voyant* further removes poetry from nature and endows it with the ability to evoke the night of the impossible. Bataille, in the key quotation below, summarises the dynamic between poetry and insanity, such that poetry is its own negation:

Le mouvement de la poésie part du connu et mène à l’inconnu. Il touche à la folie s’il s’accomplit. Mais à l’approche de la folie le reflux commence. A peu près toute la poésie n’est qu’un reflux: le mouvement *vers* la poésie, par la *vers* la folie, cherche à rester dans les limites du possible. La poésie est... négation d’elle-même: elle se nie en se conservant et se nie en se dépassant.⁶⁹

The movement of poetry towards the unknown therefore implies madness, creating an equivalence between poets and the insane: ‘La limite du poète est semblable à celle du fou en ce qu’elle l’atteint personnellement et n’est pas limite pour la vie humaine.’⁷⁰ The poet is a fixed yet unstable point at the threshold of experience, an experience, furthermore, which is still not the full extent of what is possible.

The question of whether the new forms of desired objects would still be recognisable, given the *derangement* necessary to reach it, is circumvented here by Rimbaud: the *derangement* is mitigated by reason. Bataille, although referring to poetry rather than the poet

⁶⁸ Rimbaud, *Correspondance*, p. 68. Bataille seems to have confused the letters of Rimbaud – unsurprisingly perhaps, as Rimbaud repeats slightly modulated phrases in letters to different recipients – and cites a quotation (given below) as found in Rimbaud’s letter of 13th May (to Izambard) but which is actually in his letter of 15th May, to Demeny. The citation in the manuscript consists of the first three words only: ‘La première étude de l’homme qui veut être poète est sa propre connaissance, entière; il cherche son âme, il l’inspecte, il la tente, l’apprend.’

⁶⁹ Bataille, OC III, pp. 531-2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 532.

in this manuscript, makes the same qualification in claiming that poetry seeks to preserve itself from fully confronting the unknown and therefore, potentially, complete collapse. However, Bataille also emphasises the destructive power of poetry, expressed in its negation, in that poetry does not only lead to the unknown but also enables the unknown to seep back to the known; an ontological shift has taken place whereby experience is no longer a movement that may echo a sacred feeling but one that posits an absence or lack instead, one which may be termed as impossible. In the same manuscript, Bataille elaborates on the tendency of poetry to evoke, if not reproduce, the absence of the impossible within it:

Mais ce qui touche à la connaissance de soi-même est simplement désir, évocation, c'est le vide, le chaos, laissé par la poésie: aucune distinction n'y est faite entre la folie, à laquelle on succombe, et l'épuisement raisonné des possibles de l'être. La folie est masquée sous l'apparence d'une volonté d'expérience, et cette volonté sous l'apparence d'un dérèglement. L'invincibilité procède de l'excès du désir – dirigé en même temps dans plusieurs sens – l'affaissement à l'avance éprouvé dans la fatigue empêche l'esprit de dépasser le désir et l'exacerbe.⁷¹

In a marked departure from his assessment of the *willed experience* in *L'Expérience intérieure*, here instead, the will is equivocated as merely a disguise for (or symptom of) madness, or derangement in another form. In pursuing this shift from will as the normative human condition – one that is based in nature – to one which functions as a conduit of madness, a negation is still nonetheless implied. Insanity is thus a totality in which the deranged subject experiences nothing but their own derangement without any mediating reality. The negation of poetry is its own failure to accede to this totality:

La poésie est niée par un déplacement. Le poète n'est plus le langage détruit refaisant un monde faux par le moyen de figures décomposées mais l'homme même qui, lassé du jeu, veut faire de ce royaume de la folie l'objet d'une conquête réelle. Ce qu'affaîssé par anticipation le *voyant* ne peut *voir* est la différence entre l'affaissement subi (la folie ou l'équivalence, la négation pure) et la quête des possibles au-delà de cet affaissement. Ces deux moments se confondent en un seul avec celui de la poésie.⁷²

The shift mentioned above is further expanded with the displacement of the poet as a subject moving beyond mimesis (the creation of 'false worlds') in attempting to objectify the kingdom of madness. The poet/*voyant* cannot anticipate or account for this anterior, hidden state precisely because it has been anticipated and to do so would be to go mad, thereby negating the attempt. This ostensible criticism of Rimbaud's method does not judge it a failure however: 'La grandeur de Rimbaud est d'avoir mené la poésie à l'échec de la poésie. La poésie n'est pas une connaissance de soi-même.'⁷³ The wide space between Rimbaud's claims that poetry first demands a complete knowledge of the self and Bataille's denial of that

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

knowledge alters poetry's status in Bataille's thought so that it is no longer the essential expression and enactment of experience and is, instead, part of the endless movement of the desire for the unknown.

As an unknowable but desired object, poetry belongs to nature; it has no rules or limits. This exposes the subject to a space that also implies the disappearance of limits in a universe in which the subject is unable to position themselves; poetry is not self-knowledge but knowledge – or rather, an evocation or awareness – of nothingness, of an empty universe with nothing to connect the subject to anything else. However, as Bataille states: 'La poésie aussi excédait le monde, mais elle ne pouvait me changer'.⁷⁴ In simple terms, Rimbaud did try to sacrifice himself to poetry, a gesture Bataille characterises as a failure because it was incomplete. Although Rimbaud was prepared to, he did not go far enough – not until he sacrificed not only himself as a subject but also the object – poetry. Once Rimbaud had represented the sacrifice, the teleological momentum of his project demanded that he then enact it.

The dictum 'Le sacrifice est la communication de l'angoisse' (in *L'Expérience intérieure*) explains the failure of poetry because Rimbaud's epistemological project misunderstood the true nature of poetry, being in and of itself unknowable once writing is taken to the limit of a rational project. In *L'Impossible* the moment of violence marked by Rimbaud's sacrifice of poetry is taken up by Bataille as the means by which poetry can remain sovereign.

The means to remain sovereign introduces the subjective element of hatred into the poetics that, as discussed in Chapter 1, has its roots in ideological revolt that, in turn, conditions poetry's evocation of the impossible. Bataille's reference for the Orestes legend was Racine's *Andromaque*. In the preface to the second edition (*L'Impossible*) Bataille writes:

Il me semblait que la poésie véritable accédait seule la haine. La poésie n'avait de sens puissant que dans la violence de la révolte. Mais la poésie n'atteint cette violence qu'évoquant *l'impossible*.⁷⁵

Poetry thus not only makes sense as a violent gesture, having been cast as the pusillanimous orphan of literature but, that, furthermore, this violent revolt does not necessarily lead to the annihilation (summit) of experience – its meaningless sacrifice – but retains the potential to communicate the void of the unknown. This chimes with Rimbaud's statement, in his letter of 15th May 1871: 'La Poésie ne rythmera plus l'action; elle sera *en avant*'.⁷⁶ Rimbaud's abandonment of poetry may thus not be an abandonment *per se* but a shift of form that allows

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 221.

⁷⁵ Bataille, OC III, p. 101

⁷⁶ Rimbaud, *Correspondance*, p. 70.

poetry to evoke the impossible. Although this shift does not exceed the subject, it uproots and disassociates him from his logically-inflected position within language. Rimbaud's letter also provides a basis for Bataille's distinction between masculine and feminine poetry, in that as Rimbaud implied poetry cannot be constrained by language but must itself use language and experiment with new forms of writing to successfully communicate experience and new visions. Once all objects have been pushed to the same vertiginous point overlooking the night, they lose their objective meaning. This vertiginous point is evident in places in *Une saison en enfer* where Rimbaud submerges his own subject-poet into the personae who revolt against his identity determined by racial, physical, historical and mythic aspects.

In 'Être Oreste' the symbolic body is clearly signalled as that of Orestes himself. It is the trial of Orestes that opens the way for death to reach into life, in the shape of the Furies that torment Orestes after the murder of his mother. The trial of Orestes, which crystallises him as a symbol of hatred and vengeance lends Orestes the same status as Rimbaud. It is Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus that results in his trial and ordeal. Clytemnestra, as Orestes' mother, therefore represents not only the body of the known but also the sacred body, that is, it can never be known in the way any other body can be (she remains unknown). In *L'Expérience intérieure* Bataille describes poetry as belonging to the *body of language*. Therefore analogously to Orestes, Rimbaud's silencing of his poetry – in an attempt to stop writing as well as interrupting communication – is murdering the body of language that had once offered him the promise of self-knowledge. In this context, poetry holds the status of the sacred. These analogous acts make them at once sacred and reviled and push them out beyond the sphere of law and discourse respectively. The self-made orphan Orestes is effectively outlawed after committing matricide: his trial and judgement seal his anterior, excluded status in a moral and spiritual exile. This results in Orestes' exposure to the night, accompanied by the Erinyes which, according to Bataille, reveals the depth of his revolt: 'Le cœur est humain dans la mesure où il se révolte (ceci veut dire: être un homme est "ne pas s'incliner devant la loi")'.⁷⁷ In Orestes' case, his singular, directed hatred brings down upon him a universal, excessive hatred (driving him insane) in revenge for not submitting to the law thus exposing the action-reaction mechanics of a human-as-divine universe. Rimbaud broaches this macrocosmic paradigm in *Une saison en enfer* (as did Bataille, in making eroticism come to signify the purely human) of which their hallmark is unmitigated guilt and suffering. The only relief is the temporary spasm of revolt or the finality of dissipation in fusion: 'j'ai voulu parler un langage qui soit l'équivalence de rien, *un langage qui retourne au silence* [my emphasis].'⁷⁸ Bataille's desire to invent a language of nothingness has its

⁷⁷ Bataille, OC III, p. 217.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, OC X, pp. 257-8. Later in *La Souveraineté*, a volume of *La Part maudite*, Bataille characterises this psychological condition as the new, laicised version of a miracle 'Le plus remarquable est que ce

precedent in Rimbaud's wish in *Une saison en enfer* to resurrect a pagan language in which to communicate; a language which would have no concept of divinity or hierarchy – only the universal flows of love and hatred and vengeance that, as outlined by Bataille in *L'Anus solaire*, lead inexorably back to their own source and oblivion, endlessly negating and renewing themselves.⁷⁹

It is the case, I suggest, that inner experience is itself largely a study of failure. In *L'Impossible*, Bataille formulates the function of poetry as that which is able to reveal the unknown as a desire for an experience at the limit:

La poésie révèle un pouvoir de l'inconnu. Mais l'inconnu n'est qu'un vide insignifiant, s'il n'est pas l'objet d'un désir. La poésie est moyen terme, elle dérobe le connu dans l'inconnu paré des couleurs aveuglantes et de l'apparence d'un soleil.⁸⁰

The first two sentences show how poetry communicates or dramatises the effect of the unknown rather than the unknown directly. The unknown must be desired as an object or else it cannot signify anything: the object in question here being poetry. The last sentence shows that the action of the *moyen terme* that conceals the known is revelatory, in the metaphor of looking at the sun for understanding that is too overwhelming and too excessive to be absorbed in any meaningful way. Poetry then, as the agency of camouflage, is unstable as a means to communicate the unknown, therefore, it seems contradictory and becomes impossible to access directly. The void of the unknown infects poetry as, inversely, the unknown reveals the irreducible meaning in poetry. That the unknown and poetry contaminate each other is part of the difficulty Bataille addresses in relation to experience, which is how a new experience of the sacred can be recognised, given that poetry militates against and confuses its status in discourse by incubating silence within it. Once the unknown is revealed by poetry, the horror of bare experience is exposed, that of a failure to adequately express the unknown: it is perhaps the horror of its own failure.⁸¹

Poetry is contaminated by the unknown of which it is part and, therefore, poetry is inevitably transformed by the unknown. Poetry too, then, forms part of the same trajectory that marks all literary/artistic activity in regard to the sacred, in that it is pulled – lacking any power of its own – into the night and irretrievable loss. If however, poetry does succeed in tearing itself apart from the body of language, it is only this act of tearing and rupture that

miraculeux négatif, donné dans la mort, répond au principe... selon lequel l'instant miraculeux est l'instant où l'attente se résout en RIEN'. *Ibid.*, OC VIII, p. 257.

⁷⁹ 'A la fécondité céleste s'opposent les désastres terrestres, image de l'amour terrestre sans condition, érection sans issue et sans règle, scandale et terreur.' *Ibid.*, OC I, p. 86.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, OC III, p. 222.

⁸¹ In *L'Impossible* Bataille, in general terms, characterises the perception of poetry as that which can express this horror: 'Il y a devant l'espèce humaine une double perspective: d'une part, celle du plaisir violent, de l'horreur et de la mort – exactement celle de la poésie – et, en sens opposé, celle de la science ou du monde réel de l'utilité.' In 'Préface de la deuxième édition', *Ibid.*, p. 102.

animates it: the poem itself remains a ruin; remaining as literature rather than forging a path to the unknown. A cursory reading of Bataille's poetry shows a bare style stripped of any lyrical adornment, simple or complex metaphorical image or narrative. Bataille's poetry thus may be said to possess a scopophilic quality whereby the real world is perverted by the spectacle poetry (re)presents of the space beyond; the night. Poetry is the best means, therefore, to de-objectify the object. Poetry does not clarify this difficulty however, it itself only adds to the tenebrous feeling.

L'Impossible therefore articulates the proposition that Rimbaud's sacrifice of his poetry was motivated by hatred. This act is part of his epistemological project and represented metaphorically as an attempt to wrest poetry violently from the body of language. This gesture is analogous to Orestes' renunciation and murder of the known, symbolised by his mother. The rebellious hatred that fuelled both these acts represents the resurgence of the subject through the reclamation of the will, in contrast to its failure (discussed in *L'Expérience intérieure*) and exposed them both to the night beyond language and law.⁸²

The reading of *L'Erotisme* below focuses on Bataille's conception of poetry in terms of desire – ebbing and flowing from the unknown – but not in the parodic operations of *L'Anus solaire*. Erotic experience is another means to represent the subject beyond language. Bataille posits eroticism as an approach to the unknown and to communicate the sovereignty of the subject. Eroticism, furthermore, allows for experience to be modified not only as acting as the effacement of the distance between subject and object but their fusion. This fusion, however, is also *confusion*: the subject-object relation is altered by non-recognition and which allows for the sacred to be realised on the subjective plane of continuous existence.

Eternal Poetry

Published in 1957, *L'Erotisme* is very different to both *L'Expérience intérieure* and *L'Impossible*, the aim having shifted from exploring the dynamic between writing and subjectivity to producing a more objective and *almost* scientific analysis of the historical-psychological aspects of eroticism. Bataille noted that 'l'érotisme a pour les hommes un sens que la démarche scientifique ne peut atteindre'.⁸³ Eroticism is grounded in the psychological realm of sensation, or experience, rather than in any anatomical or biological domain. The erotic is one of the fundamental tropes within Bataille's corpus and one which is also treated in myriad ways: as anthropological study in *L'Erotisme*, as psychoanalytic literary experiment in *Histoire de l'œil* and more conventionally in the Sade-ian *Le Mort* and as poetic account of erotic desire, celestial patterns and their libidinal, linguistic expression in *L'Anus solaire*.

⁸² Bataille had already acknowledged hatred as a kind of communication, without elaborating on it: 'Le refus de communiquer est un moyen de communiquer plus hostile, mais le plus puissant'. OC V, p. 64.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, OC X, p. 12.

The erotic, in this case the subject as an eroticised being, and the poetic, in the form of metonymy, are two paths which join to lead into the domain of night beyond language, where words are replaced by sighs in sexual activity and where Bataille's poetry comes closest to enacting the violence that is sublimated in sexual behaviour by destroying received notions of the poetic. In simple terms, perhaps, it is the erotic act that has come to replace the violent (sacrificial) act in the poetics; the end point has no longer come to be rupture but, rather, dissolution. In light of this shift from an unstable and subjective mode to an objective mode of writing, the weight of Rimbaud's presence also changes. Whereas in *L'Expérience intérieure* and *L'Impossible* Rimbaud's influence is both overt and structural, in *L'Erotisme* there is only one mention – in the introduction. Bataille drew a link between the operation and consequences of eroticism and any analysis of this difference could not be undertaken scientifically; it is instead within poetry that the erotic impulses find their most profound echo.

[...] nous sentons tous ce qu'est la poésie. Elle nous fonde, mais nous ne savons pas en parler... mais je crois rendre plus *sensible* l'idée de continuité que j'ai voulu mettre en avant, qui ne peut être confondue jusqu'au bout avec celle du Dieu des théologiens, en rappelant ces vers d'un des poètes les plus violents, de Rimbaud.

Elle est retrouvée
Quoi? L'éternité.
C'est la mer allée
Avec le soleil.

La poésie mène au même point que chaque forme de l'érotisme, à l'indistinction, à la confusion des objets distincts. Elle nous mène à la mort, et par la mort, à la continuité: la poésie est *l'éternité. C'est la mer allée avec le soleil.*⁸⁴

This seemingly contradictory stance of poetry affirming the gulf between subjects, briefly bridged in eroticism, as well as standing for their negation through death and, therefore, for the continuity of eternity is notably different to that in *L'Expérience intérieure*, in which Rimbaud's sacrifice of poetry does not necessarily posit a continuity. Instead it symbolises the sovereign moments of rupture and unconstrained destruction. Rimbaud and poetry – the project – are two separate entities: the project was that which he had to overcome violently to re-affirm his subjectivity, or, alternatively, as others saw it, his indissoluble bond to the project. This act of sacrifice allows Bataille to make the link between violence – whether eroticised or not – and poetry as the threshold of continuity or eternity. This is the same trajectory Rimbaud had already followed, positing, however, the violent end in 'Le Bateau ivre' rather than representing it. As noted above, this poem depicts consciousness merging, dissolving and then becoming enfolded into the object of its visions, as one of those objects.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Bataille's model of eroticism depicts the approach to a plane where the human and non-human blur and where fusion displaces communication. This displacement is termed continuity by Bataille, as a momentary condition: in exceeding this state it becomes death. The poem quoted above however, claims that 'eternity has been *rediscovered*' [my emphasis], implying any previous notions – presumably of a more anthropomorphic kind – have been discarded and replaced with the sun, one of the motifs of Bataille's writing. However, in contrast, Rimbaud does not keep the sun in the centre of the sky as did Bataille, instead, Rimbaud invokes the ocean as the symbol of its effacement: in pointing directly to the sea the sun is not reflected but fused and therefore annihilated at the line of the horizon. The violence this act supposes arguably exceeds the notion of eroticism Bataille is discussing and sets it apart alongside other sovereign acts such as sacrifice. It is a reversal of the poles of deification whereby when the Aztecs sacrificed to the sun as the representation of their gods, according to their belief that the heart is a lost fragment of the sun and sacrifice would reunite the fragment with the whole. Rimbaud names the sun as a catalyst for the fusion of subject and object; communication and silence prefiguring the transformation of the sun in Bataille's thought found, for example, in *L'Anus solaire* where Bataille declares 'Le Soleil aime exclusivement la Nuit'.⁸⁵ *L'Erotisme*, arguably, considers sacrifice as the inevitable result of a trajectory that leads to fusion, as an attempt to stem or otherwise offset the inevitable self-destructive teleology of desire.

There are, therefore, two ways in which Bataille's thought on eroticism and poetry may be seen to inform each other here: first, by the linking of body and mind (as language) in Rimbaud's writing (the sea and the sun perhaps) which is a union that enables a centred and fixed perspective to be overcome. In enabling its exposure to the unknown limit, the object of the body – conceptualised as language or as it is represented within *Une saison en enfer* – is sacrificed in order to account for the limit and serve as a marker for the experience. Second is the formal approach to circumscribing this experience, which is determined by a decentred and unstable perspective. This aesthetic of inherent contradiction – characterised as misrecognition by Bataille – explains to some degree how his theory of eroticism is motivated by the dynamic of hatred. The formal implications of an unrecognisable or mutilated poetry form the core of the poetics that, in turn, predicate the decentred position of the subject in the generically unstable text of *L'Expérience intérieure*.

Conclusions

In the reading of Bataille's three books and Rimbaud's poem in this chapter, I aimed to establish: first, a clear idea of the poetics that, broadly, works through a reciprocal system of

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, OC I, p. 86.

representation in relation to project – the content affects form and form affects representation – that posits sacrifice as a means to not only represent the subject but think beyond the stable and rational nature of the subject's configurations; second, the explicit and implicit presence of Rimbaud across Bataille's writings that enables conceptual ideas of subjectivity and sacrifice to be linked to their literal inscription in poetry/writing; third, the polyvalent nature of poetry's subversion and its communication of the representation of the subject's experience.

Bataille's subject in these books emerges in different form to Breton's Surrealist subject as well as distinct from Rimbaud's poetic subject. Bataille's subject is destabilised by his experience and, drawing from Rimbaud's precedent, the poet-subject fails in the face of the demands his project makes upon him. Bataille's criticism of Rimbaud is essentially an expression of his own ambivalence towards poetry; the first of the two figures he identifies with is Rimbaud – in a strategy not unlike Breton's – who, on the one hand, is faulted for his passive resignation to chance and subordination to 'feminine' poetry but, on the other hand, acknowledged for his act of sacrifice in revealing the sovereign potential of poetry. The second figure Bataille identifies with is Orestes who is more positively portrayed for making poetry the discourse that channels the subjective emotions of hatred and its social manifestation of revolt – into a resituating of the subject's confrontation with the impossible.

The significance of sacrifice in this chapter is central to programming the nature of the poetics because Bataille joins a sacrificial operation to a poetic one: poetry is the sacrifice of words that destroys their meaning; a strategic principle derived from Rimbaud's sacrifice of his project in which the destruction of project communicated the opaque and impossible loss of meaning in experience. The problem of sacrifice in the poetics is evident in the conflicting demands Bataille makes of poetry – beyond instrumentalising it as a critique of poetry in the *hatred of poetry* – in that poetry destroys the meaning of words yet must maintain its discourse in order to represent this destruction. The impossible demand Bataille makes of poetry is to leap alchemically from representation to communication. This negates the potential and capacity of poetry (implicitly avowing the failure of sacrifice as well) and this failure reverberates in the larger structure of project, in that poetry and project collapse because they can never succeed in overcoming the deficiencies of language to account for the subject's experience at the limit and of the unknown.

These failures form the basis of my reading of 'Le Bateau ivre', as an expression of transformative experience: it is the sacrifice of the rational aspect of the subject – the subject subordinated to his object-hood (the boat) – that enables the boat to assume the sovereignty of experience and reconfigure poetic representation of experience; the emancipated boat is free to drift on the sea of language formed by the poem yet dissipates, in a dissipation represented by the enervated form of memory and nostalgia. 'Le Bateau ivre' and, more potently *Une*

saison en enfer as I discuss in Chapter 3, are representations of sacrifice without gain: experience is unlimited loss beyond language and meaning. ‘Le Bateau ivre’ refers to the sign or symbol of the boat-object as the signified drifts freely of its signifier; a transformation that is elaborated to a much greater degree in *Une saison en enfer*, made more complex by the subject’s own alienation from a constellation of signifieds; channelled through historical, cultural and psychosexual configurations of identity that comprise the poet-subject-narrator. Both poems reference their own instability in discourse, as a kind of psychological palimpsest that foreshadows the moment of sacrifice. ‘Le Bateau ivre’ represents the subject exposed to the unknown and signals the first problematic engagement with subjective representation. The representation of the subject merging with the sea of the poem articulates this foreboding because it does not reveal the void of nothingness rather it hides it: the irreducible unknown is only experienced for an instant.

The poet’s experience of poetry – of writing poetry – develops to become one of the core concerns in Bataille’s *œuvre*. This is why the aim of project (of literature) – in the subversive, Bataillean sense – is to destroy the power of words and to disintegrate the coherent figure of the subject, thereby revealing the non-sense inherent in poetry. Bataille’s reading of Rimbaud’s project in *L’Expérience intérieure* demonstrates its significance in that questions of representation are no longer preoccupied by how to militate against tyrannical cultural and aesthetic systems of morality but the failure of representation itself, particularly mimesis; Bataille and Rimbaud’s revolt against poetry is one against representation in order to salvage the subject who is subordinated to mendacious and pernicious moral systems. The impossible, then, may be seen as a response Bataille’s a-logical, formless negation of the rational part of Rimbaud’s deranged *voyant* project and, as such, orients his (Bataille’s) poetry to the representation of the affect of sacrifice, the expression of experience without possible meaning. In the ‘Ebauche’ Bataille writes that inner experience has the form of a project, one that, at a later point, would be labelled immoral:

Elle l’est, l’homme l’étant en entier par le langage qui par essence, exception faite de sa perversion poétique, est projet. Mais le projet n’est plus dans ce cas celui, positif [...] mais celui, négatif, d’abolir le pouvoir des mots, donc du projet.⁸⁶

This shows the ambivalence within Bataille’s thought may actually be seen as an outright contradiction, as poetry perverts language, so language corrupts project. Project, in this context, is to record the exhaustion of the subject in the instant of experience; the project cannot subsist beyond this point. Therefore the negative trajectory here is in relation to project and its logical components of work and morality that demand completion; the

⁸⁶ Bataille, OCV, p. 35.

negative is the *no* of *refusal* of these demands. The contestation of poetry is therefore grounded in a negative circuit and, because of this negativity it is a contestation that disrupts its own coherence and stability.

Steinmetz, in his reading of Bataille's poetry identifies the movement that disregards all linguistic strategies of association, paradoxically, the ways which poetry itself layers, obfuscates and refuses singular meaning in favour of its own, labyrinthine expression:

Conçue par Bataille, la poésie souhaite moins exposer la richesse savoureuse du monde... que dépassant l'éloge du possible et la "jouissance des images", accéder à l'impossible. Si le discours cache l'impossible, si la poésie des "correspondances" n'a pas davantage vocation pour le dire, reste un état de poésie où, pauvrement et de façon nue, quelque chance serait donnée d'en formuler le pressentiment.⁸⁷

The foreboding Steinmetz refers to here is also the impossible. As a signifier of nothingness it is not so much the froth or sputum of literature but the dynamic within the subject that pushes him back towards the unknown, the nothingness within himself. Sacrifice, as emblematic of Bataille's militant tendency to delineate the subject, channel violence and access the sacred, thus produces meaningless words, a movement that rejects meaning, meaning accumulated by the edifice of project. The significance of poetry even extends to Bataille's other major concern, eroticism, which highlights the corporeal aspect of the subject's confrontation with the unknown, the unknown in the guise of the other. This engagement results in the destabilising of the subject; a destabilisation that is represented textually through generic shifts, interruptions and the subversion of the idea of project.

The reading of *L'Expérience intérieure* in Chapter 3, mediated by Derrida's essay, considers the textual and literal inscription of this sacrificial principle as it operates through the fabric of Bataille's writing, in its textual, formal representation of experience. The reading of Derrida's essay builds on his model of *major* and *minor* writing in which minor writing (poetry) is situated against the accumulation and clarity of meaning major writing engenders (nominally philosophy in the form of project). I suggest this theoretical model has literal implications and accounts for the formal, generic compositional nature of *La Somme athéologique* and other books – overdetermined additionally by the precedent of *Une saison en enfer*.

⁸⁷ Steinmetz, p. 148; the quotation within is Bataille from *L'Expérience intérieure*.

Chapter 3

Genre and Form: The Unstable Structure of Bataille's Project

Ce fut d'abord une étude. J'écrivais des silences, des nuits, je notais l'inexprimable.
Je fixais des vertiges.¹

Toute la littérature connue est écrite dans le langage du *sens commun*. Hors Rimbaud.²

The reading of *L'Expérience intérieure* in this chapter focuses on form and genre, as aspects of structure. In exploring the structural and paradigmatic aspect of *L'Expérience intérieure* I aim to assess Bataille's consideration of writing on experience within the framework of a specific project. Bataille's project takes shape against the background of the dialectical, structural and conceptual implications of sacrifice that inform his reading of Rimbaud during the 1940s. The reason form and genre come into play here is because writing itself comes under scrutiny as a gauge to measure experience as a way of investigating the subject. Structure and genre at once inform and are affected by the subject matter of Bataille's project at this stage: his aim to objectively record his experience of writing. In the next chapter I consider the *thematic* examination of this link between ontology and writing in Bataille's poetry and how obscenity and eroticism comprise the predominant concerns in the poems. This chapter establishes the influence of genre and formal instability in Bataille's thought and writing and examines how this feeds into his poetics and, thus, in turn, his poetry.

To broadly orient this reading of *L'Expérience intérieure*, I suggest that Bataille's project is an investigation of being by means of experience; in more philosophical terms it uses subjective empiricism to determine the ontological condition of the subject in relation to (religious) doubt and guilt, or in Bataille's term, the unknown.³ This investigation takes the form of a project, yet is at once the subversion of project, because Bataille's epistemology affects the very form of the enquiry. The *project*, in the sense of something like Breton's Surrealism or Thomas Aquinas' *Theological Summa* – to which Bataille's title *La Somme athéologique* directly refers and alters – and is pursued in a manner which, as discussed in Chapter 2, leads to the failure of this enquiry and the collapse of project.⁴ This failure,

¹ Rimbaud, *Une saison en enfer*, 'Délires II' in *Œuvres*, p. 223.

² Paul Valéry, *Cahiers III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 247.

³ In the 'Avant-Propos' experience is defined as the point of becoming open to a new perception: 'Une telle expérience n'est pas ineffable, mais je le communique à qui l'ignore: sa tradition est difficile (écrite n'est guère que l'introduction de l'orale); exige d'autrui angoisse et désir préalables. Ce qui caractérise une telle expérience, qui ne procède pas d'une révélation, où rien non plus se révèle, sinon l'inconnu, est qu'elle n'apporte jamais rien d'apaisant.' Bataille, OC V, p. 10.

⁴ According to Bataille, project is equivalent to authority. Explaining in the 'Ebauche d'une introduction à l'expérience intérieure', he wants inner experience to be autonomous and thus not be indexed to any religious or philosophical system that would give it meaning: 'L'opposition à l'idée de projet – qui prend dans ce livre une part essentielle – est si nécessaire en moi qu'ayant écrit de cette introduction le plan détaillée, je ne puis m'y tenir.' *Ibid.*, p. 18.

however, is not valorised negatively because it is essential to the enquiry; it shows that the experience of the subject moving towards the known limit of their existence cannot be articulated within the terms that have been previously used. The project is, moreover, marked by formal, generic instability and structural incompleteness. The instability stems from the use of experience as a means to describe being, and from the fact that the multiform nature of experience may only be reflected in generic multiplicity and instability. Incompletion represents the failure of language to adequately express the truth of experience at the limits of being.

Rimbaud's poetic project forms the precedent for Bataille's that is evident in the generic shifts in parts of *Une saison en enfer*, in which Rimbaud assesses critically and negatively, in prose, certain poems he has previously written. In *La Somme athéologique* the distinction between present and past writing are just as clearly delineated by genre, in many cases simply by use of italic typeface, but these distinctions are complicated because more genres are in play: essay, diary and poetry. These genres interrupt and interpenetrate each other throughout the three parts of the project in what is ostensibly a philosophical essay (*L'Expérience intérieure*) but which is also a journal/memoir (*Le Coupable*) and a philosophical-literary critique (*Sur Nietzsche*). Generic instability and the content matter itself mean that none of these texts may be easily categorised as either one genre or another; they are instead wide-ranging meditations on being, language and writing.

La Somme athéologique shares formal similarities with *Une saison en enfer* and in this regard I consider why the text may be described primarily as an essay but one that contains elements of a diary as well as including poems. In order to better understand the problem in *L'Expérience intérieure* of how language is seen as an obstacle to articulating experience, I will discuss how experience is itself considered as an alternative epistemology to philosophy and how the problem with experience as both the analytical method and the form in which to express this method is, at best, problematic. The problem Rimbaud and Bataille share in regard to language is that it is unable to convey the experience of being at the limit of subjective experience. This failure of language affects the form of poetic vision in *Une saison en enfer* and forms a subject of enquiry as part of the investigation into experience in *La Somme athéologique*. The theoretical debate on poetry and its ability to function as both a transgression of literature and as a channel that communicates the sacred are affected by the role of the subject and the position the subject occupies in the text or poem in regard to mediating generic shifts. Bataille's thinking of subjectivity and the role of the subject who stands for transgression, is framed within the project of inner experience. Bataille and Rimbaud's texts are both read from this vantage point of the author-as-subject.

To briefly summarise the considerations given above, then, before outlining the structure of this chapter, the form and structure of Bataille's writing is thus determined by and

reflective of the content, which in *La Somme athéologique*, is the subject. In Bataille's view elucidating the representation of the subject in experience requires the subversion of discourse by means of generic instability and plurality. In this way, poetry becomes a critique of writing and ontological discourse yet ultimately subverts philosophy as much as it subverts certainty within language. Rimbaud's presence is significant here because his *œuvre* deals with philosophy and language, or the expression of subjectivity as one and the same problem.

Une saison en enfer functions as the structural precedent to *La Somme athéologique* in three ways: first, through the use of the first-person narrator and a self-reflexive authorial voice to discuss being in relation to philosophy and religion; in this way, Bataille's narrative voice functions as a distinct, alter-ego subject. The second major feature is the poetic interruptions as symptomatic of the general strategy of generic disruption. The third characteristic is the ironic use of recycling previously written texts, which are identified as such, in order to comment upon them and refute them. In regard to the intertextual commentary that threads through *La Somme athéologique*, I argue that this fulfils Bataille's aim to maintain philosophy on the level of subjective interpretation as well as refuting the idea of absolute knowledge. Knowledge, for Bataille, is as much experience as anything. Therefore his books consider experience as a means to discuss knowledge. The valorisation of experience derives from the fact that Bataille, like Nietzsche, distrusts language and, by implication, philosophy. Experience, then, can be labelled as knowledge and knowledge as experience, without any hierarchical difference between the two terms. The introduction of subjective experience into a discourse of philosophy has the effect of valorising doubt as a method, such that the ambivalence of the statement is reflected in the instability of its form. Experiential doubt, in this sense, is distinct from Cartesian doubt, where enquiry leads to reductive certainty.⁵ The two epigraphs highlight the idea that language and silence are not necessarily opposed to each other. For Rimbaud silence functions thematically as the symbolic, unknown aspect of language that represents the extreme limit of his achievement, that is, finding silence in language through poetry or conveying the feeling of vertigo are testament to poetic prowess rather than silence or the night in the conceptual sense Bataille uses them. Nonetheless *Une saison en enfer*, from which the epigraph to this chapter is taken, is at once the account and the creation of the space in which Rimbaud, writing as a self-generating subject, moves to objectively examine the poet-subject and the results of his poetic project. The second epigraph, from Valéry, characterises Rimbaud's poetry as written beyond

⁵ Exceptions to this are Pascal and Kierkegaard, both significant figures for Bataille's philosophy who provide the preliminary groundwork for his inner experience. Pascal's *Pensées* and Kierkegaard's *Diary of a Seducer* both use form to foreground an ironic questioning of religion and aesthetic pleasure respectively.

normative or conventional language; it is this characteristic which I suggest forms the precedent for Bataille's epistemological writings in *La Somme athéologique*.

This chapter is organised as follows: first, in 'The Silent Anarchy of Poetry' I examine Derrida's seminal reading of Bataille's writing practice, specifically in regard to poetry's relation to discourse. I refer briefly to Antonin Artaud's definition of poetry, written in 1934, because he recognises that poetry is ambivalent – if not violently contradictory – vacillating between order and anarchic chaos. Artaud provides a neat summary of those qualities in poetry that also preoccupied Bataille and push the thinking on poetry from theoretical considerations to textual representation. What both Derrida and Artaud articulate is the capacity Bataille sees in poetry to transgress and subvert literary discourse by representation in the poetic text itself. Then, in 'Infernal Experience', a reading of *Une saison en enfer* reveals the precedent techniques of formal disruption and auto-subjective figuration Rimbaud uses and which are legible in *L'Expérience intérieure*. The formal reading of *L'Expérience intérieure* follows in 'Form, Genre/s and Poetry in L'Expérience intérieure' and in the final part, 'The Season of the Flood', the reading of Rimbaud's poem 'Après le déluge' explores the problematic position of expressing absence within poetry as symptomatic of the shift from a subjective to an objective mode of writing. The last section summarises the main points of the argument in Part II.

The Silent Anarchy of Poetry

Derrida's analysis in 'De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale' places silence at a crucial point of Bataille's writings as the invisible centre around which everything else moves; its presence is delineated negatively by the discursive limits of the language surrounding it.⁶ Conceptual silence is analysed by Derrida in his model of Bataille's economy of writing, specifically forming the minor part – opposed to the major part – that stands against mimetic representation and meaning derived from hierarchical and metaphysical epistemological systems. On a conceptual level silence is the byproduct of the slippage Bataille describes in *L'Expérience intérieure*, schematised by Derrida as that between major and minor writing. Silence relates to experience as that which signals the failure of the subject's desire to possess or know the unknown (object) and is, I suggest, engendered in the frequent points of ellipsis, interruption and incompleteness in *La Somme athéologique*.

Derrida states that poetry is a minor discourse in Bataille's writing that requires elucidation by a discursive commentary which translates and affirms the meaning hidden or

⁶ Derrida's article appeared in a special issue of *L'Arc* journal in May 1967 and was later reprinted in *L'Écriture et la différence* as one essay among many on literature including writers such as Artaud and Jabès. It marks one of the first instances of serious critical readings of Bataille, in which Derrida assesses Bataille's engagement with Hegel in order to account for Bataille's concept of unreserved expenditure in the context of Hegel's negative dialectics.

obscured within the non-discursive poetic discourse. However, Derrida states there is only ever *one* discourse:

Sans doute, au ‘discours significatif’, Bataille oppose-t-il parfois la parole poétique, extatique, sacrée... [a long quotation follows from Bataille’s article ‘Hegel, la mort et le sacrifice’] mais cette parole de souveraineté n’est pas un *autre* discours, une autre chaîne déroulée à côté du discours significatif. Il n’y a qu’un discours, il est significatif et Hegel ici est incontournable. La poétique ou l’extatique est ce qui *dans tout discours* peut s’ouvrir à la perte absolue de son sens, au (sans) fond de sacré, de non-sens, de non-savoir ou de jeu, à la perte de connaissance dont il réveille par un coup de dés.⁷

Bataille’s text is a record of reading Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, an experience of the dialectical movement of ascension, and at the same time an attempt to break out of this trajectory. This attempt, which is more precisely a failure accounts for the constant breaks, intervals and ellipses that interrupt the writing throughout. Patrick ffrench, in *After Bataille*, notes that this textual manifestation of sacrifice cannot be re-incorporated as the sacrifice of discourse itself – Bataille, furthermore, considers poetry to be too ineffectual and impotent – it remains just a moment in discourse:

Discourse must thus in some way be sacrificed, without this sacrifice being re-incorporated into discourse as ‘its’ sacrifice, a ‘moment’ of this discourse. Writing must operate the sacrifice of discourse, and rather than sealing the breach, leave it open and exposed. Writing must be this loss without gain.⁸

This exposure gives poetry the same characteristics as the other means of approaching inner experience: laughter, intoxication and erotic ecstasy. Poetry is the expression of the subject in anguish, or, as ffrench describes it, the subject becoming prone to *jouissance*. Derrida’s reading broadly assesses Bataille’s response as one that is ambivalently situated on the line between philosophy and poetry. He also considers poetry’s role as a sovereign discourse:

La poétique de la souveraineté s’annonce dans “le moment où la poésie renonce au thème et au sens” (*Méthode de méditation*). Il s’y annonce seulement car livrée alors au “jeu sans règle”, la poésie risque de se laisser mieux que jamais domestiquer... Ce risque est proprement *moderne*. Pour l’éviter la poésie doit être “accompagnée d’une affirmation de souveraineté”, “donnant”, dit Bataille en une formule admirable... qui pourrait servir de titre à tout... comme la forme et le tourment de son écriture, “le commentaire de son absence de sens”.⁹

Poetry is therefore the central, critical element in Bataille’s writing, although paradoxically, as Derrida notes, it is the discourse least able to articulate its own presence. Derrida’s characterisation of this paradox of poetry’s importance and invisibility seems to allude to

⁷ Jacques Derrida, ‘De l’économie restreinte à l’économie générale’, in *L’Ecriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p. 383.

⁸ Patrick ffrench, *After Bataille* (Oxford: Legenda, 2007), p. 77.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 383-4.

Rimbaud's demand (of poetry) in *Une saison en enfer*: 'Il faut être absolument moderne. Point de cantiques'.¹⁰ Derrida, like Rimbaud before him, tasks poetry with enacting its own radical programme of communicating more than purely literary themes and meaning, but of doing so at the cost of exposing its own limitations. Another point on which Rimbaud's thought arguably finds an echo in Derrida's conceptual consideration of Bataille is in sharing a similar approach to the idea that all discourse is based on the instability and articulation of poetry. In his letter of 15th May 1871 – as he did with many of his letters at this time – Rimbaud included poems within the text of the letter (in this case the poem was 'Mes Petites amoureuses'):

– la suite a six minutes
Ici j'intercale un second psaume, *hors du texte*: veuillez tendre une oreille
complaisante – J'ai l'archet en main, je commence.¹¹

The habit of inserting poems into prose text arguably forms a literal precedent for the textual, generic binary paradigm in *Une saison en enfer* as does the self-reflexive, albeit dramatised, commentary recording the activity of writing itself. The poem is referred to as outside of or beyond the text, revealing how certainly at this stage leading up to *Une saison en enfer*, Rimbaud conceptualised generic difference and considered a value to this difference. Significantly, Rimbaud's choice of term where the poem in the letter is referred to as a 'psalm', is one that is emphatically expiated two years later in his desire to be modern: 'no more hymns'. The practice of one kind of writing interrupting or interpenetrating another is one Derrida explores in the same part of his essay. The major point Derrida makes here is that poetry does not necessarily generate meaning from its content but from its position relative to other major discourses.

Below Derrida seems to limit poetry's revolutionary potential within the context of Bataille's engagement with Surrealism. Breton sees poetry as a catalyst for revolutionary activity but poetry, for Bataille, is too ambiguous:

Faute de quoi la poésie serait, dans le pire des cas, *subordonnée*, dans le meilleur des cas, *'insérée'*. Alors, 'le rire, l'ivresse, le sacrifice et la poésie, l'érotisme lui-même, subsistent dans une réserve autonome, insère dans la sphère, *comme des enfants dans la maison*. Ce sont de leurs limites des souverains mineurs, qui ne peuvent contester l'empire de l'activité'. [from *Méthode de méditation*]. C'est dans l'intervalle entre la *subordination*, l'*insertion* et la *souveraineté* qu'on devrait examiner les rapports entre la littérature et la révolution tels que Bataille les a pensés au cours de son explication avec le surréalisme. L'ambiguïté apparente de ses jugements sur la poésie est comprise dans la configuration de ces trois concepts.¹²

¹⁰ Rimbaud, 'Adieu', p. 236.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, *Correspondance*, p. 68.

¹² Derrida, p. 384.

ffrench highlights the distinction that – in this dynamic – the poetic element is prevented from undermining the stability of meaning and thus, loss of meaning:

Derrida's subtitle 'Les deux écritures' proposes the operation, in Bataille's work of two modes of writing: a 'poetic' writing of the loss or sacrifice of sense, which would be accompanied by a commentary on this loss, in order to guard against the possibility that this loss of sense may be transformed into (a) meaning.¹³

In this sense poetry is not supplementary or auxiliary to discursive prose but a vital element that is able to convey the concept of inner experience to its logical dissolution, beyond the formal stability of discursive meaning. This is due to the poetically constructed subject who is able to represent the ambiguity or loss of meaning within inner experience. Where Derrida argues that the dynamic between two modes of writing is contained within the same text, I will seek to add to this idea to the effect that it is this dynamic itself that engenders the instability and loss of meaning that Bataille's writing explores and enacts. Bataille reads Rimbaud's *œuvre* as a teleological project and, in this sense, as an object that was sacrificed. This sacrifice is indicative of the method or will to approach the unknown, because Rimbaud's poetic project is used as a metaphor to explicitly reveal the structure of sacrifice as it works through poetry. That is, sacrifice resolves the tension inherent in poetry and preserves the loss of one – discursive – element while granting new meaning to the remainder: silence. Rimbaud conceptualises this rupture through the dynamic of self and other.¹⁴ This method is enabled by the poetic subject, which points to the significant contribution the reading of Rimbaud brings, primarily: that poetry can open out to the unknown within language.

In *L'Expérience intérieure* (as well as at some points in *L'Impossible*) the accent of this process becomes more violent, where poetry becomes characterised as a sacrificial mechanism that destroys words and, therefore, meaning. The sacrifice of Rimbaud's project comes to represent a greater transgression than the interior generic transgression in that it sanctifies and preserves the project, in its moment of destruction, as loss. This loss is represented as the negative inversion of discourse, that is, as silence. This sense of destruction – as well as the notion of anarchy – is redolent of Artaud's description of poetry from 1934 as a destructive and reductive force; in a state of perpetual collapse, the previously hidden essence of things is momentarily revealed. Artaud gives another perspective on a very similar consideration of poetry and experience as an unstable threat to order as well as the consequences of experimenting with disorder: that is, anarchy as a form of immanent nothingness:

¹³ ffrench, p. 81.

¹⁴ 'Moi! moi qui me suis dit mage ou ange, dispensé de toute morale, je suis rendu au sol, avec un devoir à chercher, et la réalité rugueuse à étreindre!' Rimbaud, 'Adieu', *Une saison en enfer*, p. 235.

Et l'anarchie... c'est de la poésie réalisée. Il y a dans toute poésie une contradiction essentielle. La poésie c'est de la multiplicité broyée et qui rend des flammes. Et la poésie, qui ramène l'ordre, ressuscite d'abord le désordre, le désordre aux aspects enflammés; elle fait s'entre-choquer des aspects qu'elle ramène à un point unique: feu, geste, sang, cri. Ramener la poésie et l'ordre dans un monde dont l'existence même et un défi à l'ordre... c'est susciter une anarchie sans nom, l'anarchie des choses et des aspects qui se réveillent avant de sombrer à nouveau et de se fondre dans l'unité.¹⁵

Although Artaud's description resembles Surrealism's revolutionary agitation it more profoundly suggests Bataille's poetics in its assessment of poetry as dissembling and subverting the unique characteristics of things before their annihilation. This ordering and collapse is, furthermore, a never-ending or endlessly repeating cycle of energy being accumulated and then expended in a vision similar to that in *L'Anus solaire*. One of the capacities of poetry, among others – briefly and intermittently – is to destabilise meaning and thus, by extension, discourse. Significantly, what Bataille and Rimbaud describe is that poetry is not only capable of articulating this paradoxical impulse of destruction but can also enact it. This generic transgression is indicative of the dissolution of Rimbaud's entire poetic project and is symptomatic of the violence Bataille ascribes to poetry in *L'Impossible*. The generic transgression and polyphonic anarchy of *Une saison en enfer* is used by Rimbaud precisely to efface this subjective aspect of his poetry and, more broadly, to alloy poetry to the philosophical ideas outlined in his letters. The paramount idea being that the presence of the subject occludes an objective access to knowledge. Rimbaud's *Je est un autre* is the principle that guides his project. The position of the subject is essential to the process and as such, leads to the excision of the subject at the end point of the project that Bataille nominally considers to be *Une saison en enfer*. This positioning of Rimbaud enables a second meaning to be derived from Bataille's reading of the termination of Rimbaud's poetic project as a sacrifice. The idea of Rimbaud's project as a form of sacrifice gives poetry a status and momentum, which in light of Derrida's account, link it to being and the status of the writer. Derrida notes the way in which writing must mark both silence and presence:

Il faut trouver une parole qui garde le silence. Nécessite de l'impossible: dire dans le langage – de la servilité – ce qui n'est pas servile... Si le mot silence est "entre tous les mots" le "plus pervers ou le plus poétique" c'est que feignant de taire le sens, il dit le non-sens, il glisse et s'efface lui-même, ne se maintient pas, *se tait* lui-même, non comme silence mais comme parole. Ce glissement trahit à la fois le discours et le non-discours.¹⁶

It is silence that underwrites language, for example the word *silence* itself signals not its absence but its presence. In terms of Rimbaud's poetic trajectory, this end point of absence,

¹⁵ Antonin Artaud, *Héliogabale ou l'anarchiste couronné* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), p. 97.

¹⁶ Derrida, p. 385-6.

traces of which are arguably already evident in the generic shifts in *Une saison en enfer* – comes to the fore in the objective poetry of the *Illuminations*. That is, the subject cannot take account of the silence that forms part of his communication and perception; it is only the shift into an objective perspective that reveals the role silence plays in describing experience that moves to the limit. In this sense, in Rimbaud's project as read by Bataille, it is the subject who is sacrificed and their absence that remains, which is, in turn, configured as silence:

“Il faut trouver”, nous explique Bataille en choisissant “*silence*” comme “exemple de mot glissant” des “mots” et des “objets” qui ainsi “nous fassent glisser”... Vers quoi ? vers d'autres mots, vers d'autres objets bien sûr qui annoncent la souveraineté. Ce glissement est risqué. Mais ainsi orienté, ce qu'il risque c'est le sens, et de perdre la souveraineté dans la figure du discours. Risque, à *faire sens*, de donner raison. A la raison. A la philosophie...¹⁷

Derrida notes here that silence, in a sense, inhabits the text generated by Bataille's strategy, and its resistance to giving meaning accounts for its sovereign freedom. What this means for the subject-writer is that they risk losing control of their project; true sovereignty of language is beyond their reach. Silence is the symptom of this tenuous grip on writing for Bataille as well as his goal: to suppress the meaning in discursive or ordinary language in order to reveal the residual trace of the sacred within. Derrida refers to Bataille's metaphor of a mask that dissimulates useless or poetic language as functional:

Aux masques: “Ce qui n'est pas servile est inavouable... Ce qui n'est pas utile doit se cacher (sous un masque)” [from *Méthode de méditation*]. En parlant “à la limite du silence”, il faut organiser une stratégie et “trouver [des mots] qui réintroduisent – en un point – le souverain silence qu'interrompt le langage articulé.” Excluant le langage articulé, le souverain silence est donc, d'une certaine manière, étranger à la différence comme source de signification. Il semble effacer la discontinuité et c'est ainsi qu'il faut en effet entendre la nécessité du *continuum* auquel Bataille en appelle sans cesse, comme à la *communication*.¹⁸

Derrida uses the term *continuum* to designate the privileged experience that transgresses discursive difference and communication to designate the position of two beings who have, in Bataille's words ‘put themselves into play’ at the limit of being and of nothingness. Silence thus slides, in fleeting moments between the two, in imitation of its dialectical movement, revealing the absence that paradoxically signifies itself as presence. Bataille, in *Le Coupable*, notes how the task of describing being is beyond language: ‘En vérité, le langage que je tiens ne pourrait s'achever que par ma mort’.¹⁹ Derrida's reading thus characterises Bataille's writing, insofar as it poeticises sacrifice, as transgressive. I suggest that poetry, such as it appears in Rimbaud's project, raises the stakes in that a terminal absence must be accounted

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Bataille, OC V, p. 241.

for. One of the features of instability in Bataille's writing is the slippage Derrida identifies of words that at once signify meaning and negate this meaning. Poetic discourse, formed by Romantic nostalgia, intrinsically tends towards engendering a movement away from the original object, a movement that no less affects the subject and which results in their own dissolution. Poetry however records the trace of their echo and how the subject functions as the marker of their own unmediated experience.

In *L'Expérience intérieure*, it is sacrifice that functions as the means to account for absence – conceptualised as the sacred – and incorporate it into a particular system – be it a religious, economic or erotic one; it serves not only as a mechanism to mediate the shock of sacrifice, it is an epistemological instrument. Sacrifice provides a means to investigate the unknown and to approach the absence of God. The question of what purpose sacrifice serves after Nietzsche declared God's death is one of the central questions Bataille's *œuvre* asks. In *Le Coupable* it is the idea of death that replaces sacrifice. The figure of Laure, at one stage in the writing of this text – as its subject – is doubled from subject (experience) to object (concept). This relation is subverted by Bataille, under the pressures of attempting to record the writing – or write the recording – of the traumatic event of her death; writing which is no longer mediated by the subject but is instead unmediated, bare experience itself. *Une saison en enfer* is the precedent for Bataille's doubled figuration, in which Rimbaud as the writer destroys Rimbaud the poet.

Infernal Experience

In reading *Une saison en enfer* and the major current of repudiation within it, I suggest that the repudiation or revolt may be characterised subjectively as hatred and that this hatred, expressed as a negation of poetry, determines the ideological and formal effacement of the subject. In the critical literature that links structural readings to textual strategies in the poem – and which take account of the development of the *voyant* project – are Nathaniel Wing²⁰ and Jean-Louis Baudry.²¹ Wing's structural reading of the poem as the site of a struggle

²⁰ Wing discusses Rimbaud's poem as part of a greater survey of the tendency also found in Mallarmé, Baudelaire and Flaubert to self-reflexively confront the problem of representation; a problem that informs the development of Modernism. Specifically, the problem is considered in how the known and unknown can be thought in narrative texts. I consider Wing's discussion of Modernism further in Chapter 4. Throughout, Wing refers to *Une saison en enfer* as a 'text' rather than as a poem revealing a structural-ideological sympathy consistent with a modernist reading over a literary and specifically poetic reading.

²¹ Baudry, writing in *Tel Quel* in the late 1960s, does not mention Bataille (referring instead solely to writers associated with the journal such as Sollers, Derrida, Kristeva and Pleynet). This is surprising, perhaps, given the significance Bataille held for the journal and given Baudry's aim in the article is to draw a dividing line between prior interpretations of Rimbaud's work and his own, somewhat stringent, reading of Rimbaud's corpus as a text that produces meanings through its material aspect rather than literary and ideological readings of poetic expression as a subjective, spiritual and/or autobiographical record. Baudry's epistemological interpretation is recognisable in Bataille's assessments of Rimbaud's

between *histoire* (biography) and *discours* (rhetoric) is useful in the sense that it sets up a framework within which antagonistic tendencies interrogate and undermine each other. My reading shares this antagonistic paradigm where Rimbaud's subjective, autobiographical self writes himself as a poet and then writes himself out *hors texte* as a sacrifice: the two forces that are generated from this struggle I analyse as an expression of negativity or in more subjective terms, hatred. The two opposing forces in the field of poetic language are evident in prose poetry displacing verse poetry of which the consequences are the struggle between articulation and silence. Baudry's article contributes to my reading insofar as he establishes underlying connections between poetry – the form and structure of poetry decoupled from external thematic and biographical interpretations – and the representation of the subject ('poetry' as a term is one Baudry largely ignores). Baudry focuses on the *voyant* project, valorised positively as a radical gesture of subversion, where *Une saison en enfer* is the site of the revolt of the subject initialising a language of subjectivity, one characterised – in a possibly oblique reference to Bataille – as blindness, the repudiation of which is normative, mimetic language based on signs; signs that reproduce and transmit the oppressive manifestations of the law, religion, marriage and literature.

Baudry is, however, primarily concerned with setting out a new hermeneutical approach to Rimbaud's *œuvre*. The article stakes out an interpretative space that not only initiates a new reading of the poems but also dismisses the sum total of previous interpretations by rejecting their methodological foundations. Although he does not accuse any guilty critics specifically he does list the critical fields of interpretation that are, presumably, inconsequential because of their erroneous methodology. This faulty interpretational approach has resulted in a mass of readings based on biographical elements that only obscure the poems because they enter into the very same system of conceptual language drawn from the logocentric, oppressive manifestations of Western civilisation from which Rimbaud was trying to break free.²² Baudry introduces the term *scripturale*: one

project, where he (Bataille) valorises the material element of his poetry as well as the interpretation of meaning that derives from its unstable formal structure, incompleteness, generic subversion and rhetorical and ideological strategies rather than from the themes or autobiographical traces in the poems' content. Baudry explores the tension within Rimbaud's *œuvre* that accrues in his *voyant* project, the aim of which was the critique of subjective poetry. According to Baudry, reading Rimbaud's *œuvre* through the *voyant* project enables a coherent reading of the heterogeneous corpus as the best way to evaluate it through its internal terms of reference. Bataille's interpretation of Rimbaud's project as a failure – albeit one balanced to reflect the limitations of poetic language and the significance of experience – is however, dismissed by Baudry: '[...] il paraît aussi inexact de parler d'un échec de Rimbaud que d'une réussite amenant une transformation radicale et définitive de l'économie textuelle.' Rimbaud's *œuvre* represents neither a failure (presumably because of the sudden termination of his writing) nor a success in that the corpus is not a *modern* text/s that exists beyond the ideologies and literary rhetoric that created it. Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Le texte de Rimbaud', *Tel Quel* 35, Autumn 1968, p. 48.

²² [...] le nom de Rimbaud signale-t-il d'abord le lieu exemplaire d'un combat par lequel une pratique scripturale tente d'échapper par tous les moyens qui se proposent à elle – historique et sociale (la

widely used in the *Tel Quel* milieu that situates the meaning of the work to be in its signifiers (and referents) rather than signs, and in the material and phonetic aspect of words, placing terms of technique and (ideological) rhetoric over and above literary-historical ones, thematic analysis and biographical interpretation. Baudry situates Rimbaud's *œuvre* along a 'chronological axis', albeit one registering the internal, development of meaning indexed to the text rather than to an interpretation of the text: 'L'axe chronologique qui doit permettre de faire apparaître sur le texte de Rimbaud l'effet du travail textuel transformant, le caractère autogénérateur de ce texte'.²³ Rimbaud's corpus is essentially the host for the *voyant* project: evident in three phases, first, the pastiche and parody that lead up to the project ('Soleil et chair' and 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs' respectively); second, its appearance and articulation in the letters, in 'Voyelles' and *Une saison en enfer* and; finally, on this trajectory, its relatively successful expression in the *Illuminations*. Baudry's reading connects the notion of subjectivity to that of blindness which echoes Bataille in foregrounding blindness as the basis for the internalisation of language and rejection of rational, objective realism. Bataille's concept of blindness, notable, for example, in *Histoire de l'œil*: an eye that does not see (thus refuting the sense of empirical philosophy) and represents the blind ecstasy of subjectivity; signifier of an internal, infernal experience of nothingness. The blindness Baudry refers to – in a process termed 'mentalisation', an entirely internal process without any external, visual sensation – is key to Rimbaud's *voyant* project. The project is a method to destroy poetic language based on visual sight, that is: on signs, signs as the edifice of mimetic representation. Rimbaud's project instead seeks to disrupt normative chains of signs by internalising them and setting them against repressive systems (which Baudry terms generally 'the law') reminiscent of Benjamin's analysis, in Chapter 1, of a specifically Catholic internalisation of pain and guilt that are, in *Une saison en enfer*, externalised as drama in an attempt to strip them of their religious origins and overtones.

Commune) – historique et littéraire (le Symbolisme) – grammatical (rupture avec la syntaxe et la rhétorique poétique) – phonétique (accentuation du signifiant phonétique) – spatial (recours à une disposition subvertissant la linéarité de l'écriture phonétique) – sexuel (homosexualité, pensée de la différence sexuelle et de la permutation du sexe idéologique) etc. à l'emprise du sens, à l'infiltration inévitable du système représentatif se réintroduisent subrepticement aux détours de chaque énoncé et s'appuyant pour sa domination sur les services d'une lecture non réversible en écriture, sur la soumission à l'expressivité établie par toute une civilisation logocentrique et théologique.' *Ibid.*

²³ However, Baudry's reading of *Une saison en enfer*, specifically, develops as a psychoanalytical one, and, in citing Lacan, thus somewhat undermines his own criticism of the failure of other commentaries to break free of ideological, Western epistemological strategies of interpretation. He states the subject in the poem is an 'effect of the text' who, because of his unavowed homosexuality internalises the social condemnation of women. This casts them in a role that blocks the narrator's assumption of power conveyed through the oedipal transfer of power in the murder of the father and, by way of marriage, neutralises the oedipal complex, effectively creating a double of the father and incubating the repressive meme of the law that co-opts the narrator. This reading, however, usefully illuminates the poem's narrative as a schizophrenic struggle to secure or, at least, negatively delieate an identity free of such insidious power structures and points to why love, primarily, must be re-invented. *Ibid.*, (1968), p. 49 and (1969), p. 41.

Être “poète”, (être le lieu d’une pratique scripturale où “un langage” est mise en demeure de “se trouver”) c’est être voyant (être le lieu où s’écrit le texte général) mais cet accès à la généralité du texte ne peut être frayé que par une action violente d’effraction et de destruction contre le système linéaire de la représentation et de la mentalisation fondé sur la norme, la loi, le sens qui justifie la norme. *Les sens contre le sens*. Une telle action opère à l’intérieur de la sexualité contre la sexualité comme sens (finalité du génital); elle remplace la forme unique et réduite d’une sexualité aplatie par le refoulement et la névrose sociale (provoquée par la répression théologique et téléologique du sens) par le *pluriel* de la perversion généralisée [...] dans laquelle le corps est appelé à jouer et à déployer toutes les postures et les renversements d’une langue qui, débarrassée de l’expressivité, est susceptible de tout dire (de dire aussi son propre fonctionnement).²⁴

Baudry links textual and scriptural praxis to sexuality: sexuality without a definite meaning (or aim, based on the genital) becomes aimless and dispersed across and through the body of the subject; analogously a language without meaning therefore opens up to the plurality of meaning/s; the body is no longer the signifier of the subject and thus the subject is no longer interpellated as a monadic being – the *je* can become *autres*.

All the consequences of rejecting verse poetry in favour of prose poetry and that, in light of Derrida’s assessment of discourse and meaning above, find echoes in *Une saison en enfer* in which Rimbaud’s strategy of self-effacement is one of distancing and derferment. Rimbaud’s *voyant* project pushes its aims – the reinvention of language and renewal of love – to the abstract plane of the unknown thus abnegating its own failure. *Une saison en enfer* is the point at which Rimbaud’s project collapses. The two indicators of this collapse are first: a thematic consideration of silence, as a kind of paralysis of speech, manifested as religious verbiage and; second, the generic instability that first becomes evident here and which signals the fundamental movement towards prose poetry. The concept of hell, by which Rimbaud joins metaphysical thought to obsolete poetic form is satirised first on theological grounds: ‘La théologie est sérieuse, l’enfer est certainement *en bas* – et le ciel *en haut*.’²⁵ Hell is considered as one of many such parallel spaces, personalised and diminished: ‘Je devrais avoir mon enfer pour la colère, mon enfer pour l’orgueil, – et l’enfer de la caresse; un concert d’enfers.’²⁶ Hell as a symbol of guilt and of Romantic *ennui* – as another word in the litany of religious verbiage – is dispensed with and replaced by a psychological, materialist vision of the world. Rimbaud’s vision links it inextricably to the subject of the poet and strips it of its theological disguise and mendacity:

²⁴ *Ibid.*, (1968), p. 59.

²⁵ Rimbaud, ‘Mauvais sang’, p. 216.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

Moi je ne puis pas plus m'expliquer que le mendiant avec ses continuels *Pater* et *Ave Maria*. *Je ne sais plus parler!* Pourtant, aujourd'hui, je crois avoir fini la relation de mon enfer.²⁷

Rimbaud here prefigures Bataille's notion of a language that returns to silence in declaring that: 'ne sachant pas m'expliquer sans paroles païennes je voudrais me taire'.²⁸ Bataille's reading of Rimbaud highlights the dynamic within Rimbaud's project that forces the collapse of the dualism that had dominated Romantic poetry. The poet-subject is no longer mediated by the presence of the object; Wing characterises this movement as the ascension of rhetoric.

The conceptualisation of hell by Rimbaud as down below is echoed in Bataille's characterisation of writing during this period as being in a tomb²⁹ not only in *L'Expérience intérieure* but in a later article, from 1945, 'La Volonté de l'impossible':

La poésie n'est qu'un détour: j'échappe par elle au monde du discours, c'est-à-dire au monde naturel (des objets), j'entre par elle en une sorte de tombe où la mort du monde logique naît l'infinité des possibles.³⁰

Bataille visualises poetry as the death of logic, yet poetry, in a tomb, seems itself to be moribund or deathly: poetry is not part of the real world because it does not add to knowledge (or experience) rather it undermines it, at least, from the perspective of logical, useful language. In *L'Expérience intérieure*, Bataille describes his experience as being in a maze such as the labyrinth at Minos, holding – or in fact losing – Ariadne's thread: 'Il est des heures où le fil d'Ariane est cassé: je ne suis qu'éternellement vide, je ne sais plus ce que je suis, j'ai faim, froid et soif.'³¹ The sensation of wandering alone is not only metaphorical, a few lines below Bataille describes a nocturnal experience on the rue des Rennes and rue du Four in Paris. As the subject is the necessary predicate for the object, this stripping away of orientation, metaphorically represented by wandering lost in a labyrinth, is the means to probe the divided subject and, at once, the means to understand the limits of experience. In the maze of the labyrinth the subject is isolated and no longer able to rely on networks of identity but instead is confronted with his own non-being; that is, an existence which no longer has any significance beyond his own body or curtailed presence in the labyrinth. In linguistic terms, this is conceptualised by silence displacing the discourse of speech and thus opens up to the possibility of non-knowledge. Sacrifice strips the material layer from poetry to reveal silence as the essential meaning of discourse. The sacrifice of the will destroys this dualism, as in the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 'Matin', p. 239.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 'Mauvais sang', p. 214.

²⁹ 'Ce monde, une planète et le ciel étoilé, ne sont pour moi qu'une tombe'. Bataille, *Le Coupable* in OC V, p. 246.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, OC XI, p. 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, OC V, p. 45.

case of Rimbaud's anti-Romantic project that records its own departure in *Une saison en enfer* and which is staked out in the *Illuminations*.

In *Une saison en enfer*, Rimbaud's internalisation of history mediated by the auto-referential subject posits, first: the subject as poetic construct; and, second, the autonomy of language, so that the subject defines his own being in the present tense. That is, by inhabiting an impossible, mythic space outside of history: 'Je me crois en enfer, donc j'y suis'.³² The notion of hell and damnation is not considered as an aesthetic, literary metaphor but as a new way to understand experience although, in using religious idiom, Rimbaud's conception of subjectivity remains subordinate to poetic discourse. Rimbaud moves from a pre-established form of conventional poetry (verse) to combine poetry and prose. The poems included in verse form had all been previously written and in this new context, juxtaposed by the prose commentary, they illustrate Rimbaud's statement on his perceived failure to communicate. The experience ultimately was that of moving from poetry determined by the subject to objective poetry, a trajectory that led to the *Illuminations*. In the case of *Une saison en enfer*, experience determines the generic form of the poem. The central part of the poem 'Délires II: Alchimie du verbe', describes Rimbaud's denunciation of his poetry and of his prior existence. In terms of structure the key feature here is the reproduction of the poems Rimbaud is disavowing; this is the precedent to the form Bataille uses in *La Somme athéologique*. The first poem Rimbaud refers to is 'Voyelles':

J'inventai la couleur des voyelles! – A noir, E blanc, I rouge, O bleu, U vert. – Je réglai la forme et le mouvement de chaque consonne, et, avec des rythmes instinctifs, je me flattai d'inventer un verbe poétique accessible, un jour ou l'autre, à tous les sens. Je réservais la traduction.³³

This first denial is perhaps the most significant, not in terms of generic movements from verse to prose but in because of its magnitude: it is not just the single poem 'Voyelles' but an entire system of poetics that is being jettisoned. The first poem that is quoted is 'Bonne pensée du matin', from May 1872, reproduced in a revised form, followed by the commentary in prose: 'La vieillesse poétique avait une bonne part dans mon alchimie du verbe.'³⁴ The following poems that are reproduced, all from the same period and roughly in the order they were originally written form a dynamic dialogue between the two poets; the latter writing in prose not only leaving behind versification (for the most part) but what it represents: writing as project (an historical project), poetry as system and a tacit failure of the analysis of objective poetry. That is, the project of poetry launched in the letters to resolve the problems of being and perception in the obsolete framework of Cartesian philosophy. Rimbaud's project, then,

³² Rimbaud, 'Nuit de l'enfer', p. 220.

³³ *Ibid.*, 'Alchimie du verbe', p. 223.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

bridges the gap between the formal and structural aspect of poetry and its subjective expression in language. Wing categorises the pattern of repudiation as a linguistic process in which rhetoric is dismantled to expose the subject. The autobiography of the subject becomes the subject matter of rhetorical practice:

As the narrator dismantles a certain rhetoric of autobiography in a practice referred to in the text as 'délire' (which can be read both as a delirium and *dé-lire*) the act of writing literally forces to the surface of the text the understanding that the narrating subject is engaged less in a process of self-realisation [...] than in writing the self, contained by the rhetoric of autobiography, but the exploration of effects of subjectivity in language; the subject of writing, then, becomes the autobiography of rhetoric.³⁵

The subjectivity in language Wing refers to above is, in the terms of my reading, the experience of the subject or as Wing describes it the 'effects of subjectivity' in language. The autobiographical framework is stripped away in favour of a formless, (i.e. prose) investigation into experience, experienced without the mediating figure of the autobiographical subject. According to Wing there are two networks of alienation present in the poem: first, a Romantic deconstruction of the subject (in the form of nostalgia) and, second; a subversive alienation at work in the language of the poem itself. Wing never specifically defines alienation, which is presumably, the subjective effect of rejecting familiar systems of interpellation; however this rejection and revolt is valorised positively, it is rather the fact that displacing the *Je* leads to the realisation that his identity suffers from a lack of ontological foundation rather than an excess: 'A chaque être, plusieurs *autres* vies me semblaient dues.'³⁶ It is in the context of this engagement that Rimbaud's poetry reveals its oppositional stance to religion; it aims to undermine the validity of religious discourse if not to supplant its epistemological supremacy altogether. Wing places the pagan language that is crucial to Rimbaud's renewal of identity in the margins; pagan language is a deficiency to be overcome and stitched-together and, as symptomatic of the alienation caused by the experience of rejecting (given) identity, and language.³⁷

This self-sacrifice of poetry, represented by the figure of the poet is navigated through the encounters of two personified Romantic, poetic figures, Beauty and Satan but following them, more radically, are the abstracted, anonymous figures who appear in the two 'Délires', respectively the demonic bridegroom and the ironic self-portrait of the deranged poet. The narrator's encounter with Beauty is Rimbaud's ironic, metaphorical repudiation of the Romantic trope of personified idealism: 'Un soir, j'ai assis la Beauté sur mes genoux. – Et je

³⁵ Nathaniel Wing, *The Limits of Narrative: Essays on Baudelaire, Flaubert, Rimbaud and Mallarmé* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 80.

³⁶ Rimbaud, 'Délires II', p. 228.

³⁷ 'L'enfer ne peut attaquer les païens.' *Ibid.*, 'Nuit de l'enfer', p. 215.

l'ai trouvée amère. – Et je l'ai injuriée.'³⁸ The poet's rejection of beauty is thus not for the sake of it or through wilful revolt it is rather because Beauty is bitter, subverting the ideological notion of beauty as that which inherently connotes positive and pleasurable sensation. This rejection of Beauty because of her own lack categorically positions Rimbaud's narrator in a space antagonistic to Beauty and, therefore, to the mimetic and poetic values which she usually inspires. His rejection sets him on his course to hell.³⁹

It is thus not (only) religious or metaphysical authority Rimbaud is trying to subvert; the primary reason for the failure of his project is poetry itself: 'Je hais maintenant les élans mystiques et les bizarreries de style. Maintenant je puis dire que l'art est une sottise'.⁴⁰ Taken from one of the drafts to 'Alchimie du verbe', Rimbaud deleted it from the final version yet it is one of the clearest expressions of his hatred of the literary affectation and technique that permeate mimetic, lyrical poetry. The role of hate in this poem is to illuminate the effect of experience upon the subject. The tenebrous and obscure effect of experience is that love is given substance by hate rather than by sentimental clichés and romantic affirmation, hate gives contrast to love by affirming its difference. Ultimately, love and hate nebulously co-exist in experience as inextricable, part of the same psychological dynamism that animates the subject rather than by hermetic moral categories which confront the subject with false choices. This is what Rimbaud means when he writes love must be re-invented: poetic discourse must take account of the experience of hate; morality must be informed by desire.

Most critical readings of the poem, including Wing's, show the ontological presence of the narrator becoming progressively attenuated in the attempt to constitute his identity through language. Instead it becomes clear he is a slave and, thus, the only way to escape this subordination is by self-effacement: 'Je suis esclave de mon baptême'.⁴¹ Wing interprets rhetoric or *discours* overcoming autobiographical *histoire* because conventional writing is insufficient to represent the inner experience of the subject. I suggest, building upon Wing's reading that language itself becomes the scene and register of the subject's sacrifice and thus accounts for the deferred subject and this is visible in the struggle between pagan aphasia and ecclesiastical articulation. Pagan language or speech offers a route out of the labyrinth of

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

³⁹ The following encounter with Satan characterises him as a peevish and second-rate literary critic. Satan, as another figure who has dominated certain strands of Romantic literature, is castigated here for his lack of critical discrimination, admiring of writers who have neither descriptive nor instructive capacities: 'Mais, cher Satan, je vous en conjure, une prune moins irritée! Et en attendant les quelques petites lâchetés en retard, vous qui aimez dans l'écrivain l'absence des facultés descriptives ou instructives, je vous détache ces quelques hideux feuillets de mon carnet de damné'. The ironic appeal to Satan undermines the supposed notorious authority would impart by acknowledging the poet's own work is lacking. As Satan's characterisation is mocking so this mockery implicates poetry: poetry is merely jejune posturing and thus Satan's approval is the poet's second damnation. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 'Nuit de l'enfer', p. 215.

infernal experience and into the present tense of revelation. Becoming in language is thus represented by experience: the erasure of the subject in language means the resurgence of silence.⁴²

Pagan language as a kind of antithesis to religious discourse and modernity succumbs to the final imperative appeal of the narrator to be or become ‘absolutely modern’. Wing reads this wish for an absolute modernity as a desired resolution between *histoire* and *discours*. The question regarding this well-known phrase may then be why does it require the adverbial emphasis, how does ‘being absolutely modern’ differ from simply ‘being modern’? I suggest that this acknowledges the unstable and aimless force of desire that requires an *absolute* condition to strip the subject of his own desire; desire that ironises, undermines and ultimately severs his umbilical connections to history, identity and language. Desire psychologically destabilises the poem and necessitates a reversion to pagan idiom to illustrate the failure of the poetic project. Absolute modernity is a complete and irreversible embrace of the present moment: thus the temporal severance becomes absolute silence in the rejection of voice, rhetoric and narration as the pinnacle of experience in the narrator’s sacrifice of himself as poet-subject.⁴³ The project of *Je est un autre* was conceived as a method to approach the interior, unknown aspect of the subject, yet, Rimbaud’s subject realises in the moment of absolute present-presence that to be a *voyant* was less a trajectory into the unknown than a desire for self-annihilation.

Experience is the index of the subject and which rejects both *histoire* and *discours* in favour of desire, mediated through the experience of the subject and the subject’s poetry, the renewal of poetry and of desire – desire as love – requires an impassable *caesura*. In *Une saison en enfer* deferment means the dissolution of the subject – given form in the failure of project – the desire is of self-realisation through self-annihilation. The meaning of this circumscription of experience is cast into the blank void of modernity, Rimbaud’s vision of a continuum without desire. Obscure experience is both the subject of and the destabilising cause behind the failure of Rimbaud’s project.

⁴² Timothy Mathews offers an alternative reading that does not characterise Rimbaud’s project as an overt failure nor as a disillusioned process of systematic repudiation. Rimbaud’s rejection of morality and the rhetoric of moral decay leads to the maintaining of a ‘monadic and nomadic linguistic I’. The combination, according to Mathews, is the defining element of creativity that the narrator grants his poet: ‘In ‘Mauvais Sang’ the narrator presents his slovenly complicity with the mythological and ideological given as a product of his *involvement* in his linguistic heritage rather than a rejection of it.’ Identity does not come at the cost of experience; the loss of voice is the reaction to a construction of identity. Mathews, *Literature, Art and the Pursuit of Decay in Twentieth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), both p. 14.

⁴³ Mathews interprets being ‘absolutely modern’ as like ‘absolutely being’: an acceptance of the body and the ‘mobile, futuristic, decaying, ambitious, alienating otherness’ that arises when the subject is defined by his physical aspect in embracing the reality of being. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

In his letter of 15th May 1871, written before *Une saison en enfer*, Rimbaud gives his famous assessment of Baudelaire, ranking him first as the poet who influenced his own consideration of poetry as a pseudo-mystical discourse:

[...] Baudelaire est le premier voyant, roi des poètes, *un vrai Dieu*. Encore a-t-il vécu dans un milieu trop artiste; et la forme si vantée en lui est mesquine: *les inventions d'inconnu réclament des formes nouvelles* [my emphasis].⁴⁴

Significantly, Baudelaire is dismissed on formal grounds, his static form, for the most part, reflects the stable metaphysical system his poems describe. Rimbaud's writing wrestles with the problem of religion just as fervently yet discards hell as a fixed metaphysical space. The formal switch from verse to prose is only the most visible sign of this renewal; the more fundamental shift takes place in the figure and body of the subject, loosed in hell and from authority, he is sovereign and, situated as such, is able to repudiate the illusions of religious love (*agape*), poetic clichés (*eros*) and re-present love as an intimate, personal and social reality. Alongside love it is language that needs renewal and it is through poetry that Rimbaud attempts to rejuvenate language. In *Une saison en enfer*, hell has not manifested itself in the streets as it does in Baudelaire's urban space but, instead, forms a metaphorical basis for experience to question the role of poetry. In broad terms, Bataille and Rimbaud's writing of experience takes the form – indeed formlessness – of generic instability comprised of discursive and non-discursive elements in a text mediated by experience. In the following part I read *L'Expérience intérieure* in regard to generic instability, in order to examine how the subject of/in experience affects the form of writing.

Form, Genre/s and Poetry in L'Expérience intérieure

This reading of *L'Expérience intérieure* divides into three questions: first, what does genre mean to Bataille? Second, how does genre relate to the subjective, authorial presence in the text? And third, how do these preceding concerns relate to his thinking on poetry at this time? To sketch out initial responses to all three questions: first, genre represents a discourse to be militated against. Genre is the underlying structure that must be subverted by interruptions of opposing genres to communicate subjective or non-discursive experience. Second, formal disruption is an expression of the representation of subjectivity; the thematic content of personal first-person writing is evident in the passages from Bataille's diary and by poems. Third, Bataille's ambivalent relation to poetry shows on the one hand that Bataille values poetry for its ability to transgress other genres but, on the other hand, poetry is instrumentalised as a *critique of poetry*.

⁴⁴ Rimbaud, *Correspondance*, p. 71.

Like Rimbaud, Bataille considers poetry ironically, in that the poems in this text mostly display a denuded and anti-poetic style and language. Although Bataille considers that poetry has the capacity to free words from ordinary meaning, it is at the cost of sense; poetry is therefore the site of the ruin, or the limit, of discursive language. The generic instability of *L'Expérience intérieure* is symptomatic of a paradoxical attempt to give form to experience, specifically an experience that neither philosophy nor religion can account for or describe. Poetry is ideal as the genre that can communicate this kind of experience but, at the cost of sense; it is problematic at best.

My reading of 'Le Supplice' and an outline of 'Antécédents du Supplice' in *L'Expérience intérieure* will highlight the form and structure in each of its sections. Specifically, the reading here highlights the genres that are at play, the significance of their juxtaposition, the narrative voice and instances of interruption, either of genre or the narrative voice, as indicators of generic instability. Generic instability forms the transgression of authoritative discourses. In other words, Bataille's writing is set against philosophical, literary and religious discourses. Discourse here stands for an authoritarian 'project', in Bataille's term, therefore inner experience is a means to contest project.

Bataille conceives of *La Somme athéologique* as a project in book form composed of two elements, a subjective-biographical one and an objective-philosophical one. The former stems from a compulsion to elucidate his own life – represented generically by the diary and/or first person voice and the latter from the demand of writing a conventional, philosophical book. The two elements account for the two narrative voices in the text which engender interruptions. The manipulation of genre allows for the disrupting of the objective or discursive discourse through the use of subjective and biographical discourse, by way of interruptions and the introduction of poetry, to create a hybrid and unstable discourse. In this sense, genre for Bataille is nothing but a vehicle to transgress discourse. Poetry is, on its own terms, the exemplary genre to effect this transgression because – for Bataille – it links the known to the unknown.

In the section 'Post-Scriptum au supplice', discussing the poetic implications of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Bataille equates the narrator's obsession with Albertine to poetry's defining characteristic of needing to possess someone or something but in the final analysis – at the limit – being unable to do so. Indeed the will to possess Albertine is a conventional representation of erotic desire but one that is also symbolic of the situation of the writer. Albertine symbolises the greater compulsion to give a complete account of the subject (the writer Proust himself in this case) construed as poetic because it is writing *towards* the limit, towards the impossible goal of trying to make language wholly convey the nuanced experience of an entire life. This compulsion to complete the project only has the effect of moving further away from and, ultimately, losing the desired object or person due to

the failure of language; the writing is all that remains as the literal record of this failure and loss. *A la recherche du temps perdu* is thus a poetic expression that attempts to concretise experience as a means to possess an object, namely Albertine (considered as an object as she is reified as time: ‘comme une grande déesse du temps’).⁴⁵ In this sense, the aim is not so much possession but an engagement with the unknown that is suspended to the degree that the object is lost. Poetry therefore remains as a discourse that contains the trace of the lost object; that which was or what was known. The status of the object in poetry as lost, or as representative of the unknown, thus feeds back to destabilise the subject.

In the first part of the book, the ‘Ébauche d’une introduction à l’expérience intérieure’, Bataille defines the terms of his book as being grounded in – but also opposed to – religious, mystical discourse:

M’ouvrant à l’expérience intérieure, j’en ai posé par là, la valeur, l’autorité. Je ne puis désormais avoir d’autre valeur ni d’autre autorité. [The following text appears as a footnote] S’entend dans le domaine de l’esprit, comme en dit l’autorité de la science, de l’Église, de l’Écriture.⁴⁶

Bataille here sets the project of inner experience against religious discourse. As a consequence of this opposition, inner experience becomes its own authority and recognises no other values other than its own. Religious thought externalises and dramatises the subject’s relation to an object, God, through prayer, for example. Clearly, inner experience rejects this exteriority and it is in this sense that inner experience also opposes philosophy. A few pages below, Bataille defines this difference, justified on the grounds that philosophy is a discourse that cannot move beyond discourse:

La différence entre expérience et philosophie réside principalement en ce que, dans l’expérience, l’énoncé n’est rien sinon un moyen et même [...] un obstacle; ce qui compte n’est plus l’énoncé du vent, c’est le vent.⁴⁷

Inner experience is not philosophy because philosophy valorises expression and therefore subordinates experience to expression. In doing so philosophy becomes abstract and separate from experience and objects. As part of its expression, *L’Expérience intérieure* includes generic instability as part of its militant stance against such stable and authoritarian discourses as philosophy. Examples from *L’Expérience intérieure* that locate the instances where generic instability is manifested correspondingly reveal how this affects Bataille’s representation of inner experience. *L’Expérience intérieure* comprises five parts not including the ‘Avant-propos’. In the ‘Avant-propos’, Bataille signals that two opposing genres inform the book’s discourse: a biographical mode of writing (diary) and a more formal, academic mode (essay):

⁴⁵ Cited by Bataille, OC V, p. 159.

⁴⁶ Bataille, OC V, p. 18.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Les seules parties de ce livre écrites nécessairement – répondant à mesure à ma vie – sont la seconde, le Supplice, et la dernière. J'écrivis les autres avec le louable souci de composer un livre.⁴⁸

It is therefore clear from its beginning that this book is generically hybrid and difficult to categorise. Only three of its five parts were written to respond to the demand of a book or project. *L'Expérience intérieure* is neither a diary nor an essay yet it has elements of both. Bataille acknowledges that the biographical elements are distinct from the other elements. The biographical passages taken directly or else adapted from his diaries represent an attempt to bypass conventional philosophical writing. The general instability present throughout the book is clearly displayed in its first sentence: the first clause is Bataille's and the second is Nietzsche's. From the beginning the extensive quotation of Nietzsche and the inclusion of the footnote in the main body of the text signals how unconventional Bataille's writing is and how heavily his own words are mediated by those of other writers. It also demonstrates the extent to which other writers and other discourses are critical to Bataille's writing such that it forms the basis of a method that strives to avoid becoming a method.⁴⁹

The third and longest subsection does not vary significantly from the previous two, in regard to the essay genre and third person voice. In terms of content, this subsection broadly critiques religious experience (namely Christian mysticism) as externalised or dramatised communication that in fact removes or shelters the subject from experience. In terms of voice, paragraphs in the third person, as above, are punctuated by paragraphs in the more direct and subjective tone of the first person. However, several pages below there is a significant interruption signalled directly in the text itself, as well as by the change in voice back to the first person:

J'interromps à nouveau le cours de l'exposé. Je n'en donne pas les raisons...Je me borne maintenant à des notes où ressort l'essentiel et sous une forme répondant mieux à l'intention que l'enchaînement.⁵⁰

Bataille here writes that he will not give any reasons for this interruption, yet proceeds to state that his notes contain an essential explanation. Most significantly, however, he writes that it is the form of the notes that makes them essential. It is the raw and unorganised text from his notes that communicate his intention better than the neutral, third person voice that has largely been the case so far. Bataille's notes do indeed sustain the interruption to the extent it affects the content of the text. The notes therefore cut off the preceding mode of writing (of the essay) and open up a space that is more chaotic, and allows for several further quotations

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁴⁹ This is most succinctly stated in the following section, 'Le Supplice': 'Principe de l'expérience intérieure: sortir par un projet du domaine du projet'. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

from Nietzsche. The notes give a much more subjective account of experience, comprising subjective opinion, reminiscences and writing which allows Bataille to range over disparate subjects to make his point.

What is at stake in regard to the significance of differing narrative voices in this text is that writing on experience is represented textually by the competing authorial or narrative voices in *La Somme athéologique*. Bataille does not ever create an alter ego of the kind Nietzsche or Kierkegaard invent but because his fiction, essays and philosophical works are all grounded in his subjective experience, there is a blurring effect. In stylistic terms Bataille's voices all resemble each other, from the early article 'Sacrifices' to *Le Coupable*. Instead of substituting his own voice to a prophetic authority, the voice often comes into proximity with other versions of itself. It is not just genres that are juxtaposed but authorial voices that cohabit the same textual space. For example, in the section analysed above, the third subsection of the 'Ebauche', Bataille's notes in the first person interrupt the essay in the third person. In this regard, Bataille's texts are structured in the same polyphonic paradigm as *Une saison en enfer*.

'Antécédents du Supplice (ou la Comédie)', as is clear from its title, seeks to explain the inner experience in 'Le Supplice' in more objective terms. This section is also formally unstable although it is more structured than 'Le Supplice'. The reason for this formal instability however is due to the unique structure of this section: each of the five sections has been reconstituted from Bataille's previous writings.⁵¹ This structure has its direct precedent in *Une saison en enfer*: in which the part 'Delires II – Alchimie du Verbe' contains five of Rimbaud's own poems all of which date from before the main section was written. The first section, 'La Mort est en un sens une imposture' is preceded by a subjective, first person account of Bataille's experience of the sacred: 'un sentiment d'ivresse divine m'envahit que je n'aurais pu ni puis décrire'.⁵² This subjective experience is then assessed in an objective, philosophical account of a revised article written several years previously. In 'Antécédents du supplice', each section is followed by a passage in the subjective, first person voice that relates the philosophical content in the preceding essay to one of Bataille's experiences in diary/journal form. The interruptions were written at the time the book was written and form a commentary on the other sections. As in the other sections, passages written at a different point in time are marked typographically by being set in italics and in brackets. All the older texts are in the same neutral essay genre but, because they date from different times, they

⁵¹ The first section, 'La Mort est en un sens une imposture' is a revised version of the article 'Sacrifices', written in 1933. The second section, 'Le Bleu du ciel' is taken directly, with only a few revisions, from an issue of *Minotaure*, written in 1934 and published in 1936. The final two sections, 'Le Labyrinthe (ou la Composition des êtres)' and 'La Communication' are from one, slightly revised article published in *Recherches Philosophiques* in 1935/6.

⁵² Bataille, OC V, p. 83.

represent different authorial voices. That is, Bataille quotes himself as if he were another writer; his name becoming interchangeable with that of Nietzsche, for example. In the same way, in *Une saison en enfer*, Rimbaud is dismissing his poems by setting them in a context mediated by himself as the narrative voice. Rimbaud's intention is to demonstrate the limitations of experience as a subject and inspiration for poetry and, indeed, poetry as a means to record experience. Bataille's intent here, I suggest, is the opposite. Contrary to his own stated intentions, Bataille is attempting to grant authority to his experience by giving it an objective meaning, in drawing from his own writings as well as from other philosophers and writers, in a sense, trying to grasp something that is already 'out there'.

The last part of the book 'Manibus Date Lillia Plenis' comprises five poems and, although the poems themselves are similar in style, contained in this way they do not form a counterpoint to other voices and genres in the book. In regard to poems that interrupt the text, it demonstrates Bataille's conviction that poetry can disrupt a stable discourse and communicate its own authority on its own terms. In this way, poetry is a counterpoint that conveys the subjective narrative voice, which transgresses the text and accounts for the instability of the discourse and the project as a whole. Bataille uses poetry to transgress the objective third-person narrative voice, which comprises the parts of the text written in the essay genre. However, the isolation of poetry in its own section subordinates poetry to the philosophical or discursive aims of the book. The five poems at the end address the same themes that have arisen in the book, albeit subjectively, demonstrating Bataille's view perhaps that poetry remains a minor discourse with no potential. In this context, poetry is unable to transgress genre because poetry requires a discursive discourse to enable the more objective voice to communicate clearly. The form comes to reflect its content.

'Le Supplice' is the central and most important part of the book and is the most generically unstable. In it Bataille records his own experience as the means to put into practice what he has theorised in the previous section. The writing changes from the relatively structured and formal third person voice and essay genre to a first person and subjective account of his own meditation in order to approach a genuine inner experience. Nonetheless, 'Le Supplice' does have a basic structure: it comprises five untitled sections none of which delineate shifts in the content or indicate whether some sections were written at different times.⁵³ The first subsection begins subjectively emphasising Bataille's physical condition

⁵³ 'Le Supplice' does contain one sub-heading, 'Le Non-Savoir Dénude'. This highlights the critical point that authentic experience must take the form of ecstatic release. This is so that experience avoids taking account of itself, in the sense that the subject is usually always conscious of its own experience. Genuine experience is therefore only accessed in moments of ecstasy as non-knowledge rather than knowledge. Nudity is an analogy for this process. Bataille's metaphor is undressing; nudity is the cessation of intellectual thought and confrontation with the subject's body: our original, unmediated being. Poetry, in this sense, is nude language: language that has been stripped of the clothes of its signs.

and state of mind: 'je ne sais plus ce que je suis, j'ai faim, froid et soif'.⁵⁴ This subjective voice develops into more objective discussion as 'Le Supplice' proceeds, as is evident in the following examples. The first section begins in a subjective, first person voice where Bataille refers to Ariadne's thread, which is broken. The thread has a double metaphorical function: first the broken thread represents his abject condition, in which the thread represents his normal, stable condition of existence. Second, it represents the discursive essay. Because 'Le Supplice' is of the diary genre, it represents an interruption in the essay, the genre of the previous section; the break in the thread is the interruption. In terms of form the first section is a diary (or adapted from a diary as the text is undated) and in terms of content, it describes experience as suffering and sensation rather than contemplation. The second subsection continues in the same genre and voice. Bataille discusses the fact that extreme experience is always elusive by definition.⁵⁵

However, the text here is interspersed with directly subjective accounts of Bataille's own experience: in one instance, an account of a conversation with Blanchot. There are two important points Bataille makes: first, inner experience is a rational project, 'L'expérience intérieure est conduite par la raison discursive.'⁵⁶ Only a project that is guided by rationality can sustain inner experience as an alternative to religious experience. Second, Bataille explicitly disavows himself as the author of *L'Expérience intérieure*: 'Le moi n'importe en rien. Pour le lecteur je suis l'être quelconque'.⁵⁷ These two points signal the inherent irony in Bataille's writings on experience: it is only rationality that can destroy a project because it is a rational construct, whereas an irrational method is powerless to effect this kind of change. Bataille's disavowal of himself as a *name* affirms that he wants to efface himself from his writing. However, paradoxically, it is his own subjective experience that is essential to communicate his thinking on experience. This paradox is arguably the reason for the generic instability in his texts. The narrative voice of the essay genre is essential to maintain the discursive logic of Bataille's project. The essay genre has to counter the subjective element, represented generically by the diary as well as by the non-discursive poetic interruptions,

⁵⁴ Bataille, OC V, p. 45. Anguish, or 'torment' is clearly signalled as the means to approach authentic experience as only anguish will provoke an ecstatic release in an experience of non-knowledge. The archetypal biblical figure who stands for this kind of torment is Job, whom Bataille mentions briefly. (Job's torment however doesn't lead to ecstatic release in experience in a sovereign moment but the reconfirmation of his faith.) *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁵⁵ Experience is circumscribed by rational thought. Therefore, because authentic experience is an ecstatic escape from self-awareness, the subsequent awareness of this ecstatic experience tries to make sense of the experience. However, the original experience – of ecstatic non-knowledge – has disappeared by the time the subject can make sense of it.

⁵⁶ Bataille, OC V, p. 60.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64. The two points are related: Bataille abdicates authorial control as a means of granting inner experience its own authority. Another significant point in terms of Rimbaud's influence is that the rational project of inner experience directly follows Rimbaud's method: 'un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens'. Rimbaud, *Correspondance*, p. 68.

which seek to destabilise the project. This is because the authorial voice is indicative of a logical project.

The next and final subsection highlights this non-discursive aspect of Bataille's project. The last subsection is the most formally unstable one as it contains the first poetic interruption in the book. The poem's content reformulates the points and even repeats phrases from the preceding paragraphs and subsequent paragraphs.⁵⁸ Bataille's distrust of language is perhaps clearest in regard to his poetry as it seeks to avoid poetic tropes as much as possible: rhyme, rhythm, imagery etc., although traces of all these techniques do remain. The paramount feature however is the poem's attenuated form. However, where Bataille condemns most poetry because literary pretension impedes its effective communication, his poems attempt to clarify the text that frames them. Bataille seeks to communicate his most subjective and irreducible thoughts through poetry; in one sense the poems are subjective responses to the objective passages that inform them. Jacqueline Risset notes the disruption of the prose discourse by the poems not only reveal Bataille's strategy of generic instability but are a product of the book's discourse itself, a raw and irreducible irruption of affective emotion or *song*:⁵⁹

[...] à l'intérieur des livres, [Risset is referring to *Le Petit*, the three volumes of *La Somme athéologique*, *L'Impossible* and *L'Etre indifférencié n'est rien*] les poèmes apparaissent de façon plus ou moins isolée ou continue, mais toujours comme brusque rupture du fil du discours, rupture appelée de l'intérieur et correspondant au statut du « chant » tel que Bataille le définit à propos de René Char. Correspondant aussi dans sa visée finale, à ce qu'il décrit comme essentiel dans la poésie de Prévert : « jeu, incertitude, destruction du réel ». ⁶⁰

Risset here highlights the random character of the poetic interruptions as an expression of chance: chance, as Bataille elaborates in *Le Coupable* is an overlap of life and death that opens out for the subject to glimpse the lawless (i.e. illogical) and irrational state of existence; poetry, somewhat reductively, is the expression of chance.⁶¹ Poetry nonetheless represents the generic instability in this book that fulfils the vital function of forming the non-discursive element in Bataille's writing.

⁵⁸ The subsection begins 'Est-ce gémir? Je ne sais plus', which is slightly reformulated when taken up in the first line of the poem: 'Je ne veux plus, je gémis'. Bataille, OC V, p. 69 and p. 71.

⁵⁹ 'A propos de René Char: « L'écriture, au-delà d'une entreprise qui est concertée, et comme telle terre à terre, privée d'ailes, peut soudain, discrètement, se briser, et n'être plus que le cri de l'émotion ». Le chant se fait en quelque sorte instrument du cri, il devient cri lui-même, il demande à être entendu et traité comme un cri.' Jacqueline Risset, 'Haine de la poésie', in *Georges Bataille – après tout* (Paris: Belin, 1995), p. 152.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁶¹ 'L'usage calculé des mots, la négation de la poésie, détruit la chance, il réduit les choses à ce qu'elles sont [...] La chance est la point douloureux où la vie coïncide avec la mort: dans la joie sexuelle, dans le rire et dans les larmes.' Bataille, OC V, pp. 320-1.

C'est que, pour Bataille, la poésie, lorsqu'elle va assez loin au-delà des cadres esthétiques dans lesquels on l'enferme d'habitude, est capable, d'un coup, d'approcher et d'exprimer mieux que les autres langages, le champs les plus fuyants, les plus risqués de l'expérience.⁶²

Poetry, then, both points to the inexpressible in discourse and disrupts the normative expression of discourse. This tendency to stain a discursive text with non-discursive and subversively affective poems creates a doubled space of sense and non-sense. Meaning and signification is bled out through absence of stability in the form of affective experience. In the following reading of Rimbaud's poem 'Après le déluge' a more radical and unusual interplay is depicted, of language trying to make sense of an absent event. The poem demonstrates Rimbaud's turn to an objective mode of poetry, one that seeks to escape from the gravitational presence of the subject, warped by sensational interiority. Additionally, I read it in light of dynamic between prose and poetry, meaning and non-meaning in Bataille's writing: as an attempt to recuperate absence; poetry must account for its opening out to chance and the unreserved loss of meaning that results.

The Season of the Flood

'Après le déluge' is representative of the transition in Rimbaud's *œuvre* from a subjective to an objective mode of poetry and, as the reading below shows, this incomplete and indeterminate transformation is itself taken account of in the poem. As part of the trajectory of Rimbaud's project – beyond that considered by Bataille – when it enters its objective phase, the poem itself enacts this lack of objectivity in its own articulation, indirectly through metaphor. The metaphor of the flood – an indication of the irony that permeates Rimbaud's *œuvre* – recycles a religious myth that subverts time, symbol and language as obsolete ways of transmitting meaning. The poem therefore considers theological-mythical historicity through the receded flood and the resulting reformulation of meaning.

In *Une saison en enfer*, Rimbaud – as poet and mythical construct – places himself in an oppositional stance to God and his symbolic transgression of reclaiming hell as his own territory.⁶³ Hell functions as a metaphor for the deleterious effect of religion on Western civilisation and thought. In the reconstitution of hell as his own subjective experience, Rimbaud pushes poetry to subvert metaphysical boundaries yet it is a failure in that it remains determined by the residue of these discourses. 'Après le déluge' goes further in that the flood not only severs history from the present; the poem's historicity stands for the end of the idea of the flood. The flood does not only imply the end of history and the absolute historical

⁶² Risset, p. 153.

⁶³ Rimbaud's confrontation with God is however not a combat as such, in the manner of Maldoror's for example. Rimbaud instead parodies such confrontation and articulates it as part of his submission to theology as way of potentially subverting religious systems of ontology.

horizon but by extension, the end of the idea of history: synchronic time displaces diachronic time. In linguistic terms, the flood functions as a metaphor for silence effacing language from the world, the meaning of which is lost and forgotten. The flood itself cannot escape the force poetry exerts on objects which develop a new presence in poetry; the flood therefore loses its original meaning when poetry collapses in the face of the unknown. Marcelin Pleyne also reads Rimbaud's critique of symbolism as positing an immanent system, questioning the existence of an originary event:

Si avec 'Après le Déluge' Rimbaud considère 'aussitôt' essentiellement un 'après', n'est-ce pas, non moins essentiellement, en questionnant, en mettant en question la réalité, physique ou métaphysique, d'un 'avant', d'une 'Genèse', d'une cause première?⁶⁴

The flood enables Rimbaud to dismiss a preordained and unexplained aetiology that generates being; which is, in view of Kojève's argument below, the narrative the poem seeks to subvert. The flood is a break in the transcendent narrative of theological myth.⁶⁵

Leo Bersani's general, thematic reading of Rimbaud's *œuvre*, confusingly, states that Rimbaud wanted to make poetry *mean* as little as possible. While this statement is contradicted by Rimbaud's own letters, if it is viewed instead in the context of his demand that poetry becomes objective or autonomous, it may be taken to explain Rimbaud's alchemical materialism that attempts to displace referential language in favour of the material aspect of words. This elimination of normative systems of interpretation is connected to the overarching movement in Rimbaud's poetry to displace the social, structured subject with a scattered and disseminated subject. The subject is indeed, as Bersani identifies, the core of Rimbaud's poetic project – both in his presence up to and including *Une Saison en enfer* – and by his absence in the *Illuminations*.⁶⁶ The tendency within literature (from the beginning of the nineteenth century or, arguably, originating in the Romantic movement) to deny a

⁶⁴ Marcelin Pleyne, *Rimbaud en son temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 344.

⁶⁵ Wing's reading of the poem in his study on the *Illuminations* is a conventional, interpretive reading focusing on the Biblical-mythical tropes and their significance. However he makes a useful statement in the introduction to the book: 'A reading of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* must first account for an absence'. In general terms this presumably means the (self-)referential meanings that are intrinsic in *Une saison en enfer* are notably absent in the *Illuminations*. In 'Après le déluge' the narrator is conventionally absent, invisible in the third person yet the significant point here is, I suggest, in the way it presents the action or event of the flood as absent from the poem. Wing characterises the poetic language in the *Illuminations* as intransitive to the poems rather than conveying a fixed, transitive meaning, which renders them obscure. This intransitivity may be seen as symptomatic of Rimbaud's objective poetry. Wing, *Present Appearances: Aspects of Poetic Structure in Rimbaud's Illuminations* (Valencia: University of Mississippi Press, 1974), p. 11.

⁶⁶ Bersani situates Rimbaud as part of a broader tendency in nineteenth-century literature that charts the development between a structured, social subject and the wish to scatter psychic and social structures. An orientation that, in Bersani's view, leads to a 'radical psychic mobility' and a dehumanising, deconstructed and quasi-pornographic form of writing; all three characteristics may be found in most modernist writing, not least Bataille's. Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978).

stable and coherent subjectivity is illustrated by the shifts within Rimbaud's poetry, in which 'desire' replaces previous terms such as 'vision' or 'freedom' and literature, exposed to Freud's theories, no longer reveals selfhood but creates models of unstructured desires, unbound from biographical systems.

'Après le déluge' represents the end of Rimbaud's alchemical theory in that poetry is no longer able to reach a single, transcendental moment that reveals unknown visions beyond ordinary language. 'Après le déluge' is an account of the failure of this process, of immanent language unable or no longer able to be rendered transcendent or meaningful by poetry. The flood, as a biblical symbol, reveals a new and sanctified world. The flood added to the world notions of history, religion and myth. These structures are necessary in order for experience to have an interior or poetic aspect in opposition to them. In this poem the flood fails to reveal a new world; it is instead one that no longer associates events – the flood – with history *et al* or transcendent time; that is, everything remains immanent.

This immanence is the opposite tendency to that in *Une saison en enfer* in which Rimbaud attempts to resolve the struggle between the subject and his experience. The central figure in *Une saison en enfer* is Rimbaud as the auto-referential subject who mediates the *récit*. History and myth are grafted onto the poet's own experience in an attempt to transcend these planes of immanence. This posits poetry as the most satisfactory way to communicate experience, as a means to consider the subject on his own terms. All unity is destroyed between God and the world. However, rather than making the ideal transcendent, Rimbaud's project attempts to reverse this thinking and exalt the world (or material reality) by subverting metaphysical symbols. 'Après le déluge' is an attempt to *preserve* the object rather than dissolve the dualist connection to the subject. The question is then what happens to the object, or in other words, the poetically constructed subject as object in the *récit*.

Rimbaud's paganism refuses historicity and exists in a synchronic present to better articulate being objectively, without becoming determined by myth and history. The dilemma is how to discard speech and language that are an inheritance from God and yet maintain a discursive dynamic with religion so that the revolt maintains its blasphemous power. This dynamic manifested itself in Rimbaud's *œuvre* as an enunciation of paganism; in Bataille's writing from the early 1930s and including *La Somme athéologique*, Rimbaud's paganism broadly translates into the notion of the sacred: that which is sublimated by moral, monotheistic religion.

'Après le déluge' – albeit using the flood as an *idea* just as hell was an idea – refers to myth to signify myth itself and is thus very different to the pseudo-mythic *Une saison en enfer* where experience determines the form of the poem in the way myth is invoked as a response to history. Steinmetz argues that the position implied by the dictum *Je est un autre*

enables two parts of the subject to co-exist: one mythic and one biographical, or, considered another way, one symbolic and one real:

Deux espaces donc où *Je* prend plus ou moins ses aises face à la réalité, cette réalité qui, dans la mesure, où elle relève de la norme ou de l'anomie... aux espaces ainsi parcourus par le *Je* de deux noms: la vie et la mythe. J'entends par vie... une quelconque biographie. Le mythe... fait intervenir dans le texte un autre temps, une évidente étrangeté placée sous le signe du sacré.⁶⁷

If Rimbaud is invoked as a historical (real) subject it is because he is first constituted as a mythical (symbolic) subject in 'Mauvais sang', the second part of the poem that traces the sources of Rimbaud's damnation (described in the subsequent parts) as a descendant of the inferior race(s) of Gauls, slaves and pagans. All these personae – as representative of alienated others in relation to the subject – are uprooted to create a fragmented experience of history, yet they are all still mediated by the subject of the poet in the present tense of his experience. The *Illuminations*, however, take myth to be any another element that comprises the panoramas described in the poems: that is, the poems do not stage it as a spectacle as such; rather they express mythic or fantastic scenes as an *unmediated reality*. If *Une saison en enfer* articulates Rimbaud's auto-creation as his own subject in the *récit* of the poem, the first poem in the *Illuminations* marks the extinguishing of not only his (or the poet's) selfhood but also the poetic system within which it has centred itself. The first five lines of 'Après le déluge' are below:

Aussitôt après que l'idée du Déluge se fut rassise,
Un lièvre s'arrêta dans les sainfoins et les clochettes mouvantes
et dit sa prière à l'arc-en-ciel à travers la toile de l'araignée.
Oh les pierres précieuses qui se cachaient – les fleurs qui
regardaient déjà.⁶⁸

The flood is a clichéd symbol of myth and its irrelevance and invisibility is emphasised not only by questioning its existence as historical event but by refuting its existence as a concept. The synchronic mode of experience in the *Illuminations* definitively situates myth outside of history, repressing silence rather than embedding it as a vital part of poetry, as in *Une saison en enfer*. *Une saison en enfer* introduces silence as Rimbaud's response to the other personae in the poem, where the history of the subject is intertwined with the history of poetry and, in this case, if language is communication, poetry is failed communication. The irony of 'Après le déluge' is that the flood reveals a world shorn of myth and knowledge rather than an ideal and sanctified world. The paradoxical event of a traditionally held religious event as the event that eradicates all sense of the sacred – and of teleological religious time – also effaces the

⁶⁷ Steinmetz, p. 45.

⁶⁸ Rimbaud, p. 247.

subject as a structural function. It is the mind, or imagination that reveals language rather than language that morally determines the subject in a metaphysical order.

The *Illuminations* begin by ‘illuminating’ vision as textual. In a further irony, the world the poem describes is fragmented. Instead of a visionary realm centred on the subject, all myth, history and knowledge are merely allegorical and, therefore impossible to articulate; the flood has revealed an absence of myth and memory. It is thus possible to read ‘Après le déluge’ not only as indicative of the profound shift of Rimbaud’s writing of experience but, conceptually, as the moment of stasis in a failed sublation.⁶⁹ The flood has submerged a pre-existent world yet as nothing is preserved of this previous flood there is no history to the present, no silence to language and no invocation of the sacred in referring to the event of the flood. In this sense the floodwaters represent myth but also silence in that, once receded, they reveal language or the articulation of the forgotten myth:

Dans la grande rue sale les étals se dressèrent, et l’on tira les barques vers la mer
étagée là-haut comme sur les gravures.

Le sang coula, chez Barbe-Bleue – aux abattoirs – dans les cirques, où le
sceau de Dieu blêmit les fenêtres. Le sang et le lait coulèrent.

[...]

Madame *** établit un piano dans les Alpes. La messe et les premières
communions se célébrèrent aux cent milles autels de la cathédrale.⁷⁰

The flood has revealed the liquid circuits of commodified objects, those of blood and milk in the abattoirs, which are the opposition and negation of the flood.

In Bataillean terms, the flood stands for nothingness: it is its own effacement. The flood is at once the process and the result of silencing the world as an unprecedented event external to the world that, has in turn, forgotten it. The flood is the dividing point between itself as an idea as symbolic and the real in an ahistorical present; the flood is both a temporal interruption and a historical span of nothingness – the idea is also the event. In other words, the event of the flood refers to the time before there was a flood, yet nothing remains of that time – of the world before the flood. The flood represents the sacred sphere that is beyond approach, the only relics being the stones which are mute and hidden: ‘les pierres précieuses qui se cachaient’.⁷¹ Kojève summarises the Hegelian context, in which the poem describes the effect of an absence of language:

⁶⁹ *Aufheben* in the Hegelian sense is, arguably, the failure of discourse to absorb the event of the flood as ‘nothingness’ (as external to itself). In the Kantian sense, the material world – that described in the poem – does not truly exist unless it sublates its own self-externality that is, the flood.

⁷⁰ Rimbaud, p. 247.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

L'homme atteindra certainement... le jour où il cessera d'exister... le jour où l'Être ne sera plus révélé par la Parole, où *Dieu*, privé du *Logos*, redeviendra la sphère opaque et muette du paganisme radical de Parménide.⁷²

The implication that language reveals existence and structures religion places Bataille's enquiry as one working against language, using poetry by constantly questioning it. Rimbaud's poem – although a cynical dismissal of language and knowledge – expresses this metaphorically in that experience of being is linked to a reversed transcendence. The flood does not move beyond the world/language but strips away what was already added to the world: the sacred. In this interpretation, the sacred is conceptualised as that which is concealed and repressed by language. Rimbaud and Bataille's projects both reveal silence as the necessary opposition to – and negation of – language and reason and do so by actively seeking the limits and space where the two opposites overlap or where silence is apprehended or perceived from within language. The 'paganisme radical' referred to by Kojève recalls Rimbaud's 'paroles païennes', words which form a silence in opposition to language in *Une saison en enfer*. The pagan words are seemingly manifested in 'Après le déluge' as agents that delineate the absence of history and knowledge, and become embodied in figures of the queen and witch:

Car depuis qu'ils se sont dissipés – oh les pierres précieuses s'enfouissant, et les fleurs ouvertes! – c'est un ennui! et la Reine, la Sorcière qui allume sa braise dans le pot de terre, ne voudra jamais nous raconter ce qu'elle sait, et que nous ignorons.⁷³

Knowledge remains in the hands of conspicuous yet mysterious monarchs and shamans whose function affirms that the system of knowledge is not based on progress but on its very lack ('que nous ignorons'). Yet this lack embodies residual ideas of silence and of myth. The metaphor of the flood as silence underlines and undermines the world of the poem to reveal its flatness and in which experience is simulated, that is, experience as a replication of the reality. Its effects are left embodied in the 'precious stones', in that what remains as testament to the flood is unseen and unknown.⁷⁴ Rimbaud posits the possibility of a new flood yet what is significant remains the unseen; the unseen space or unknown – or forgotten – mythic idea that undermines and compromises everything while at the same time affirming everything through its potential. 'Après le déluge', takes account of epistemological and historical-mythical discourses as other methods of systematising experience. Experience that is divorced from the subject and, by extension, a poetic discourse that is autonomous, give access to

⁷² Cited in OC VI ('Préface à l'œuvre de Georges Bataille', 1950), p. 363.

⁷³ Rimbaud, p. 248.

⁷⁴ Leo Bersani's reading of the poem in his book *A Future for Astyanax*, focuses on water imagery, in which only a second flood will cleanse the world; he reads the flood as inundating everything except the secret held by the queen-witch. He identifies the poem as another scene where two opposing tendencies in Rimbaud's poetry reveal his desire to be liquefied or erased; unlike in 'Le Bateau ivre' which depicts an exhilarating surrender to the ocean, the flood here is at once destructive and renewing.

vision that is able to account for a model of subjectivity based on lack and communicate this irreducible aspect of experience.

Conclusions: Rimbaud's Vision – Bataille's Experience

The central argument of chapters 2 and 3 has been to establish a clear sense of Bataille's poetics, primarily through charting the subversive epistemological operations of *experience*, the *impossible* and *eroticism* in his writings and, secondarily, the presence of Rimbaud's project as a guiding precedent. Chapter 2 focused on the poetics as enabling Bataille to think beyond a stable and coherent subject, an enquiry that has its poetic precedent in Rimbaud's project, and which foregrounds experience as a problematic means to articulate the trajectories beyond the stable, coherent subject (transmitted from Romantic and Parnassian discourse, from Rimbaud's perspective). Rimbaud configures such transformation and disarticulation primarily in terms of poetry's relation to language and the subject's relation to vision; that is, the subject must embrace that other, unknown part of himself – and then overcome it – in order to access an objective vision. Bataille uses the principle of sacrifice to introduce violent disruption of mimetic language and to delineate the nature of experience: experience of being at the limit of selfhood and experience of the impossible that seeks to investigate the subject's relation to the unknown.

In Chapter 3 the reading of *L'Expérience intérieure* is undertaken in light of Derrida's theoretical reading that discusses the model of discourse in Bataille's writing which seeks to undermine and devalue the meaning (major) writing engenders. In combination, then, with the consideration of the sacrificial principle that reconfigures the subject outlined in Chapter 2, the reading here shows how the conceptual implications of representing experience affect literary representation and textual practice in the form of project and texts marked by formal instability, incompleteness and generic disruption.

The conceptual and literal aspects of Bataille's poetics have emerged through the orienting principle of sacrifice and the way sacrifice articulates the unstable nature of subjectivity and the meaning of experience that is impossible to communicate in his exposure to the unknown. In regard to *experience* (as it is outlined in *L'Expérience intérieure*) it is the disruption of the subject's relation to the object in a destructive moment of sacrifice; the *impossible* mediates the subject as known and the object or other as the unknown, determining the poetic model of poetry that incorporates sense and non-sense yet recuperates the communication of non-sense in formal ruin. In valorising silence Bataille emphasises one of the ways to avoid experience becoming recuperated by language and thus given meaning is, instead, to communicate the silent interiority of experience. In the same way that nature is mediated by culture, here language is being stripped away from its role in mediating silence. Finally, in *eroticism*, the desire of subjective fusion with the object (the other) is a fusion that

has its roots in misrecognition and confusion in the impossible, in which erotic experience dissimulates sexual desire as the desire for self-annihilation. *La Somme athéologique* reveals the formal instability, interruption and incompletion of representing subjective experience through generic and linguistic subversion of project. The problematic status of poetry in the poetics is demonstrated by the ambivalent – if not contradictory – position that it must become the subversion of its own discourse, of project and of subjective representation. Poetry can best depict the meaningless expenditure of experience in the sacrifice of its own sovereign communication and form; a formal disruption, furthermore, which injects a contagious disorder into the genres that surround it. The formal, textual and conceptual means of representing experience demonstrate the strategy of moving beyond conventional, mimetic representation. This movement away from mimesis has implications for thinking about the subject: the subject in poetry is one who is sacrificed and what the concepts that circulate in Bataille poetics show is that the subjectivity is – formally and conceptually – limited in accounting for the kind of experience that preoccupies Bataille.

For Rimbaud, language is a material conduit to experience, which can be used in what he termed an alchemical process to become useful and transcend its immanent state. However, utility and poetry are not mutually exclusive for Rimbaud. Rimbaud wanted poetry to retain its essence: if language is familiar, its alchemical transformation is the process that posits moving beyond the familiar/known to the unfamiliar/unknown. In this way, poetry can be internalised by the poet; poetry is thus aligned to articulate experience in a register beyond familiar language.⁷⁵ Poetry is itself an unstable element and transgresses discourse in its anarchic plurality in Artaud's summation; termed *jouissance d'images* by Bataille.⁷⁶ This enables the figure of the subject to function metaphorically: as the ontological vessel by which experience can be articulated in these texts. Poetry exists as the active yet volatile element within – and in excess of – the immanent, static form of discursive language. It is by virtue of this instability that it can access the unknown; metaphorically rendered by Rimbaud as alchemy. The relation between subject and object is the foundation for the linguistic system set out in *L'Expérience intérieure*. The suffering caused by this experience thus disrupts the relation between the two:

⁷⁵ *Une saison en enfer* is the récit of Rimbaud's auto-construction as a poet. Following this, 'Délires I' – ostensibly an account of his relationship with Verlaine – can arguably be read metaphorically as Rimbaud's bondage to the figure of the poet and, therefore, poetry itself. The failure of the relationship, therefore, is Rimbaud's failure to comprehend poetry.

⁷⁶ 'L'image poétique, si elle mène du connu à l'inconnu, s'attache cependant au connu qui lui donne corps, et bien qu'elle le déchire et déchire la vie dans ce déchirement, se maintient à lui. D'où il s'ensuit que *la poésie est presque en entier poésie déchue, jouissance d'images* [my emphasis] il est vrai retirées du domaine servile [...] mais refusées à la ruine intérieure qu'est l'accès à l'inconnu.' Bataille, OC V, p. 170.

La passion du *moi*, l'amour brûlant en lui, cherche un objet. Le *moi* n'est libéré que *hors du soi*. Je puis savoir que j'ai créé l'objet de ma passion, qu'il n'existe pas de lui-même: il n'en pas moins là. Ma désillusion le change sans doute: ce n'est pas Dieu – *je l'ai créé* – mais pour la même raison ce n'est pas le néant. Cet objet... est catastrophe.⁷⁷

Therefore, for Bataille and Rimbaud, experience as existence does not represent knowledge and is in fact opposed to meaningful knowledge. Language is an unreliable system that confuses the object and its expression and, as the unknown, becomes a traumatic experience for the subject.

Silence allows for the poetic project to survive the unknown and to escape recuperation by the discursive aspect of the project that inherently strives for meaning. Silence, in this sense, resists and undermines meaning. The status of silence in the schematic of inner experience however is different to the nothingness the subject is exposed to when exposed to the unknown. Language according to Bataille is therefore always failing and his poetry represents the extent of the failure of language in aporia – in repeating the failure of language and delineating the limit of the unknown. Poetry is the register at which words lose their familiar meaning or sense and evoke the unknown or non-sense that is the indication of silence. That is, silence stands for the paradox of using words – that imply meaning – which poetry transforms to describe and evoke the unknown or that which is posited by the known.⁷⁸ Silence is the result of Rimbaud's sacrifice of his project, which is not nothingness or emptiness but the result of the project or object being destroyed, or in more discursive terms, placed beyond language, so that it may still communicate its termination and terminal absence. Silence thus stands for the recuperation of meaning in a project in which language fails; silence is able to move beyond the limits of the known and the limit of language represented by the discursive project. Language itself is a failure in terms of signifying knowledge and the truth of the object, as in 'Le Dormeur du val' and 'Après le déluge', in which revelation appears, ironically, after the event.

As Nick Land comments, Rimbaud's declaration of silence in *Une saison en enfer* is a final submission to the demands of poetry: 'This is not to say that words come to an end, but only that discourse ceases to dominate them. The motor is not discursive competence but the eye of the storm.'⁷⁹ Rimbaud's search for a new language results in silence, in the wake of the destruction of subjective discourse therefore transfers to the linguistic concept of absence and thus why absence – both conceptual and ideological – form the basis of 'Après le déluge'.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, OC V, p. 88.

⁷⁸ This may be seen in Rimbaud's sleeping soldier in 'Le Dormeur du val' whereby his death is denied and dissimulated as sleep: sleep which is portrayed as natural yet is evidently nonsensical given what is revealed and subsequently described; 'Il a deux trous rouges au côté droit'. Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, p. 76.

⁷⁹ Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 202.

The trajectory of Rimbaud's project thus explains why it serves as both the precedent and the ideal metaphor for the anti-project of inner experience. *Une saison en enfer* functions as an ironisation and renunciation of Rimbaud's own status as a poet, the depiction of his own monadic identity in writing. The major influence *Une saison en enfer* exercises on Bataille's writing is that it is a text in which experience is obscurely indexed to the fragmented construction of the subject. Sacrifice is a definitive rupture; sacrifice as articulated by Rimbaud in *Une saison en enfer* effaces the past and suspends the future.

The argument Part II has sought to establish, then, is that the fundamental elements which inform Bataille's subversive project are the concept of sacrifice and the role of poetry: neither project nor the poetics can be thought of without the dynamic role of sacrifice and poetry. Sacrifice, as discussed in Chapter 2, supposes that the writer must sacrifice themselves to their project in order to reach the extreme limit of their subjective experience. Thus Bataille's reading follows the idea that Rimbaud's project was sacrificed because of Rimbaud's failure to recognise the demands of poetry, yet it nevertheless reached the limit of the possible in poetry. Sacrifice, in a sense, may retrospectively be viewed as the culmination of Rimbaud's visionary project, based on the idea articulated by the paradigm in *Je est un autre*.⁸⁰

The significance of poetry in *La Somme athéologique* is in the way it can articulate the tension between language and silence and thus communicate the inner experience of the subject. This communication is, paradoxically, other to ordinary language (verbal communication) and other to the subject and, thus, communication becomes complicit in and representative of the failure of language and the conceptual instability of the subject. Underlying the project of inner experience is the dynamic between subject and object, which has as a precedent, among others, in Rimbaud's own investigation into thought and the lesson his work offers of how to break from the Cartesian framework of consciousness.⁸¹ Language is of course implicated in this project in that it conceptualises the original paradigm of the subject-object relation that Bataille seeks to overcome. However, in regard to the experience they both seek to communicate, language is an obstacle and, furthermore, a repressive system in relation to which poetry represents a means of subversion.

Where Part II has considered experience, the impossible and eroticism as abstracted concepts and as ones that delineate the poetics and formal nature of Rimbaud and Bataille's

⁸⁰ This paradigm is also influential upon Bataille and his own ideas of the *ipse* (discussed in Chapter 2) which, furthermore, situates the subject within inner experience in which the relation between subject and object is defined by Bataille's particular idea of communication. Communication, in this context, is a non-verbal experience of the other which ruptures the integrity of the subject himself.

⁸¹ 'Et surtout *plus d'objet*. L'extase n'est pas l'amour: l'amour est possession à laquelle est nécessaire l'objet, à la fois possesseur du sujet, possède par lui. Il n'y a plus sujet = objet, mais "brèche béante" entre l'un et l'autre et, dans la brèche, le sujet, l'objet sont dissous, il y a passage, communication, mais non de l'un à l'autre: *l'un et l'autre* ont perdu l'existence distincte.' Bataille, OC V, p. 74.

writings, Part III, looks at the way these concepts are expressed in Bataille's poems. Moving on from genre and form, the next two chapters consider the problems of taking account of the sacrificial paradigm in regard to representation and the implications for language and the subject. In considering the link between poetry and being, there are two thematic approaches to this relation that emerge in Bataille's poems – obscenity – that negates poetic expression and militates against oppression inherent to language and, eroticism, which illuminates the subject lacerated and disarticulated in erotic experience.

Part III

Obscene, Erotic and Destructive Poetry

Chapter 4

The Obscene Word: Materialism and Exposure

J'ai de la merde dans les yeux
J'ai de la merde dans le cœur¹

The analysis in Part III shifts in focus from the delineation of the poetics across Bataille's writings to a series of close readings of a selection of Bataille's poems; this is in order to establish how ideas of representing subjective experience manifest themselves linguistically in the poems. The aim of the readings is, therefore, to establish a depiction of the subject as he has been determined and configured in the poetics. In another sense, the discussion of the obscene in this chapter engages with the implications of materialism considered in Chapter 1. The emphasis in this chapter, where obscenity acts as the expression of materialism, is not only as an affect of poetic discourse to militate against language and mimetic representation but a way to move beyond the representation of subjectivity by disassembling it. This representational disassembly thus reveals the component drives of subjectivity in the context of obscenity and eroticism. They are not only thematic treatments of the poetic principles of materialism and sacrificial writing practice respectively but subversive formal and representational methods of depicting the disarticulated subject on the corporeal register of being. This disarticulation of the subject is expanded upon in Chapter 5, in which I explore the implication of representing experience that necessarily moves beyond a monadic and stable depiction of the subject. Eroticism, furthermore, allows for associations to be made between the subject in representation and the writing practice of the author and thus for Bataille to consider eroticism as a way to understand the experience of being. Chapter 6 does not focus on specific poems in considering strategies that counter mimetic representation but instead attempts to determine how metaphor, image and other linguistic elements function across Bataille's poetics. The aim in Chapter 6 is thus not to consider subjectivity as such but how the principle of sacrifice affects the ontological status of the subject in representation. The consequences of attributing an ontological meaning through poetry to a subject who is disarticulated in dissolute erotic experience and who is morally guilty because of his refusal to grant meaning to his internal or transcendental experience (disavowing or perhaps subverting the Catholic interpretation of being as one of intrinsic guilt) is, at the least,

¹ Bataille, OC III, p. 65.

contentious. The opposing principle to Bataille's fragmented subjectivity is Sartre's existential ontology that affirms the subject through political engagement.

The structural outline of this chapter first considers obscenity as a conceptual theory that militates against idealist representation as symptomatic of language as a repressive and alienating force. In Chapter 5 the close readings are preceded by Nancy's theory of exscription that join the representational, linguistic aspect of the poems to the conceptual consideration of the writer's relation to his project. This relation is central to the poetics because it implicates the writer in his own sacrificial project. To begin with, a chronological overview of Bataille's poetic output outlines three parameters: first, mapping the development of themes and motifs, second, introducing and assessing the presence of certain concepts and, lastly, situating the close readings that follow within the overall corpus. In 'Histoire de l'obscène', I trace the theoretical and literal development of obscenity in Bataille's thought to establish its presence and function in the poems. The obscene provides a basis for all Bataille's fictional writings from his first book – *Histoire de l'œil* in 1929 – but remains implicit in his non-fiction *récits* until *L'Histoire de l'érotisme* in 1951-2, where Bataille distinguishes it from (pornographic) sexuality but negatively correlates it to the corruption of female beauty. In referring to Jacques Cels' account of Bataille's poetry, I consider how the obscene specifically – and poetry generally – function to militate against language as a culturally oppressive phenomenon that degrades the subject's existence. The development of the obscene as literary theme and as concept reveals how the obscene doubles as a materialist marker against idealism and as the linguistic means to articulate the poetic revolt against idealist language. 'Holy Obscene' explores the obscene in Rimbaud's poetry and my reading of the two 'Stupra' poems is inflected by Bataille's thought on the sacred – in particular the twin concepts of the *sacré pur* and *sacré néfaste* – to emphasise the significance of suppression to the obscene; the obscene, then, in Bataille's poetry is a mechanism to agitate against oppressive epistemological and social-cultural thought. Following this, in 'Poem of the Word', the role of Modernism and how it informs Bataille's poetry in two – opposing – ways is considered: first, Bataille's poetry follows the broad modernist tendency to consider representation through textual means, a practice that converges with Bataille's materialist approach, foregrounding the word in the poem rather than lyrical depiction or versified narrative.² Second, is the tendency in Modernism to disregard the sacred (as an immanent space) in its preoccupation with representation determined by new temporal paradigms. Bataille's thought, I suggest, seeks to salvage the

²*Modernism* as a retrospective and, arguably, anglocentric term of reference is perhaps a little awkward in this context. Nonetheless its use here serves primarily to bracket the time from Rimbaud's cessation of writing in 1875 to the beginnings of Surrealism in 1919 as well as to encapsulate the developments in poetry – relevant to Rimbaud and Bataille's poetics but which are beyond the scope of this thesis – undertaken by Mallarmé, Valéry and Apollinaire.

sacred as symptomatic of subjective experience beyond a temporal understanding as well as beyond the modernist phenomenon of framing subjective psychological experience with objects in the physical environment; Bataille's sacred transects temporal function (such as memory) and the world by mutilating corporeal being in a violent act – exemplified by sacrifice – to thus reveal subjective experience beyond psychological configurations of the world and which transcends temporal or linguistic attempts to delineate and define such experience. In this sense, then, the obscene is a means to express the sacred. Finally, all these factors – the theoretical, linguistic and philosophical implications of the obscene – guide the reading of Bataille's *Douleur et quatre poèmes* from 1942 and 'Le Trottoir de Danaïde' from 1957.

The relation between subjective experience and poetic representation in regard to the obscene is somewhat more obscure because the obscene is primarily a subversive linguistic programme, derived from the expression of Bataille's ideological materialism but which develops as a linguistic strategy to counter *beautiful* poetry. The obscene evolves from a conceptual idea to a linguistic and thematic assault against the repression of language and the limitations of representation. This material obscenity is also evident in some of Rimbaud's poetry and is no less evident in Bataille's writings, beyond poetry, as a kind of heterogeneous discourse. A typical example of Bataille's obscene verse in the epigraph shows, I suggest, that the shock derives from the excremental juxtaposed with the corporeal, particularly in the use of the heart and eyes, two soft organs which are respectively symbolic of love and reason. In regard to Bataille's poetry the obscene has two aspects: the first is formal in that it frames the obscene object or obscene language, whether structurally so that an obscene piece of writing is counterbalanced by an elucidating text or through the depiction of an object that is not obscene in itself but is perceived to be so through its context. The second manifestation of the obscene is deliberately and plainly evident; it is a linguistic function in which the obscene word disrupts or desublimates the sense of the poem. The obscene word primarily consists of a scatological vocabulary which, within the matrix of the poem, *exposes* them, a process I suggest that strips them of their meaning, leaving them obscenely meaningless with the result that their material quality becomes more significant than their referential one. In this sense, in its linguistic operation, the obscene, scatological word militates against mimetic representation. Obscenity thus determines both the ideological tone and the linguistic non-sense of Bataille's poems such that they reject ambiguity and the obscene word restricts any possible symbolic or metaphorical meanings. The Freudian concept of sublimation is useful here and comes into play through its opposite, *desublimation*. The exposure the obscene enables in the poems is a desublimation of the suppressed link between the subject and desire. Desublimation is the release of base sexual

energy that has hitherto been channelled to positive aims into an aimless, violent irruption.³ The obscene, then, is one such instance of the irruption of desublimation. Desublimation is most often employed in art history to describe Bataille's theories that privilege deformation of the object and alteration of the subject rather than representation; a theory, I suggest, which is equally valid in reading Bataille's poetry.

Rimbaud's poetry in this chapter serves to set a precedent for a similar albeit clearly distinct reading of the obscene that nonetheless sets Rimbaud apart from his contemporaries and not least his eulogisers such as Breton. Rimbaud's poetry may be seen to approach obscenity in two distinct ways: first, where it is valorised as a means to corrupt poetic discourse, through satire and parody in 'Venus Anadyomène' and the collection *L'Album Zutique*, and; second, in providing the theme for what are termed the 'para-Zutique' poems, 'Les Stupra'. 'Venus Anadyomène' in particular clearly shows how the obscene determines the portrayal of the body. As a consequence of this shift in focus the presence of Rimbaud necessarily diminishes and, although the readings of his poems in the following three chapters aim to provide a thematic and ideological precedent, his influence is delimited in terms of formal, stylistic and thematic concerns in Bataille's poems.

The Complete Poems

The first focal point of Bataille's poetry is the collection, *L'Archangélique*, containing approximately thirty poems written in 1943. This book is the only collection of poems that was published during Bataille's lifetime, appearing in 1944. The only (verse) poem that exists in the *Œuvres complètes* before this date appears in the article 'La Pratique de la joie devant la mort' from the *Acéphale* journal (5), published in June 1939. All the poems written either during the same period or subsequently appear interspersed in the major project *La Somme athéologique*, written from 1939 to 1944. *L'Impossible*, published in 1947 features a number of poems in its third section 'L'Orestie'. A small collection of poems, *L'Être indifférencié n'est rien* was published in 1954 in the poetry magazine *Botteghe Oscure*. However, *L'Être indifférencié n'est rien* forms only a part of Bataille's poetic output from the late 1940s to the early 1950s. A number of poems exist, including the *poèmes érotiques*, which are linked to this collection but were either excluded from the published version or were written independently during the same period.⁴ Bataille's five final poems were written in 1957 and never published outside of the *Œuvres complètes*. In regard to this overview, it

³ An additional important point Hal Foster makes is in regard to the implications of desublimation for the subject and which are relevant here: 'In art this may mean the (re)rupting of the sexual [...] but it may also lead to a (re)shattering of object and subject alike.' The consequences of desublimation for the subject and the fragmentation of representation are central to Bataille's poetics. Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, p. 110.

⁴ These poems are grouped at the beginning of the fourth volume of the *Œuvres complètes*.

must be acknowledged that the parameters of what constitute poetry are certainly broad by the mid-twentieth century and extend far beyond metrical verse. I am limiting the summary to conventional verse poetry although it is arguable that *Histoire de l'œil* is poetic in structure if not in form as well as, more significantly, *L'Anus solaire* which has many of the characteristics of a prose poem and which I discuss further below.

One – 'La Pratique de la joie devant la mort'

The first untitled poem to appear is in the article 'La Pratique de la joie devant la mort'; a four-part poem that predicts to some extent the way poetry functions in *La Somme Athéologique*. It is a lyrical treatment of the themes laid out in the rest of the article in the prose text that frames the poem, preceding and following it. Poetry, from its very first appearance in the *Œuvres complètes* is given the task of communicating an experience beyond that of ordinary, prose language.⁵ It is indeed unique in the somewhat unsubtle way the subject is foregrounded: 'JE SUIS la joie devant la mort'.⁶ The majority of lines that follow all begin with the first person pronoun, showing how the subject remains affirmed in the face of the unknown: 'Je deviens moi-même cet inconnu obscur':

La joie devant la mort me porte.
La joie devant la mort me précipite.
La joie devant la mort m'anéantit.⁷

It is the joy before and outside of death and not death itself and not annihilation that causes the ecstatic experience, an experience recognisable by the collapse of the distance between the subject and the unknowable object. This poem is exceptional precisely because it is very conventional. It uses poetic tropes such as rhyme and uniform rhythm although the only technique previewed, one that Bataille would use throughout his poems, is the heavy repetition. It suggests a litany that implies the suspension of discursive or logical thought. This poem, however, parodies the religious concept of enlightenment. Although the subject remains coherent, it is death rather than life that defines it and which must be acknowledged: 'Je suis anéanti dans la joie devant la mort [...] Je me représente l'instant glacé de ma propre mort'.⁸

Two – Le Petit

⁵ 'La « joie devant la mort » signifie que la vie peut être magnifiée de la racine jusqu'au sommet. Elle prive du sens tout ce qui est *au-delà* intellectuel ou moral, substance, Dieu, ordre immuable ou salut.' Poetry can implicitly evoke or otherwise better delineate an experience that is beyond any intellectual or moral system. Bataille, OC I, p. 554.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 555.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 555-6.

The next two poems appear in *Le Petit* and can be approximately dated to 1943. They appear in a separate section entitled 'Absence de remords' and are untitled. These poems introduce two important elements: first the obscene content, evident in the scatological language and, second, a universal scale featuring celestial objects:

J'ai de la merde dans les yeux
J'ai de la merde dans le coeur

[...]

la foudre chante
l'éclat solaire chante⁹

The universe is one of the central images in Bataille's writing and supplies a core lexicon of subsidiary synecdoches, primarily the sun, sky and stars to his poems. The earlier text *L'Anus solaire* sets out a metonymic system of association within language that operates through parody on a universal scale. Objects resemble each other or share similar functions and thus lose their independent status by merging with each other.¹⁰ In regard to the poetics the central concern of this article is that the subject, the *je* in the text, appears as an unprivileged link in the metonymic chain that runs through the universe: 'l'univers est en moi comme en lui-même/ plus rien ne m'en sépare'.¹¹ The celestial imagery remains pre-eminent in Bataille's poems. The exception to this poetic programme is the erotic poems, mostly written in the late 1940s. The erotic poems were written to Bataille's lover at the time and introduce a distinct tone to the poems. They are more personal, as might be expected (although perhaps not romantic in the traditional sense) and they focus on individual, anonymous, bodies. The erotic poems privilege not so much a metonymic system as one of fusion, therefore, although the imagery and violent obscene tone remain the same the centre of gravity around the subject shifts to take account of fusion with the desired object.

'Absence de remords' hints at the generic instability that is the hallmark of *La Somme athéologique*: separating the two poems on the page is a short paragraph of prose text. It is this text that introduces the concept of the universe as avowedly materialist. As the original act that created the universe is purely physical there can therefore be nothing beyond this physicality; that is, there is no idealist value or transcendent meaning to the universe:

⁹ *Ibid.*, OC III, p. 65.

¹⁰ 'Il est clair que le monde est purement parodique, c'est à-dire que chaque chose qu'on regarde est la parodie d'une autre, ou encore la même chose sous une forme décevante.' *Ibid.*, OC I, p. 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, OC III, p. 77.

Si un gland jouissant engendrait l'univers, il le ferait comme il est: on aurait, dans la transparence du ciel, du sang, des cris, de la puanteur.¹²

The universe stems from an originary act, replacing the word, that is, language as the creative force given in religious texts. This word is replaced by a biological and, therefore mechanistic expression, ejaculation. This act is a rejection of speech and language and therefore reason. Bataille's universal vision, in *L'Anus solaire*, makes each subsequent act, either physical or verbal, an echo or reproduction of this original violent act that is perpetuated through time and space.

Désastres, les révolutions et les volcans ne font pas l'amour avec les astres. Les déflagrations érotiques révolutionnaires et volcaniques sont en antagonisme avec le ciel. De même que les amours violents, ils se produisent en rupture de ban avec la fécondité.¹³

In contrast, although arguably still linked to the concept of parody, the second universal condition governing terrestrial forces is negative and unproductive violence. Some key linguistic and thematic moves in Bataille's poetry become evident here and are worth highlighting. The poems exhibit a thematic cohesiveness, which veers between the celestial and the erotic poles, operating on a system of metonymic parody. The linguistic tendency towards scatological or otherwise obscene diction determines the conceptual violence that dominates the poems. In linguistic terms this is also evident in the generic instability these poems suggest.

Three – L'Archangélique

L'Archangélique is the first major instance of poetic activity: this is Bataille's only publication solely comprised of poems. Many of the poems were adapted for inclusion in *La Somme athéologique*, which was written concurrently. *L'Archangélique* contains thirty three poems, all of which are untitled, in three sections: 'Le Tombeau', 'L'Aurore' and 'Le Vide'. The fourteen poems comprising 'Le Tombeau' had appeared previously in an anthology under the title *Douleur* in 1943. In Bataille's manuscript for this collection, there are notes for unused contents, implying a more comprehensive volume on poetry that would have housed both theory and practice:

Je ferai un livre au lieu de celui qui est prévu avec:

Anus solaire
Dirty

¹² *Ibid.* The poem may implicitly refer to W.-C. that immediately precedes it in *Le Petit* where Bataille describes his father as blind during his conception: 'Mon père m'ayant conçu aveugle (aveugle absolument).' *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, OC I, p. 86.

Le paysage
L'absence
Les poèmes érotiques
Le tombeau

[There follows the first lines of eight poems included in *L'Archangélique* and *La Tombe de Louis XXX*]

rien d'autre
comme titre du livre: DEAE DIANAE¹⁴

Bataille's aborted plan reveals how important *L'Anus solaire* is in programming the concerns and direction of his poetry and shows that the poems are an articulation of the linguistic theory set out in this article. This alternative plan demonstrates Bataille considered poetry occupying a more critical space than the published output suggests. 'Dirty', as the original title for the 'Introduction' to *Le Bleu du ciel*, follows the narrative plan of *Madame Edwarda* of the narrator witness to and complicit in acts carried out by figures that stand for obscenity. The inclusion of 'Dirty' underlines how the obscene relates fundamentally to poetry. The poems in *L'Archangélique* follow a standard template that, with few exceptions, remains unchanged. The poems are all untitled and evenly spaced on the page and thus, each section can possibly be read as related meditations on a single theme, rather than a series of different perspectives such as that in *Les Fleurs du mal*, for example. Three further features that characterise the poems are all evident here as well. First, the form of the poems is very compressed. As will be discussed further below, Bataille's poetics is based on metonymy, which, as a reductive form of metaphor, precludes typical poetic features such as adjectives and adverbs. The dense form engenders the second feature: an absence of adverbs and verbs; abstract nouns feature prominently instead, giving the impression of a static and frozen perspective:

je suis le mort
l'aveugle
l'ombre sans air

comme les fleuves dans la mer
en moi le bruit et la lumière
se perdent sans finir¹⁵

The impression of immutability in fact paradoxically articulates an endless movement and motion of the universe; a motion described in *L'Anus solaire*:

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 501. 'Au lieu de celui' is guessed to be *L'Archangélique*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

L'image la plus simple de la vie organique unie à la rotation est la marée. Du mouvement de la mer, coït uniforme de la terre avec la lune, procède le coït polymorphe et organique de la terre et du soleil.¹⁶

In relation to the poem quoted directly above, the simple image of flowing water appears as phenomenological perception, the 'sound' and 'light' moves through and beyond the subject, giving the appearance of having disappeared but in fact subsisting. Other technical features that define conventional modes of poetic writing are also largely rejected, primarily rhythm and rhyme. As mentioned above, Bataille's diction is intentionally limited, allowing a relatively small lexicon of objects to circulate within the poems. It is this limited pool of objects and denuded style that provokes the third feature, which is parody.¹⁷ Parody operates through the metonymic process of objects freely associating with each other. The association of objects eventually leads to a paradoxical dead end that is the evocation of the impossible: 'le soleil est noir'.¹⁸

Four – Poèmes érotiques

The fourteen short poems are grouped together because they were found in the same *carnet* but the classification 'poèmes érotiques' is not Bataille's.¹⁹ They form the first part of *L'Être Indifférencé n'est rien* which appeared in *Botteghe Oscure*, the rest remained unpublished. Written in the late 1940s and addressed to his partner at the time, these poems are notable for their mingling of the obscenity that underlies most of Bataille's poetry with eroticism. Some seem to express the typical concerns of Bataille's poetry, in effacing the author's connection to his text and have no discernible erotic content at all, such as 'Le Petit jour':

J'efface
le pas
j'efface
le mot
l'espace
et le souffle
manquent.²⁰

Others, such as this untitled poem, are more markedly erotic. The first three lines bear little relation to the last two. This juxtaposition of images, albeit some of which are implicitly morphological, such as 'la langue' and 'pine', create a strong sense of disorientation:

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, OC I, p. 84.

¹⁷ Parody is often explicitly referred to: 'l'amour est parodie du non-amour/ la vérité parodie du mensonge'. *Ibid.*, OC III, p. 76.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁹ The heading *poèmes érotiques* does exist in the notebooks of *L'Archangélique*, which I quote above. However, the title does not specifically refer to any particular group of poems.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, OC IV, p. 28.

J'ouvre les jambes
à la langue de boeuf
de la fourrure

Une longue pine crachait
dans l'église de mon coeur.²¹

The depiction of the body in the erotic poems can be seen to result in a different representation of the body to the 'non-erotic' poems. If Bataille's poetry is considered according to the representation of the body then, in the other poems the body is tied to the subject as a complete entity. In the erotic poems, the body is divided up, as eroticism is implicitly likened to butchery: 'à la langue de bœuf'. The poem divides the body to consider it as separate parts. This allows for the heart, on its own, to be likened to a church. In the erotic poems then, it is on the axis of the body that all other concerns such as religion and transgression come to transect. Consequently, this alters the representation of the body as well as arguably destabilising the depiction of the subject.

Five – La Somme athéologique

L'Expérience intérieure is key to understanding Bataille's poetics because it is where Bataille first links the subject to experience and to writing. Bataille, albeit with deep reservations, recognises the capacity of poetry to express subjective experience. This experience is formally organised around the concept of project and explores the idea of failure, based on Rimbaud's account of the subject in *Une saison en enfer*. *Une saison en enfer* and its generic pattern of instability expresses a mode of philosophical enquiry through form as well as content, leading to the fragmentation of the subject and the corresponding self-destruction of this mode of enquiry.

In Bataille's writing the status of poetry perhaps becomes more complicated as the discourse is fractured along generic differences. Poetry and prose create the *récit*; this *récit* is unstable as it is disrupted by the two genres interrupting one another. This dual-discourse *récit* enables Bataille to centre experience in a poem and then formulate his commentary on this experience in discursive prose. In light of this transformation of poetry whereby the genre comes to represent a (non) discourse inextricable from experience, the poems that disrupt the prose of *L'Expérience intérieure* have a different function to the poems that close the book, in the section 'Manibus Date Lilia Plenis'. There are two poems that disrupt the *récit*, one in 'Le Supplice' and the other in 'Post-Scriptum au Supplice'. This model of generic instability is sustained throughout the other two volumes of *La Somme athéologique*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

There are two poems in the *récit* of *Le Coupable* and six in *Sur Nietzsche*.²² The final part of *Le Coupable*, *L'Alleluiah*, does not conform to this dual-discourse model of framing experience. It is possible to read *L'Alleluiah* as a prose poem as it does not share the metatextual discourse that threads through the rest of *La Somme athéologique*. This is because *L'Alleluiah* was written for someone else. The subject, the *je* of the text, functions in relation to another person rather than the platform for experiences that seek to access the impossible. Written in 1947 during the same period as *L'Impossible*, it was appended to *Le Coupable* later in 1961. As such it reflects the position and status of 'Manibus Date Lilia Plenibus' in relation to *L'Expérience intérieure*. *L'Impossible* however, deals with the converse emotion, the hatred of poetry. In 'Dianus' there is a rare mention of the obscene as a concept, linked not to hatred but to pain:

L'obscénité n'est elle-même qu'une forme de douleur, mais si 'légèrement' liée au rejaillissement que, de toutes les douleurs, elle est la plus riche, la plus folle, la plus digne d'envie.²³

This unusual conjunction of obscenity and pain, or perhaps more broadly, suffering, is however one that is linked remotely to its opposite rejuvenation of a kind that is parodic. The defining feature of obscenity that remains is not its relation to rejuvenation as a kind of innocence but its suppression and corruption of this relation. Emotional positions are articulated through an obscene discourse which shows the significance of the obscene is its parodic ability to twist love into hatred and pain into bliss. An ecstatic moment formed by an experience of pain or happiness, especially of an erotic kind, are indistinguishable once a certain pitch is reached, certainly to the person undergoing the experience.

Six – L'Orestie

There are seventeen poems in 'L'Orestie', including some of the most minimal Bataille ever wrote and some of the most relatively expansive. In it Bataille fixes the status of poetry as the *moyen terme*, which cannot become transcendent in the way poetry is positioned in the Surrealist model. Bataille's poetry is thus always non-poetic because it operates at this remove from conventional poetry to avoid becoming too poetic; it must remain the middle term, steering away both from beautiful poetry as well as away from its own disappearance into the unknown it evokes but cannot enter: 'La poésie éloigne en même temps de la nuit et du jour'.²⁴ However, the obscenity of poetry is more than just a revolt against the aesthetic formalism of poetic convention, which, long before the 1940s had become itself a

²² The editors note that the poems, as they appeared in the manuscript, seemed to be grouped together or else be part of one, long poem 'Time out of joints', Recognisable as a mis-quotation from *Hamlet*.

²³ Bataille, OC III, pp. 183-4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p 218.

convention and a necessity for the avant-garde.²⁵ The obscene is the expression of unreserved excess demanded by rebellion, a demand that leads to an illogical world beyond discourse.²⁶ The world beyond, which is also represented as the night is the poetic register at which meaning must be sacrificed. Sacrifice destroys meaning and leaves words obscenely exposed for what they are, as objects, the detritus of language that can no longer signify meaning:

La poésie fut un simple détour: j'échappai par elle au monde du discours, devenu pour moi le monde naturel, j'entrai avec elle en une sorte de tombe où l'infinité du possible naissait de la mort du monde logique.²⁷

This accounts for the theme of the tomb or burial that threads throughout Bataille's poetry, a perspective that is explicitly referred to in *La Tombe de Louis XXX*. The poem is the remainder of the experience of writing, which in Bataille's schema is the effacement of the subject or the textual *je*; the *ipse* in Bataille's term. Poetry is (morally) obscene in being able to evoke nothingness through the operation of associative images leading to a paradox of the impossible.

Seven – La Tombe de Louis XXX

This book was sketched out in 1954 but was never to be completed as Bataille envisioned. The draft plan shows that the poems from *Douleur* and the two poems from *Le Petit* were to be used. The title refers to one of the many pseudonyms Bataille uses, 'Louis XXX', the one used for the first editions of *Le Petit*. The manuscript contains five short poems, only one of which explicitly mentions a tomb: 'Tombeau de vent/ tombeau de fleuve'.²⁸ Another poem includes a common trope, the inversion of the sky and earth: 'le CIEL inversé dans tes yeux'. The first four poems are gathered under the main title 'La Tombe de Louis XXX' but the fifth one is given its own title, 'Le Livre' and is one of the few poems which represents a dynamic between the subject and the object; forming the last stanza of a longer, erotic poem:

Je bois dans ta déchirure
et j'étale tes jambes nues
je les ouvre comme un livre
où je lis ce qui me tue.²⁹

²⁵ As an example of poetry worthy of this spleen, Bataille mentions the Romantic poet Lamartine, in the article 'De l'âge de pierre à Jacques Prévert': 'Au sens du cri [...] rien n'est plus antipoétique au fond, ni plus poétique au sens funèbre, que « Le Lac » de Lamartine'. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁶ 'Un poète ne justifie pas – il n'accepte pas – toute à fait la nature. La vraie poésie est en dehors des lois. Mais la poésie, finalement, accepte la poésie.' *Ibid.*, OC III, p. 218.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

²⁸ These lines are drawn from 'Je mets mon vit...' where it forms the last of four quatrains. It is one of the poems in the *L'Archangélique* manuscript that was not included for publication. *Ibid.*, OC IV, p. 153.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

Aside from the fairly rare formal structure, including an a-b-c-b rhyme scheme, this poem perhaps most clearly elucidates the title of the collection. In *La Littérature et le mal*, Bataille considers poetry, writing and literature as a whole even, as an expenditure of energy that is only validated if it destroys these edifices; words serve as instruments for the destruction of literature and the death of the author's name. The overarching metaphor, only indirectly and occasionally visible in Bataille's poetic corpus, is the burial of the author, signified in this case by Louis XXX. Ironically, the affirmation of writing is the destruction of literature.

Eight – The Final Poems

The last poems, written from October to November 1957, include some of the most conventional Bataille ever wrote. However, they also considerably expand the scope of the language and the form of his poetry. 'La Valse brune', exceptionally, seems to belong to another sub-genre entirely, unprecedented in Bataille's *œuvre*, that of humorous verse: 'La Caméléon/ tient l'accordéon'.³⁰ Others, notably 'Mon Chant' and 'Le Trottoir de Danaïde' expand on the central themes of the subject dissolving in an ecstatic experience beneath an empty, indifferent sky:

Je ne meurs pas je ne suis rien
sais-je pas ce qu'est ce cri
Il ouvre les nuages³¹

'Le Trottoir de Danaïde' returns to the theme of the obscene however, embedding it as an expression of the repressed part of nature in the same way as Rimbaud's 'Stupra'. However, the poem stages the violent return of the repressed aspect in a hallucinatory and savage display: 'O mort je suis ce cerf/ que dévorent les chiens/ La mort éjacule en sang'.³²

Histoire de l'obscène

Rimbaud's presence in Bataille's poetic corpus can be focused on the question of the obscene, where obscenity is a discursive practice or act that emphasises the material, specifically through depiction of the body. Neither Bataille nor Rimbaud has a theory of the obscene, and there are very few references to the obscene termed as such to be found in their writings. However, in *L'Histoire de l'érotisme* (written from 1951-1952 as part of the preparatory process for *L'Érotisme*) Bataille does make a distinction between obscenity and nudity:

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

La nudité n'est pas toujours obscène et elle peut apparaître sans rappeler l'incovenance de l'acte sexuel [...] La nudité a donc le sens, sinon de la pleine obscénité, d'un glissement [...] L'obscénité n'est d'ailleurs elle-même que cette animalité naturelle, dont l'horreur nous fonde humainement.³³

Obscenity is here considered as that which derives from the animality – the corporeal presence – of the subject but which nonetheless retains the common element of beauty; obscenity is thus a paradoxical effect of beauty that evokes a terrifying, repellent animality. This definition – placing obscenity on the corporeal level – informs the approach I take here in reading the poems as obscene in the way they mutilate and deface poetic discourse – but do so without disfiguring or effacing the subject completely – to formally convey the corporeal disarticulation of the subject in experience. The obscene is multi-faceted, however, and this means it is not only a concept derived from an economy of eroticism but a linguistic one as well, determining many of Bataille's poems and forming an integral part of nearly all of his fictional texts. Although I will argue that, according to Bataille, it is poetry that allows for a varied expression of obscenity, it is in his fiction where the obscene is first articulated.

In Bataille's first major piece of fictional writing, *Histoire de l'œil*, the obscene appears in a series of metonymic transformations that the eye undergoes which becomes revealed or exposed as other obscene objects. The psychoanalytic *récit Histoire de l'œil* considers the obscene a series of sexually violent scenes that defer and evoke the protagonists' own encounter with death. The object, the eye, becomes obscene through a series of metonymic transformations, engendering more violence at each stage, moving from an egg, to a bull's testicle, to the enucleated eye of a matador and finally the excised eye of a priest. The series of objects, or the same object in different guises, acts as a detached signifier or excremental remainder from the obscene acts. ffrench notes that:

[...] obscenity is [...] part of a process of revelation, part of the overcoming of repression which enables the expression of latent or dormant trauma. Obscenity is at the same time the deep level of the mind which consciousness represses and cannot stand without aberration, and a process which overcomes this repression. Obscenity overcomes or exceeds its own repression, and this functions through a process of association, of 'copulation' (as proposed in *L'Anus solaire*).³⁴

Bataille's poems, for the most part, follow this conceptual process of association. The effect produced is that obscenity exceeds the original, traumatic experience yet a trace remains of this excess, bare and unresolved: the excremental remainder. Poetry effects a representation of the infinite, the experience arguably becoming obscene in being shown reductively as

³³ *Ibid.*, OC VIII, p. 129.

³⁴ ffrench, *The Cut – Reading Bataille's Histoire de l'œil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press and The British Academy, 1999), p. 168.

insignificant on the universal scale, through its dissipation in an endless chain of metonymic association.

The experience in question is not necessarily obscene yet it is displayed as such, as something that is exposed and excessive, cordoned off from the analysis that frames it. This division is clearly visible in *Histoire de l'œil*, which is split into two parts: the longer, narrative *récit* of *Histoire de l'œil* and 'Coïncidences', written afterwards.³⁵ In *La Somme athéologique* however, this linking of real life or lived experience to the text that surrounds it, is destabilised and questioned by the interruptions of the prose text, primarily by poetry.³⁶ Poetry in *La Somme athéologique* therefore functions as the dividing line between analytic prose text and the narrated text of lived experience, more accurately, blurring the distinction because poetry, in concluding two of the three volumes of *La Somme athéologique*, attempts to dissolve the meaning of experience by opening it out to the unknown.

Further, Bataille gives a clearer idea of how the obscene fits into his own system of thinking. The obscene is the uncovering of something previously hidden. Obscenity seems to refer to an indeterminate, interior scene or experience, which is always hidden from view. By contrast, nudity signifies the summit of pleasure; obscenity seems to refer to an anterior stage, linking the deferred experience to the unknown as the annihilation of consciousness itself. The obscene, then, is a kind of blind spot: in the same way the sun cannot be looked at directly, so the obscene cannot be accounted for without something substituting for it. In this sense, the obscene *always* refers to something else, the obscene object or scene signals another transgression, which mostly cannot be directly thought or conceived of. In this text therefore, the obscene is not linked to an object and is abstracted. The abstraction places the obscene in an ambivalent position in regard to the moral and religious plane, where it stands for corporeal pleasure and at the same time the indefinite suspension of this pleasure.

Jacques Cels notes that where poetry is accounted for morally or religiously then it may be perceived as a kind of shameful equivocation of representation. Poets are thus susceptible to repression, leading to a neurotic poetry, as is intimated in Bataille's article 'Dali hurle avec Sade'. Repression constructs a labyrinth of symbols and signs that lead away from the repressed event or drive. The opposite condition, perversion, admits its avowed desires plainly, leading them to be considered as obscene through their exposure.

³⁵ There is also a further supplement to the *récit*, *W.-C. or Préface à l'histoire de l'oeil* that gives some additional biographical detail. These two supplementary texts explain, or at least elucidate the *récit* by linking Bataille's real life experience to the events narrated in the *récit*.

³⁶ French notes how the process of dual texts defines nearly all of Bataille's fictional output and, as I argued in Chapter 3, non-fictional works as well: "Coïncidences" provides a framing discourse about this process [...] a strategy which will be adopted in all of Bataille's other fictional productions [...] which frame their narratives with metadiscursive considerations on the nature and significance of the *récit*.' French, *The Cut*, pp. 172-3.

This implies that obscenity is therefore more a question of how a desire is expressed as much as, if not more, than what is actually desired. The question then becomes:

Ce faisant [...] dès qu'il y a recours au langage (écran médiateur et phénomène culturel par excellence), il n'y a pas automatiquement névrose [...] sublimation ou transposition des pulsions refoulées. [...] Où trouver la parole, perverse et désublimée, qui, branchée sur la pulsion, dira l'immédiateté du désir?³⁷

Language therefore is the obstacle poetry must overcome to become obscene, otherwise it risks being caught up in the mediatory net of cultural references and codes. Bataille goes on to deny that literature and poetry can become desublimated and unmediated: it is only experience itself that can be aware of and at once be in the immediate event of existence. Nonetheless, the obscene experience can be seen as similar to the erotic or extreme experience Bataille explores in the rest of *La Somme athéologique*, as something that cannot be expressed directly but must nonetheless be articulated through irrational, often eroticised behaviour or illogical language, that is, poetry.

Holy Obscene

Obscenity is the defining characteristic for a short period of Rimbaud's career, during the writing of *L'Album Zutique*, including the two poems that comprise the 'Stupra': 'Les Anciens animaux saillaient' and 'Nos Fesses ne sont pas les leurs'. These poems were written between 1871 and 1872, in the same period as 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs' and 'Le Bateau ivre'. *L'Album Zutique* then, marks a period of writing that runs counter to critical interpretations of Rimbaud's project as a search for transcendent vision. The Surrealist interpretation, for example, is that Rimbaud's project articulates transcendent vision as means of enacting a rebellion with the ultimate aim of reaching a state of freedom: psychic liberation being the first stage to enacting a revolution in reality. The obscenity of the 1871 poems may seem less of an aberration if they are considered as an instance where the materialism that underlies all of Rimbaud's writings becomes overt. Susan Harrow notes that Rimbaud's visionary project has its roots in more material circumstances, what she calls 'filth poetics'.³⁸ Harrow cites one of Rimbaud's letters, written to Georges Izambard in November 1870: 'Je meurs, je me décompose dans la platitude, dans la mauvaiseté, dans la grisaille.'³⁹ Rimbaud's 'Stupra' convey this tone of earthy realism although the obscene glimpses of bodies are presented ironically, from the detached perspective of suppressed innocence:

³⁷ Jacques Cels, *L'Exigence poétique de Georges Bataille* (De Boeck: Brussels, 1989), pp. 59-60.

³⁸ Susan Harrow, *The Material, the Real, and the Fractured Self: Subjectivity and Representation from Rimbaud to Réda* (Toronto, Buffalo & London: The University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 20.

³⁹ Rimbaud, *Correspondance*, (Paris: Fayard, 2007) p. 50.

Nos fesses ne sont pas les leurs. Souvent j'ai vu
Des gens déboutonnés derrière quelque haie,
Et, dans ces bains sans gêne où l'enfance s'égaie,
J'observais le plan et l'effet de notre cul.⁴⁰

In contrast, the poems of *L'Album Zutique* are parodic and intended to shock, perhaps the most notorious being 'L'Idole, Sonnet du trou du cul'. The obscene content gives a doubled meaning to *L'Album Zutique* in that it operates as a comment on – and an opportunity to mock – the status of poetry.⁴¹ The 'Stupra' do not have the same parodic shock; they acknowledge the obscene as a mythic remnant of lost cultural mores. Rimbaud mourns the interdiction that has come to be considered deleterious as well as ironically reminiscent of depictions of holy love:

Une igéniosité touchante et merveilleuse
Comme l'on ne voit qu'aux anges des saints tableaux

[...]

Oh ! de même être nus, chercher joie et repos,
Le front tourné vers sa portion glorieuse,
Et libres tous les deux murmurer des sanglots?⁴²

The sacred in pre-Christian religion divided into two, the *sacré faste* and *sacré néfaste*. At the ascension of Christianity, the latter category was disavowed through Christ's sacrifice in which all Christians are cleansed of their sin, an adoption of paganism's *sacré faste*. This means all sin and spiritual impurity were demonised and became part of the *sacré néfaste*. The 'Stupra' can be read as depicting the effects of this division and the disavowal of the profane and the consignment of sexuality to the realm of nature.

Rimbaud's Obscenities – Venus

The obscene is manifest in two ways in Bataille's poetry: first in the use of obscene language and, second, the parodic impulse that subverts the notion of lyric poetry. Furthermore, as shown by the discussion in 'L'Orestie', the obscene is an operation that works through poetry to denude or undress words, leaving them exposed so that they subvert their own meaning or sense. This process of obscenity affecting meaning is evident in Rimbaud's 1870 poem 'Venus Anadyomène'. The description of Venus' grotesque body leads to the greatest obscenity: the words associated with the ulcer on her anus, 'Clara Venus': the ultimate ironic disfiguration. Rimbaud has advanced, or degraded, the assessment of idealised, classical

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, *Œuvres*, p. 327.

⁴¹ 'L'Idole' refers to a collection of poems by the Parnassian Albert Méral of the same title that details all the body parts of his beloved: 'Sonnet du front', 'Sonnet des yeux' etc.

⁴² Rimbaud, p. 328.

beauty as pathological, beyond that of Baudelaire. Where Baudelaire compares his beloved's body to the carcass of a horse in the street in 'Une charogne', the woman's body, standing more generally for beauty, is shown to be mutable, subverting the concept she embodies. Her body is exposed by association and is implied to be dead already; her body is a veil covering the truth of mortality beneath:

– Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure,
À cette horrible infection,
Étoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature
Vous, mon ange et ma passion!⁴³

Baudelaire juxtaposes two different bodies in order to create the implication that one is fundamentally identical to the other. Rimbaud's poem collapses this distance to locate Venus' body *itself* as the source of decay:

Puis le col gras et gris, les larges omoplates
Qui saillent; le dos court qui rentre et qui ressort;
Puis les rondeurs des reins semblent prendre l'essor;
La graisse sous la peau paraît en feuilles plates;

L'échine est un peu rouge, et le tout sent un goût
Horrible étrangement; on remarque surtout
Des singularités qu'il faut voir à la loupe...

Les reins portent deux mots gravés: *Clara Venus*;
– Et tout ce corps remue et tend sa large croupe
Belle hideusement d'un ulcère à l'anus.⁴⁴

However, Venus' grotesque body is not too dissimilar from Rimbaud's other disdainful studies of women in 'Mes Petites amoureuses' or even less generous and acidic portraits of the male *fonctionnaires* in 'Les Assis'. What distinguishes Venus' body are the words that effect the grotesqueness by making it ridiculous: *Clara Venus*, when the body under scrutiny, 'à la loupe' is clearly described as the corruption of physical perfection and thus ideal beauty. The unreal aspect of Venus's body however, of an anatomical study shown by the stereotypical scientific phraseology, 'on remarque surtout' implies that this Venus is an example of a discourse of beauty that has not only been corrupted by reality but which questions the genealogy of beauty as a moral ideal. The inscribed words are the key to revealing the exposure of decay and ugliness beneath sclerotic categories of beauty yet at the same time, the words 'Clara Venus' dissimulate the truth; words exposed, literally on the Venus' back, reveal the obscene body but arguably the greater distortion that poetry generates as a discourse of morally determined idealism.

⁴³ Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 32.

⁴⁴ Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, p. 61.

Saturn

The detached irony of 'Venus Anadyomène' is the tone that dominates the poems of *L'Album Zutique*. The premise of *L'Album Zutique* is to mock and parody the styles of other poets. In this sense it is also mocking the avant-garde tendency to prove its innovative trajectory by reacting against preceding styles. Rimbaud's poems were written, in Verlaine's company, as part of the larger Zutique group that hung out in post-Communard Paris, at the Hôtel d'Étrangers on the Boulevard St Michel in the winter of 1871-2. Steinmetz affirms that the poems are more than mere intellectual vulgarity: 'Toutes les pièces de *L'Album Zutique* présentent un narquois réquisitoire contre la trop belle poésie; elles se plaisent à lui opposer les réalités du bas-corporel'.⁴⁵ The poems elevate the lowest and hidden part of the body, psychologically and physically respectively, to the superior level of that other object which in nineteenth-century lyric poetry had come to be the ultimate marker of beauty, the flower:

Obscur et froncé comme un oeillet violet
Il respire, humblement tapi par la mousse
Humide encor d'amour qui suit la fuite douce
Des fesses blanches jusqu'au cœur de son ourlet.⁴⁶

These lines, written by Verlaine, use the carnation as a simile for the anus. The elevation of the anus as a disembodied organ in its own right 'Il respire', is situated in time after intercourse, as the semen trails to the *heart*, another suggestive reference to the anatomy of a flower. In the final tercet, the flower is again indirectly referred to: 'C'est le tube où descend la céleste praline'.⁴⁷ The rectum is implicitly compared to the stamen, the male, fertilising part of the flower and which, instead of pollen, suggestively out flows a mixture of semen and faeces. In his poem, 'Un Dahlia' written in 1867 from the collection *Poèmes Saturniens*, Verlaine displays an arguably ambivalent approach to flowers as subject matter for poetry. The similes here however add a level of strangeness to the flower rather than emphasising the flowers' beauty through comparisons to idealised beauty; Verlaine instead chooses a cow: 'Courtisane au sein dur, à l'oeil opaque et brun/ S'ouvrant avec lenteur comme celui d'un bœuf'.⁴⁸

The following simile tends towards the paradoxical where the dahlia is conflated with the idealised and therefore conceptually immutable idea of a flower: 'Ton grand torse reluit ainsi qu'un marbre neuf'.⁴⁹ *L'Album Zutique* shows the original and the copy are both despoiled in the parodying process. Another poem in the album, 'Les Remembrances d'un

⁴⁵ Jean-Luc Steinmetz, *Arthur Rimbaud – Une question de présence* (Paris: Tallandier, 1991) p. 117.

⁴⁶ Verlaine wrote the two quatrains and Rimbaud the two tercets. Rimbaud, p. 328.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Paul Verlaine, *Œuvres poétiques complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 81.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

vieillard idiot’ again parodies the Parnassian poet François Coppée and can be seen as not only subverting Coppée’s style but corrupting the wholesome sentimentality associated with childhood. Childhood as a phase of innocence, as in ‘Les Poètes de sept ans’, predicts that the more ordered and sheltered the child’s life is the more violent and extreme will be the eventual revolt:

Et comme il savourait surtout les sombres choses
Quand, dans la chambre nue aux persiennes closes

[...]

En bas, – seul, et couché sur des pièces de toile
Ecrue, et pressant violemment la voile.⁵⁰

‘Les Remembrances d’un vieillard idiot’ presents childhood as a polymorphous web of suppressed, transgressive sexual behaviour, notably incest and voyeurism. The poem hears a confession of an old bourgeois remembering childhood not as a time of innocence but as the scene of tension between guilt and undirected lust, ‘Pardon, mon père!’⁵¹ It begins with his mother: ‘[...] femme mûre, avec ses reins très gros où plisse/ Le linge, me donna ces chaleurs que l’on tait’.⁵² Next his sister provokes his voyeuristic tendencies:

Une honte plus crue et plus calme, c’était
Quand ma petite sœur, au retour de la classe,
Ayant usé longtemps ses sabots sur la glace,
Pissait, et regardait s’échapper de sa lèvre
D’un bas serrée et rose, un fil d’urine mièvre!⁵³

The memories of his father reveal the usual associations of paternity with strength and security to mutate into misplaced, precocious curiosity: ‘Son genou, câlineur parfois; son pantalon/ Dont mon doigt désirait ouvrir la fente,... – oh! non! – / Pour avoir le bout, gros, noir et dur de mon père!’⁵⁴ The portrait of the superannuated pervert conveys the suppressed atmosphere of sexuality created within the family unit. The ‘Stupra’ deal with this same suppression but transplants it to a much greater scale, moving from the personal and particular to the universal.

Gaia

The ‘Stupra’ are perhaps one of the clearest expressions of Rimbaud’s paganism. Paganism not only as a system set against monotheism but one that defines humanity’s fundamental condition as innocence rather than sinful. The rise of Christianity and the subsequent

⁵⁰ Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, p. 65.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p 150.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

interdictions delivered by Moses, separated humanity from nature. As in Bataille's division of the sacred, nature is condemned as the part of creation that is opposed to religion and all the progress and order that implies. Rimbaud was not the first to question the position of humanity as subordinate to a doctrine that functions to suppress problematic aspects of human nature. From this perspective, humanity is essentially engaged in a power struggle with the divine. Baudelaire however rejects the creation myth as the beginning of the co-existence between the human and divine. What have been taken as signs of God's presence in fact signal his absence. Writing in his *Journaux intimes*, he states that the myth of man's fall is just that and the schema of a sundered, divinely ordained universe should be inverted:

La Théologie.
 Qu'est-ce que la chute?
 Si c'est l'unité devenue dualité, c'est Dieu qui a chuté.
 En d'autres termes, la création ne serait-elle pas la chute de Dieu?⁵⁵

This subversive passage suggests that rather than humanity inhabiting God's universe, God has ceded his place to his creations who henceforth remain forever separated from Him. As a symptom of this separation, Baudelaire refers more specifically to the status of love in the modern Church: 'ne pouvant pas supprimer l'amour, l'Église a voulu au moins le désinfecter, et elle a fait le mariage'.⁵⁶ As a sign of original sin, it seems designed that love should be physically inscribed on the body, by association: '[...] nous ne pouvons faire l'amour qu'avec des organes excrémentiels'.⁵⁷ This association of love, or sexuality even, contaminated by excrement is Rimbaud's concern in the 'Stupra', in the same way as Baudelaire noted, in order to satirise the belief that bodies designed by God should be perceived as instruments of sin.

In *L'Erotisme*, Bataille discusses taboos that have existed since primitive society and, arguably still have some hold, transmitted originally through the filters of religious interdiction, one example being menstrual blood. One taboo however is deemed so disgusting it has essentially been suppressed:

Mais personne ne parle de l'horreur des *excreta*, qui est essentiellement le fait de l'homme [...] Il existe donc une modalité du passage de l'animal à l'homme si radicalement négatif que nul n'en parle.⁵⁸

In the first of the 'Stupra', usually known by its incipit, 'Les anciens animaux saillaient', excrement is characteristic of animals, particularly their reproductive organs. However, it is these organs that connect humanity to nature, its animal passions and, yet at once, enables

⁵⁵ Baudelaire, OC I, p. 688.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Bataille, OC X, p. 213.

man's elevation above the animals. The bestial nature of animals is defined by a convergence of various bodily fluids staining their genitalia:

Les anciens animaux saillaient, même en course,
Avec des glandes bardés de sang et d'excrément.
Nos pères étalaient leurs membres fièrement
Par le pli de la gaine et le grain de la bourse.⁵⁹

The presence of excrement and blood on the *glandes* emphasises their proximity. As they are produced by the body it seems natural that both types of substance are congruent. The behaviour of animals serves to contextualise human behaviour, proudly displaying their own genitals in a context that is uniquely joined to reproduction: 'D'ailleurs l'homme au plus fier mammifère est égal;/ L'énormité de leur membre à tort nous étonne'.⁶⁰ The concern with dimensions is deemed necessary to compete, perhaps, in equal stakes with the animals thereby accentuating essential human qualities not by denying humanity's animal nature but by avowing it and exalting it:

Au moyen âge pour la femelle, ange ou pource,
Il fallait un gaillard de solide grément;
Même un Kléber, d'après la culotte qui ment
Peut-être un peu, n'a pas dû manquer de ressource.⁶¹

The ironic tone conveys the idea that human bodies have in some way developed according to the requirements of an uninhibited sexuality. However the tension between innocence, in the sense that sexuality is depicted as pleasurable rather than as a function is undermined in the last line of the first tercet:

Mais une heure stérile a sonné: le cheval
Et le bœuf ont bridé leurs ardeurs, et personne
N'osera plus dresser son orgueil génital
Dans les bosquets où grouille une enfance bouffonne.⁶²

Ironically, it is suggested that it is the animals that have changed their behaviour therefore instead of an external prohibition it is an unexplained inhibition which now define sexual mores. In *L'Érotisme*, Bataille makes the distinction between eroticism and procreation:

[...] l'érotisme diffère de la sexualité des animaux en ce que la sexualité humaine est limitée par des interdits et que le domaine de l'érotisme est celui de la transgression de ces interdits.⁶³

⁵⁹ Rimbaud, p. 560.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Bataille, OC X, p. 250.

The sterile hour seems to mark the advent of the prohibition of sexuality without the transgression. In this vision of prohibition without transgression the sexual development of humanity seems arrested. Humanity has lapsed upwards, away from animals and therefore from nature. This separation is caused by self-awareness and, thus, the awareness of mortality. The cognisance of this separation, of being divided from nature yet still belonging to nature makes any residual animalistic behaviour seem primitive resulting in guilt and shame. The distinction from animals suppresses the similarity, that is, man's own animal origins and nature. And, being superior, man is trapped in the division of time after the ancient world has disappeared and in which shame has come to form the basis of behaviour and inclinations in the modern world.

In the second sonnet the division between man and animal is replicated by the separation between humanity and God.⁶⁴ The first quatrain describes a bucolic scene, unaffectedly Edenic albeit with the observation again that distinguishes human form and, thus, sexuality from the wholly unaware sexuality of animals:

Nos fesses ne sont pas les leurs. Souvent j'ai vu
Des gens déboutonnés derrière quelque haie,
Et, dans ces bains sans gêne où l'enfance s'égaie,
J'observais le plan et l'effet de notre cul.⁶⁵

The narrator's observations continue in the second quatrain, coming to focus on the distinction between male and female forms:

Plus ferme, blême en bien des cas, il est pourvu
De méplats évidents que tapisse la claie
Des poils, pour elles, c'est seulement dans la raie
Charmante que fleurit le long satin touffu.⁶⁶

The first 'male' quatrain and second 'female' quatrain is preceded by the first tercet in which the divine presence hovers over both genders although it is far from a deferential depiction. The cherubim's faces echo the form of the arses freely displayed in the countryside; setting up the contamination of the holy and ethereal corrupted by the low, earth-bound and corporeal:

Une ingéniosité touchante et merveilleuse
Comme l'on ne voit qu'aux anges des saints tableaux
Imite la joue où le sourire se creuse.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ The sundering of humanity and God, in terms of religious history arguably acts as the mythological account of this split. In pagan religions there is no equivalent mythology or epistemological consideration of humanity existing beyond or apart from nature.

⁶⁵ Rimbaud, p. 561.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Nonetheless this divine presence seems to herald a kind of prohibition as the final tercet wishes for the uniting of the male and female forms and which seems to be forbidden:

Oh! de même être nus, chercher joie et repos,
Le front tourné vers sa portion glorieuse,
Et libres tous les deux murmurer des sanglots?⁶⁸

It is sexuality here that paves the way for speech, that is, to freely express desire is linked with the condition of being naked and therefore liberated from guilt. In *L'Erotisme*, the pagan world is described as comprising a pure and an impure aspect yet the Christian mode of sacrifice only absorbed guilt and sin; what remained is worthless detritus.⁶⁹ This detritus was hermetically consigned a new status as waste, as excremental. The reproductive and excremental, which were indistinct apart from the imposition of specific taboos, were eventually separated after which point the excremental was suppressed altogether. The body, as generator of excrement and as seat of desires thus also came to be regarded as impure, an impediment to struggle against and then to deny in the religious system. Sexuality as a force inextricable from the body is thus seen as disruptive and dangerous.

Le sacré pur, ou faste, domina dès l'antiquité païenne. Mais se réduisît-il au prélude d'un dépassement, le sacré impur, ou néfaste était le fondement. Le christianisme ne pouvait jusqu'au bout rejeter l'impureté, il ne pouvait rejeter la souillure. Mais il définit [...] les limites du monde sacré: dans cette définition nouvelle, l'impureté, la souillure, la culpabilité était rejetée hors de ces limites. Le sacré impur fut dès lors renvoyé au monde profane. Rien ne put subsister, dans le monde sacré du christianisme, qui avouât clairement le caractère fondamental du péché, de la transgression.⁷⁰

Sexuality as it is portrayed in the 'Stupra' forms the basis of this tension between the pure and impure, as a remainder that has the potential to transgress the pure, newly Christian sacred. The loss of innocence caused, ironically, by the complete adoption of the mark of interdiction, is arguably recognisable in Romantic poetry's search for the sublime in the natural world, that is, the suppressed, unified pagan order. Another consequence of this search is a proclivity for transgression, transferred, usually, to the social domain evident in the English Romantics' support of the pre-Terror French Revolution. Rimbaud's materialism, as symptom of a reaction against Romanticism, precludes any such rhapsody of the natural world but, nonetheless, the 'Stupra' mourn a lost and joyful kind of paganism.

The reading of these poems serves as a preface to the reading of Bataille's poems below, to introduce a precedent, ironic depiction of obscenity that is in contrast to the

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ 'Le fidèle ne contribue au sacrifice de la croix que dans la mesure de ses manquements, de ses péchés. De ce fait l'unité de la sphère sacrée est brisée.' Bataille, OC X, p. 121.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-2.

treatment of the obscene in Bataille's poems in which no such ironising context is given. By placing the obscene in a pagan rather than Christian context, the 'Stupra' show that the introduction of prohibition, in the guise of morality, enables the transformation of materialism into the obscene. Therefore while the obscene has its origins in an ideological reaction against idealism, as Rimbaud's project progresses the obscene becomes almost a spiritual affirmation of being. In this way the *sacré néfaste* depicted in the 'Stupra' prefigure the position of poetry as a minor discourse in Bataille's thought and thus bind it to the obscene. Rimbaud, furthermore, uses poetry as a discourse that is set against religion. It is perhaps part of the indeterminate character of the obscene, however, that adds to its underlying ambiguity. The reading of these poems and their treatment of the obscene as suppressed moral detritus and historical ephemera establishes a context for discussion below, in which the obscene and the sacred reappear at the advent of Modernism. The obscene moves from the abstract sphere of morality to the linguistic, material one, and expressed by the erotic and/or scatological diction that comes to characterise Bataille's poetry. The obscene word disrupts the poem, desublimating the desire of the subject and in doing so militates against language – itself a repressive system – thus determining the subject's sovereign experience in the moment of shock that the obscene delivers.

Poem of the Word

By the end of the nineteenth century two opposing tendencies in poetic discourse were embodied by Mallarmé on the one hand and Rimbaud on the other, followed by Valéry and Apollinaire respectively. In Mallarmé's poetry verse form becomes complicated internally to the extreme, most notably in his sonnets, in which to further complicate their meaning, words are used in regard to their phonetic resemblance thereby adding another supra-textual layer of ambiguity. For Mallarmé it is the *guarantee* of syntax that retains the sense within the sentence and clause and it is versification that dominates the word as the significant unit of meaning.⁷¹ In Rimbaud, by contrast, there is no such guarantee of order so it is the word that becomes privileged and, consequently, it is the word as an autonomous element that fractures the structure of the poem. It is this critical transgression of verse that opens up the possibility for poetry to link form to content.

Wing, in *The Limits of Narrative*, by contrast cites Mallarmé – specifically his *Crise de vers* – as the announcement of the subject's vanishing from literature. The subject disappears to re-emerge in transpositions of language. Modernist writing is thus a discourse

⁷¹ In *Le Mystère dans les lettres*, published in *La Revue blanche* in September 1896, Mallarmé writes 'Quel pivot, j'entends, dans ces contrastes à l'intelligibilité? il faut une garantie - /La syntaxe'. It is, however, not syntax itself that guarantees intelligibility but rather guarantees the *pivoting* of intelligibility; syntax does not necessarily govern the sense *per se* but whether or not the sense is clearly communicated. Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 385.

that interrogates why and how the subject diminishes and does so along three lines: first, the status of the desiring, speculating subject; second, the attenuation of (biographical) origins; and, third, the discontinuity and fragmentation of language. Writing begins to question how thought, desire and fiction of experience can be articulated in the space between the subject who is known to himself and what is unknown and unthought. The consequence of this enquiry is legible in writing that is no longer sheltered within representation but loses itself in diverse, non-mimetic frameworks that interface and indirectly feed into the remnant of subjectivity such as materialism in Rimbaud's (later) project and eroticism throughout Bataille's writings.

I suggest the predominant tendency that emerges from the reconfigurations of language in Modernism and which is evident in Rimbaud is the privileged status of the word. All three of Wing's conditions of Modernist writing can be detected in Rimbaud's corpus, at different stages but it is Rimbaud's anarchic innovation, evident in Apollinaire's poetry and in Surrealism and in Bataille's poetry, that foregrounds and exposes the word rather than utilising it as a component subsumed by versified syntax.⁷² The word is exposed as the monadic building block of the poem. If this word is obscene, from either a scatological or erotic lexicon, then it comes to function as a poetic technique in itself: the obscene word rejects abstraction and, as such, implicitly repudiates lyric idealism. Furthermore, the obscene word signifies and articulates transgression in an erotic poem and a materialist presence in the scatological poem respectively. The status of the word in Bataille's poetry arguably then has two tiers: the first, underlying function is communication, a foundation which is then contaminated by the second tier of the obscene. A contamination that has the intention either to shock, to enact a limited transgression within the space of the poem, or reduce if not shut down the poem's capacity to communicate.

The obscene, then, affects the articulation of this attenuation of meaning in the sense that the word's meaning is negated rather than illuminated. Bataille's poetry frames the position of the word as a vehicle that conveys both the agency of authorial communication and at once the alienating effect of the obscene. One consequence of this is a fragmented narrative within the poem. The tension between coherence and collapse distinguishes Bataille's poetry from the dualism as well as the belief in supremacy of the word over matter evident in Surrealism. For Bataille, it is the word itself that is part of the network of matter, complicit in the failure of language to communicate but essential to the poem's purpose to precisely communicate this failure.

⁷² Mallarmé's influence may be seen in Valéry through the dominant system of verse. Rimbaud's influence is more evident in Apollinaire, where syntax is abandoned in favour of either rhythm or typography.

Surrealism may be considered as the praxis in which poetry is a means to generate a broadly positive form of transgression: transgression that serves revolutionary aims. Surrealism thus shares a materialist tendency with Bataille to the extent that Surrealist poetry is a synthesis of the everyday (material) and the marvellous (imaginary). This shared view of the word as material, may account for the dictionaries that feature prominently in both Surrealism and the *Documents* project. The dictionary, itself an everyday object, emphasises or exposes the word as an object or machine that performs a function, which signifies. The dictionaries of Bataille and Breton, however, present a selection of words as a cabinet of curious objects that can be manipulated, or deformed, to subversively support their respective ideologies. The similarity between Surrealism and Bataille's position came to be highlighted through the contrast to Sartre's consideration of language as a utilitarian tool. This repositioning of poetry took place after the war, Bataille writing 'Le Surréalisme et sa différence avec l'existentialisme' in *Critique* in 1946. In purely linguistic terms, Surrealism considers the word only in conjunction with the charges it generates when brought into contact with other words: in the synthesis of everyday objects, or material reality and the transcendent expressed through the operation of transgression. In *L'Amour fou*, Breton writes:

Le fait de voir la nécessité naturelle s'opposer à la nécessité humaine ou logique, de cesser de tendre éperdument à leur conciliation [...] témoignent de la perte de ce que je tiens pour le seul état de grâce.⁷³

Breton's poetry aims for a state of grace, a factor which reveals that Breton's transgression is limited, in an abstract sense, to the social sphere, rather than affecting the fabric of his poetry itself. Although Breton was profoundly influenced by both Mallarmé and Valéry, he does not mention them as ideological precedents and as such, Bataille exploits the difference he sees between poetry and project, whereby Breton subordinates poetry to revolutionary project: 'la recherche des méthodes s'est substituée à la vulgaire inspiration poétique'.⁷⁴ Bataille therefore refutes Breton's claims for Surrealism as a transgressive avant-garde by isolating Breton's poetry as poetry: as an expression of a conservative – rather than revolutionary – literary tradition, conservative, perhaps in form and theme and, according to Bataille in 1932, clinging to an obsolete poetic paradigm.

In 'Le Sacré', published in 1939, Bataille writes that another revolutionary project Surrealism forms part of is the search for an *esprit moderne*. Bataille views this *esprit moderne* as the trans-historical manifestation of the sacred because it resembles the *privileged instant* that defines modernism's preoccupation with representing the perception

⁷³ Breton, OC II, p. 647.

⁷⁴ Bataille, OC I, p. 324.

of existing in a single moment. The sacred is also this insubstantial moment that – with the exception of its substantiation by religion – evokes an immanence inaccessible except through a violent act, as proof of being: the self-mutilation of Van Gogh or the sacrifice of Rimbaud. Romanticism and Idealist German philosophy were two attempts to identify the sacred and, Surrealism is the third, although it is beholden to these two precedents:

Le surréalisme s'est fait aujourd'hui le *supporter* de cette entreprise mais il se reconnaît lui-même comme l'héritier d'une obsession qui lui est antérieure: l'histoire de la poésie depuis Rimbaud, celle de la peinture depuis [...] Van Gogh témoignent de toute l'étendue et de la signification du nouvel orage.⁷⁵

At this point in 1939, Bataille had situated himself in a post-Hegelian landscape where literature was considered afresh from an anterior, pre-modern point, marked by Rimbaud and Van Gogh. Subjectivity, as well as phenomenological experience, form the basis of literary investigation. However, Bataille here asserts that subjectivity cannot be properly understood unless the sacred, very much a pre-modern concept, is accounted for. Rimbaud's sacrifice of poetry and himself as poet is metaphorically anticipated in *Une saison en enfer* where the cognitive, subjective experience however, refutes the structured, mythic system whereby Hell not only stands for the rejection of religion but must be taken literally; 'Je me crois en enfer, donc j'y suis'.⁷⁶ Rimbaud's revolt resituates the subject outside of a religious system: hell as a metaphor is subverted, the rational mind (*j'y suis*) and the tormented soul (*en enfer*) of the Cartesian subject are reunited in an unmediated hell. Hell has a dual presence as both the remainder of the subject's annihilation and a symbol of a mythical system. This rejection of immanence and of asserting the presence of the subject is the psychological equivalent of Van Gogh's violent self-mutilation or the shock effect of the obscene word; Rimbaud's re-creation of hell is the testimony of his own experience and his own, fleeting experience of the inexpressible immanence beyond the subject. The season is the moment of sovereign experience, depicted ironically by Rimbaud, not as a metaphysical space but the lack of meaning in his own experience. Rimbaud's destruction of the metaphor of hell and thus of his own subjective presence echoes in the immanent space beyond – and beyond the text – where the violent act needed to reach this limit reverberates in nothingness.

Douleur

The poems of *Douleur et quatre poèmes* probably written sometime in 1942 (making them among the earliest Bataille wrote) were never published and exist in the manuscripts of both *Le Petit* and *La Tombe de Louis XXX*. At this time, Bataille's poetics were predominantly determined by the universal materialism of *L'Anus solaire*. The idea of loss and the sacred

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 560.

⁷⁶ Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, p. 220.

that recuperates loss are symbolised by two precedents mentioned above: the loss of identity in *Une saison en enfer* and the loss of Van Gogh's ear. Language is the means by which identity is constructed via mediatory systems such as religion. *Une saison en enfer*, considered as scaffolding around the statue of the subject reveals that it is the scaffolding itself which forms the new, fragmented construction of the subject; the statue is the obsolete depiction or recreation of the subject. Van Gogh's gesture is to destabilise the subject in an extreme experience of exposure to the real presence of his body. The revulsion of a mutilated ear stands for the obscene remainder of experience: the experience of the sacred in the instant of self-mutilation. Identity under the shadow of Rimbaud and Van Gogh first implicates language as the flawed means to communicate the subject and second, defines the subject as bound to the representation of its corporeal presence.

Obscenity is the desublimated articulation of the repressed association between subjectivity and the body. The explicit, obscene word rejects the morality implicit in literature since Romanticism, arguably a morality based on the mimetic. Obscenity is the anti-mimetic inscription of perversion or mutilation onto the formal structure of poetry: poetry which is then deformed and remade as a negative, anti-poetic/literary discourse. The portrayal of subjectivity mediated by the body is represented by explicit, obscene language. The disassembled body, or one submitted to violence, is the obscenity that is expressed through the language of the poem. The subject's experience of overcoming this limitation incurs a loss of part of the self – an ear in the example above. It is this articulation of the loss of the subject's coherence in an instant of experience that cannot be recuperated through obscene language and subversive form, that I propose to read in the poems below.

The poems are obscene in different ways: to expose the word as meaningless in 'Rire'; the obscene form in 'Douleur'; the deferred obscene experience in 'Mademoiselle mon cœur' and obscenity determined by the uncanny in 'A la romaine'. Perhaps the most significant parodic element that underlies these poems is the exposure of the obscene, the obscene as a mechanism to reveal what is hidden. Unlike the poems in *La Somme athéologique* the poems of *Douleur* do not express an ontological affirmation but rather reveal the opposite: the truth that poetry cannot account for the unknown when the subject is itself unknowable. I suggest these poems directly engage with the rejection of idealism, expressed not only through their denuded, reductive style and the imagery of an empty universe, but also through undermining experience by rendering laughter or pain nonsensical. That is, by denying they have any inherent moral or spiritual significance.

Rire

The last poem in the collection, as it appears in the *Œuvres complètes*, 'Rire', introduces the obscene as explicit, that is, where the obscene ruins both parts of the poetic image to reveal

suppressed desire. The first five lines of 'Rire' list a series of singular object-images that express Bataille's consideration of poetry as naive and poets as children. The first five lines generate the sense of a simple, pseudo-poetry as the ironic basis of naive expression that can convey more complex ideas without the additional cultural encumbrance language engenders:

Rire et rire
du soleil
des orties
des galets
des canards

de la pluie
du pipi du pape
de maman
d'un cercueil empli de merde.⁷⁷

The tone changes abruptly in the seventh line where the image moves from the 'la pluie', to another image, 'pipi du pape'. The implicit comparison of the rain with the stream of urine merges the two liquids to create, via this fluid morphology, a new yet impossible (and sacrilegious) image of the contamination of rain by urine, issuing, furthermore, from the pope. The use of the childish vernacular 'pipi' conveys an infantile mockery, in line with the poem's title, accentuating the blasphemy through an ironic language. The figure of the pope, arguably an easy target for juvenile, anti-religious agitation and, perhaps for this reason, suffers a triple indignity: blasphemously referred to as the celestial, that is, divine, presence instead of God; ridiculed through the use of childish argot, thereby undermining the sanctity of his position and, lastly, as the father to the mother in the following line, implying a carnal relation. The mother, adjoined to the pope as producer of the piss-rain, stereotypically represents a generative and fertile force but is likewise undermined by this sterile rain. The mother is also starkly juxtaposed with the poem's final image, the coffin full of excrement – an unequivocal expression of materialism that refutes the idea of transcendence.

Santi reads this poem as a clear affirmation of Bataille's materialism but also notes an often overlooked trait, which is humour:

[...] si l'on ignorait sa part évidente d'humour, si l'on négligeait un certain côté potache que l'on a trop vite fait d'oublier pour lui préférer mécaniquement la gravité du sacro-saint 'vocabulaire bataillien', et cela jusqu'à la caricature: expérience, extase, mort, érotisme, sacrifice etc. Il faut cependant se souvenir de la manière dont Bataille a parlé de Prévert en évoquant à mots couverts la figure universelle du poète à travers le portrait d'un homme.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, OC IV, p. 13.

⁷⁸ Santi, pp. 101-2.

As I suggest above, the stereotype of a *vocabulaire bataillien* is not so much the result of a particular reading approach but because Bataille intentionally limits his lexicon. More interestingly, there is a reference to Jacques Prévert that links their use of language to Bataille's characterisation of him, referred to in terms of poetry, as a universal discourse.⁷⁹ Elsewhere, Santi writes that 'Rire' shares some similarities with Prévert's poetry, which is accurate to the extent that both use demotic, unembellished language, evident especially in 'Rire'.

This quotidian vocabulary emphasises the universal and egalitarian tone of their poems. Although their aims remain very different, it highlights a salient dissimilarity in regard to the socio-historical status of poetry. Prévert arguably views language, partly at least, as socially determined in that it is historically anchored in the society upon which it comments. This aligns to a Marxist view of poetry as a phenomenon of the superstructure and therefore intrinsic to the situation of the social-economic reality. Bataille's poetry does not fit into this category nor does it reflect the Romantic consideration of poetry as ahistorical, refusing, as it does, temporal considerations as well as a depiction of subjectivity inscribed onto the external world. Bataille's poetry therefore positions itself alongside these two antonymic discourses. His poetry is properly concerned with its own modality of production. The word exposed as a word, is singular in its obscenity rather than tractable as a symbol of plurality within the framework of the poem, be it either in a social-realist or Romantic style. That is, the word in Bataille's poems is an opaque cell that resists meaning; it subtracts from or negates the poem from within rather than illuminating the poem from without. Poetry's awkward position, one where it disavows poetry, stems from being characterised as being unable to effect anything more than the mark of its own failure. In these general terms, then, poetry can be seen as an obscene discourse: useless, illogical and destructive.

In regard to the reading of 'Rire', the obscene operates in two stages: first, metonymically through the series of objects, exposed as illogical non-associative words on a page, they contextualise the exposure of the obscene. This second phase is the contamination of the poem or the process of making an image obscene, urine contaminating rain and, second, childish language used ironically as a device to create the parodic symbolism of a pissing pope. In this merging of the everyday and the crude blasphemy, this poem can be read according to Surrealist codes of obscenity. The transgression, revealed in the final image however, does not follow the Surrealist predilection for the marvellous but rather negates it.

⁷⁹ The article 'De l'âge de pierre à Jacques Prévert' is discussed more fully in Chapter 6.

Douleur

'Rire' is an example of the obscene as excessive, revealing the paradoxical operation of the obscene: the more over-exposed a word is, the more it devalues its capacity to communicate. 'Mademoiselle Mon Cœur', 'Rire' and, clearly, 'Pipi', all use childish language, itself perverse in that it is used for the way it sounds as much, if not more, than for the idea it communicates. However, it clearly signals a joyous experience of expression rather than a sense of suffering. Laughter is bracketed with the other experiences that form the *vocabulaire bataillien* as a pseudo-ecstatic experience that signal the subject's exposure to the unknown. 'Douleur' is an example of an obscene form that reveals the effect of an experience of the unknown in a metaphor of the subject's solid, stable condition destabilised by urination in the climax of the poem: 'ô me déculotter/ me pisser'.⁸⁰ The repetition pushes the capacities of poetry to its limits in perhaps one of the clearest examples of the word being exposed as obscenely meaningless. The first part of the obscene operation exposes the non-sense intrinsic to language as a parody of poetry through the heavy repetition of the poem's title:

Douleur
douleur
douleur
ô douleur
ô douleur
ô mes pleurs de poix
ma queue de safran⁸¹

As discussed above, in reference to the untitled poem in 'La Pratique de la joie devant la mort', repetition marks a departure from ordinary language. The repetition in that poem is of longer phrases, allowing more room for variation on the core phrase yet in 'Douleur' they are sheared to the same, single word. The former poem is part of the Acéphale project which arguably means it is not parodying religious discourse as such but articulating an anti-religious statement through traditional religious form (or a subversive religion based on exposure to a pure moment of the sacred). As an abstract noun, *douleur* transmits a highly abstract quality to the poem yet the effect of this repetition subsumes the meaning of the word to its material presence: sound and rhythm. The poem shows how the obscene can be found in form as well as diction. The obscene form of the first several lines dominates and determines the obscene language starting in the sixth line. The poetic images therefore appear as less obscene, their content having been stripped away in that their main function is related to delimiting the obscene form of the five previous lines. The 'queue de safran' still has a meaning, if only a visual, poetic one. It is nonetheless obscene in that it is unrelated to

⁸⁰ Bataille, OC IV, p. 11.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

any other object usually associated with pain, including the image that precedes it in the sixth line. The first non-abstract or representational image, ‘mes pleurs de poix’, might seem to bear some relation to the title of the poem but it is only poetic through its juxtaposition with the impossible. The juxtaposition is emphasised by the half-rhyme ‘douleur/ pleurs’, associating the poetic cliché of pain and its physical expression but, the awkwardness of the association is in itself subversive. The ‘poix’ reveal the tears are not properly lachrymal but poetic, the idea of the body is distorted, the tears and the ‘queue’ are the obscene remainder of poetic fallacy and the inability of poetry to transcend language. The second image follows the same tactic of obscene, corporeal distortion; the ‘queue’ qualified by the noun ‘safran’. This incoherent image and its association with the emotion of pain highlights the illogical operation of this poem. Furthermore, in the absence of any conventional poetic function, it is this non-sense, or illogical logic that is poeticised.

The introduction of the personal pronouns, compounds the illogical, obscene operation of the poem, allowing for the final action of the last two lines. This action seems to bear as little relation to the previous two lines as they did to the first five. The abstraction of the first five lines is replaced by the first action, ‘me déculotter’ of the last two, introduced by the tears and genitals, leading to the second action of ‘me pisser’. The depiction of the subject as a vessel of experience, of pain in this case, self-reflexively thinking is undermined by the action of pissing: the turning inside out of subjectivity, the subject as corporeal presence. The subject is first incarnated as meat, the nakedly explicit ‘queue de safran’ to be, finally, dissolved; only the yellow/orange saffron remains as a final trace of an attenuated presence: a urine stain.

Mademoiselle mon cœur

The second poem of *Douleur* begins to give an enlarged and more elaborate context to recurrent images:

Mademoiselle mon cœur
mise nue dans la dentelle
à la bouche parfumée
le pipi coule de ses jambes⁸²

The heart and urine are two motifs that recur prominently in these poems, implicitly associating a sacred or, at least poetically significant space, with an excremental substance, where liquid is the dissolution of a solid organ.⁸³ The clearer reference is to Rimbaud and

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ The confluence of the heart with an excremental substance is familiar from the poem included in *Le Petit* and therefore written around the same time; (quoted as the epigraph) ‘J’ai de la merde dans le cœur’.

Verlaine's 'Sonnet du Trou du cul', where the remnant of a sexual encounter that flows outwards from the anus, echoes the representation of the body in Bataille's poems. As Santi notes, it is not *matière morte* in these poems:

Cette inscription se fait plus exactement suivant deux grandes modalités. D'une part nous avons affaire à un corps qui ne retient pas ses liquides, un corps qui fuit, qui pleure, saigne, éjacule, urine ou défèque: les larmes, la sueur, le sang, la bave, le sperme, l'urine et la merde coulent de ce corps, opérant ainsi un incessant passage de l'intérieur vers l'extérieur qui laisse voir la vie organique la plus profonde et le plus cachée.⁸⁴

Indeed, it is the inversion of the inner organs, bodily fluids and substances becoming exposed that indicate it is the waste products that animate the bodies rather than the heart, mind or eyes of conventional poetry, or even their re-arrangement in Surrealist contexts. The liquids of the body re-enact the motions of the universe as outlined in 'Absence de remords' in *Le Petit*, implying furthermore, it is biological and irrational forces that animate the subject rather than reason. However, more immediately evident, is the fact this poem is more conventional in its technique. The title, repeated in the first line, refers to the personification of the heart, which expands to become an embodiment of an anonymous 'mademoiselle' at once attractive 'à la bouche parfumée' and repellent 'le pipi coule de ses jambes'.

L'odeur maquillée de la fente
est laissée au vent du ciel
un nuage
dans la tête

se réfléchit à l'envers
une merveilleuse étoile
tombe
cœur criant comme la bouche

le cœur manque
un lis est brûlant
le soleil ouvre la gorge.⁸⁵

However, the (already slight) personification remains limited to the first stanza. The rest of the poem is the undoing of this incoherent figure. The woman is initially characterised as abject but becomes abstracted as the poem progresses, increasingly to the point where the body is depicted in conjunction with other objects. The 'bouche parfumée' is dissipated into synecdoches that efface the previous image: the composite representation of the woman: 'L'odeur maquillée de la fente'.

⁸⁴ Santi, p. 73.

⁸⁵ Bataille, OC IV, pp. 11-2.

Entre l'excès et le défaut s'instaure donc un contact virtuel mais puissant, quelque chose qui impose une ressemblance obscure, une ressemblance cruelle de l'extrême « tête de vie » à l'extrême « tête de mort ». Un tel contact tient évidemment à ce qu'on pourrait nommer, en termes d'ontologie batailleuse autant que freudienne, un *travail de la mort*.⁸⁶

The poems of *Douleur*, then, certainly seem to be following the codes of the cultural art project of *Documents* (to which this quotation refers). It examines the cultural manifestations laid out in *L'Anus solaire*, appearance as deception or parody rather than truth. Arguably a subversion of empirical philosophy, poetic metonymy articulates the contamination of life by death; it is the obscene and unrepresentable fact of death that works at dissolving and disassembling the figures throughout the poetic corpus. The mouth, the perfume and the heart are all described literally in the first instance but are subsequently distorted in a poetic operation. The heart, mentioned possessively in the first line then disappears altogether. This process of subtraction and destructive abstraction segues into further images that are purely poetic in their depiction of the impossible: a 'cœur criant', 'un lis est brûlant'. The universe is imprinted with anthropomorphic characteristics. The cloud, used as a simile of the brain, is a reversal of the process above whereby the internal fluids and substances of the body are exposed; instead it is the internal reflected onto the external. Therefore, in the last line it is the sun itself that opens its throat, the light that continuously floods out into the universe as sheer, excessive energy now threatens to devour it: its throat is suggested through the suppressed metaphor of a black hole. This poem operates in two ways in regard to the obscene; first, it represents the effacement of its subject, the woman in the poem as a symbol of the writer. Second, the exposure of the internal obscenity destabilises the subject and furthermore, implies the external universe is equally contaminated by this instability.

Pipi

The following poem introduces some other images that are recurrent in Bataille's poems such as eyes and birds. Further imagery of the universe is introduced along with the image of the tomb. The first word 'Pie' seems to pun on the consonant that forms 'pipi':

Pie mangeuse d'étoiles
fatigue mangeuse de terre
épuisement de tout⁸⁷

The image of the sun opening its throat/mouth in the last line of 'Mademoiselle mon cœur' is taken up here in the phrase 'mangeuse d'étoiles'. The first line refers to the article 'Les

⁸⁶ Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris: Macula, 1995), p. 109.

⁸⁷ Bataille, OC IV, p. 12.

Mangeurs d'étoiles' on Masson and Nietzsche.⁸⁸ The article deals with the limitations of humanity and how they can be overcome. If piety is taken as the translation, however, then it does imply consumption not motivated by appetite but by compulsion; a symbol of universal hunger, an ambivalent image at once of an ontological affirmation and an abnegating process that seems to devastate itself, 'épuisement de tout'. This overcoming cannot have any limits and, as such, the consequences are unforeseen:

ciel rapace
ciel maudit
partisan de l'hôpital

The atheistic subject is opposed to the sky, symbolic of the limit that keeps humanity subordinated. The sky is associated with the hospital, which suggests the physical cost of not overcoming inherent limitations manifests itself in symptoms of disease. The second bird to appear is the crow or raven on stilts, like a wading bird, in an image reminiscent of Dali, enters an eye: 'un corbeau sur des échasses/ entre dans l'œil'. This image is arguably a metaphor for the process of poetic vision disrupted by the object-image. Indeed, the eye for Bataille, is an object that stands for blindness as much as it does for vision.⁸⁹ The following verse continues the theme of the disassembled, de-eroticised body: the heart, the thigh, this latter part sullied by urine:

cœur en flammes de rubis
pipi sur ma cuisse nue
poli derrière mouillé
je bande et je pleure

aile noire de la tombe
politesse du caveau

The first line that suggests the religious image of Christ's sacred heart, rendered in poetic language (the noun *rubis* used as an adjective) is juxtaposed by the corporeal presence of the thigh. The thigh is made obscene by the urine that makes it shine brilliantly. The following line confuses the networks of liquid and flesh, urinating but also erect, associated with but not caused by nor resulting in crying. The obscene is revealed here through the impossible juxtaposition of a suggestively religious image and explicitly corporeal image. The discordant alliteration of 'pipi' and 'poli' emphasises the causal relation between the two. In

⁸⁸ Bataille adapted the phrase from Roussel, 'L'étrange objet signifiait pour moi que Roussel avait accompli à sa façon le rêve qu'il avait dû former de «manger une étoile du ciel».' *Ibid.*, OC I, p. 566.

⁸⁹ ffrench notes 'One should not talk about the body in relation to *Histoire de l'œil* but about its parts [...] *Histoire de l'œil* realises, in fact, the figure of the eye as an independent organ divested of the corpus in which it played such a sublime role.' The image here is of limiting vision and of blinding, a gesture that literally punctures the boundaries of the subject but, perhaps more pertinently, one that reinforces the consideration of Bataille's poetry as non-mimetic. ffrench, *The Cut*, p. 22.

a subversive link, ‘poli’ is echoed in the final line, through the stress on the first syllable where it is expanded to ‘politesse’ and rendering it nonsensical. The obscene is revealed subtly in this case, undermining the formulations of poetry and the logic supposedly intrinsic to language. The final two lines compound the subversive action of the poem by taking up the ‘aile’ from the crow, implicitly suppressing the final rhyme, ‘corbeau’ with caveau’, thus suggesting another absent rhyme that is a common feature of Bataille’s poetry – ‘tombeau’. The conventionally poetic simile of the ‘aile noire de la tombe’ recalls the magpie from the first line and assumes the eating of the stars by representing the denuded sky in the associated image of the vaulted tomb.

A la Romaine

This short poem seems to take a different approach to the others and opts for Prévert-esque realism.

A la romaine
un cœur de veau
la barbe en pointe
et le gland rose.⁹⁰

The plain, simple description of a meal shows the obscene where the obscene word negates the image of the poem: the last line explicitly suggests the flesh of the genitals prevalent elsewhere in the poems. The meat, furthermore, is on display, literally exposed on the plate. The association of obscene, naked flesh in the context of flesh on display not for consuming but for eating reveals that the obscene is perhaps more unsettling in the most ordinary and unexpected contexts. The secondary link between meat for consumption, gastronomic and erotic, exposes the selfish cruelty that fuels desire. This poem, uniquely, can be seen as an example where the guiding principle of parody is additionally determined by the uncanny: that which is repressed, desire aroused by flesh, meat that is itself naked and bloody. The implication is that flesh, in an aroused condition in an eroticised context, is exposed and fluid, is here transposed to the meal on the plate. The implicit, metonymic connection between ‘un cœur’ and ‘le gland’, represents the repressed relation of desire, embodied by love in the organ of the heart and desire embodied by the genital organs. The sauce ‘à la romaine’ acts as the device that subverts the mimetic quality of the poem. The poem does not posit ‘le gland’ as the fundamental object that determines all others but rather it is the sauce as the agent that literally covers the meat and which obliterates the possibility for it to be clearly identified – neither one thing nor the other.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-3.

*(Le Trottoir de Danaïde)*⁹¹

This poem, the title of which is crossed out in the manuscript, is one of the last Bataille wrote, late in 1957 and was never published. The time that separates it from *Douleur* is not evident in the vocabulary which largely remains constant. The first two lines indeed are reminiscent of the beginning of 'Mademoiselle mon cœur', the 'mademoiselle' changes to 'putain' suggesting the heart does not function as the personification of another but is the poet's own, obscene Muse:

Ma putain
mon cœur
Je t'aime comme on chie
Trempe ton cul dans l'orage
entourée d'éclairs
C'est la foudre qui te baise
un fou brame dans la nuit
qui bande comme un cerf
O mort je suis ce cerf
que dévorent les chiens
La mort éjacule en sang⁹²

The form is perhaps slightly different although arguably the defining feature of Bataille's poems is that they are formless, that is, they parody the appearance of poems but do not conform to the poetic demands of rhyme, rhythm and metre. However, this form is shared by all five of the poems written in 1957. The poem's internal structure is sequential, following a logical series of associations although a noticeable difference is that the associative links are not based on objects but actions. The poems above by contrast, function by exposing words to juxtapose various, disparate objects thereby highlighting the illogical processes of the poem. This poem certainly uses familiar associations but they are introduced rapidly in subsequent lines which gives the poem an oneiric, Surrealist quality. The present tense adds to the swift rhythm of the poem as well as to the strongly visual aspect of unreality; language is representational rather than abstract. In this poem, the obscene does not follow the paradigm of direct exposure but indirect association: first the heart which then introduces the statement 'Je t'aime' in the following line. However the desired other is neither loved abstractly: 'Je t'aime comme on chie' nor are they affirmed by their being but rather their obscene action: exposing their 'cul' to the storm and which is embraced by the storm. Of the storm's two elements, thunder and lightning, it is the latter which performs the obscene,

⁹¹ 'Danaïdes' is the collective noun given to the fifty daughters of Danaus in Greek mythology. Danaus offers them in marriage to their cousins, the fifty sons of his brother Aegyptus. On their wedding night, on the instructions of their father, with one exception, they murder their husbands. Possibly the hunting dogs are a reference to the daughters in the poem. Patrick ffrench also suggests that the title is possibly a metonymic slip because Diana/Dianus – another figure who obsessed Bataille – is the goddess of the hunt.

⁹² Bataille, OC IV, p. 36.

eroticised transgression on the exposed arse/vulva. The obscene is perhaps informed more by the violence implied in the unreal copulation than by its erotic nature. The stag is introduced not by the physical presence of its erection but by its sound, that is, its absence, an absence compounded by its collocation with the night in the same line. The *je* of the subject in the figure of the stag is then displaced by the *ipse*, invoked by the tumescence that signals its presence in the following line. The ironic invocation of death then introduces the *ipse* into the poem through the simile of the stag. Death contaminates the verb that usually expresses its opposite force in the ejaculation of sperm, of fertility, with the gush of blood that signals the stag's death. This is the final obscene act of the *ipse* in that it contaminates the processes of life and, rather than destabilising the representation of being to open out to immanence, the obscene instead enables the interpenetration of life and death.

This poem may be read alongside Rimbaud's 'Stupra' in two ways: first, it depicts an obscene sexuality: obscene because it is not erotic and therefore neither is it transgressive. Second, as it is unmediated by morality, the poem seems to place this amorality in nature, directly locked into the systems and networks of the natural world, one in which the violence, of sacrifice for example, was not hidden but celebrated as sacred: 'Le sens du sacré peut être regardé comme perdu dans la mesure où s'est perdue la conscience des secrètes horreurs qui sont à la source des religions.'⁹³

Bataille links the sacred to the unrepressed knowledge of violence that characterises pre-Christian pagan religion. This poem has been read as suggestive of the madness incarnated by the figure of Bataille's father.⁹⁴ It is more likely, certainly by 1957 that the theories of *L'Érotisme*, which was published when this poem was written, bears more influence upon it. The reading of the 'Stupra' shows how the suppression of sexuality is the suppression of freedom, indeed any sanitisation of desire is tantamount to its repression. Once repressed it becomes obscene. Eroticism is the register that signals the rejection of expression in Christianity; a prohibition which is echoed by the subject's dissolution in the collapsed relation to the object:

L'Érotisme [...] est [...] le déséquilibre dans lequel l'être se met lui-même en question, consciemment. En un sens, l'être se perd objectivement, mais alors le sujet s'identifie avec l'objet qui se perd [...] dans l'érotisme JE me perds.⁹⁵

⁹³ *Ibid.*, OC I, Planche XXIX, 'Le Sacré'. This text appears as a caption to one of the plates published with the article, showing an image of a broken phallus in Delos. The photograph is used again in *L'Érotisme* published in 1957, the same year this poem was written.

⁹⁴ Santi privileges the image of 'un fou brame dans la nuit' with the *je* of the stag and links it back to Bataille's father, although 'brame' specifically refers to the cry of a stag which explains my alternative interpretation: 'Le principe des coïncidences évoqué dans la post-face à *L'Histoire de l'œil* semble ici fonctionner puisque nous retrouvons [...] les hurlements de douleur du père qui crie dans la nuit [...] et, peut-être, la mort tragique de ce père qui serait figurée par la mort violente du cerf.' Santi, p. 286.

⁹⁵ Bataille, OC X, p. 35.

The self-reflexivity of Rimbaud's *On me pense* is transformed from one of affirmation into dissipation and loss.⁹⁶ 'Le Trottoir de Danaïde' moves beyond the portrayal of subjectivity in the 'Stupra', in the subject's assumption of the figure of the stag: 'O mort je suis ce cerf'. The subject in Rimbaud compares himself to the animals and is able to recognise the bestial, base part of nature in himself and in doing so, establish the difference. In the 'Stupra' subjectivity and eroticism enable difference but in 'Le Trottoir de Danaïde' this difference is annulled in an obscene invocation of the subject's destruction in erotic ecstasy. In Bataille's poem, subjectivity literally goes to the dogs: it is death that enables the recognition and, therefore, enables the subject to be sacrificed in exposing the repressed similitude to animals. It is the appeal to death that enables the obscene in two ways: the self-effacement and the contamination of death in the verb *ejaculate*; language is perverted in obscene destruction of reason and of subjective coherence. This poem aligns the obscene, in various guises, violent and erotic but which is fundamentally excessive: excessive through its universal presence, as literally elemental. The affirmative erotic experience is here poetically rendered, that is through metaphor and simile along a metonymic chain of action, which is, unusually, representational. This poem complements the conflation of sexuality and eroticism in the 'Stupra' and depicts the transgression where they depict the prohibition. They both consider the body as a means to affirm the subject's freedom from inhibition, the cost of which is the loss of the subject's autonomy represented by the fragmented and butchered body.

Conclusion

In this chapter, in beginning the close readings of Bataille's poems that continue in Chapter 5 and in Chapter 6 (albeit with a different perspective) I aimed to establish the way ideological and conceptual considerations are linguistically represented. The representation of subjectivity and of experience in itself is, indeed, one of the concepts that is problematic. I have considered Rimbaud and the tendency towards the obscene within Rimbaud's *œuvre* as one mediating context that shapes and orientates Bataille's poetry. Although Bataille does not acknowledge Modernism as a movement as such, the changes that it engendered before Bataille wrote his first poem are nonetheless significant in regard to changes in the status of the word in poetic discourse. The reading of the obscene in Rimbaud's poems here reveals the obscenity in humanity's connection to nature in its proximity is very different to Bataille's linguistic deployment of the obscene within his poetry. The sacred in regard to the *esprit moderne* below is not the same kind as either the *sacré pur* or *sacré néfaste* but, like the obscene, occupies a trans-historical space within poetry and which is evoked by experience.

⁹⁶ 'C'est faux de dire: Je pense: on devrait dire On me pense.' Rimbaud, *Correspondance*, p. 84.

Modernism represents the enduring moment that breaks with tradition, on the one hand and the revelation of an experiential, pagan yet nonetheless sacred core on the other. Modernism shows how Bataille considers the word as an object (Breton too, to a certain extent, shares this view). In Bataille's poetics, it is the word that is valorised rather than the poem so that the poem's meaning rests at the level of the word rather than transcending the poem, as is the case in Rimbaud and in much Surrealist poetry. Surrealism negatively influenced Bataille through an idealist ideology that allows Bataille to take an antithetical, materialist position. The obscene word functions as a rejection of the transcendent abstraction of idealism. However, because the obscene is necessarily material, it does not illuminate the expression it is part of – the poem – it effectively negates it. As discussed in Chapter 2, in regard to the presence of the subject, the *je/ipse* as a word in the poem – sometimes concealed by the *Moi* – bridges the known and the unknown, exposing the unknown part of the subject, that corporeal part that is depicted in poetry. In poetic discourse, the *ipse* destabilises the poem in the exposure of the subject to the unknown. The obscene however is ambivalent in this sense in that, through its obscenity, be it erotic transgression or scatological perversity, it valorises experience – the instant as a revolt against immanence. The obscene is therefore the desublimating operation that exposes the experience as a rupture in this immanent reality.

This instant of experience forms a kind of duration constituted by the subject's past and present, duration that is, in which identity is conditioned by narrative. This moment is another kind of transcendence of alteration or mutilation that allows the obscene to move beyond the corporeal register to signify death instead – the instant the body is no longer obscene through its presence but by its absence. In this light the obscene implicitly conveys the shock of mutilated flesh or the decaying corpse as a sacred experience: the first of two illustrative precedents is Rimbaud who places subjectivity at the centre of his *œuvre* through the grotesque bodies that populate it and which, further, initiates the destruction of the subject on historical, religious and mythical levels in *Une saison en enfer*. The second is Van Gogh whose mutilated, severed ear was interpreted by Bataille as an echo of primitive initiatory rites that delineate and puncture the limit of being. There is a progression from the obscene as an excremental remainder of moral idealism to its linguistic function that militates against referential meaning; Bataille's poetry is thus able to represent its own perversion of poetic discourse as a traditional method of communicating the sacred.

Obscenity is key to understanding Bataille's poetics and poems. The word in Bataille's poetry, not dissimilarly from Rimbaud, is embedded within fundamental, universal systems but *negatively*. The word is therefore opaque because it does not communicate explicitly: it is desublimated in the poem but remains subordinate to the demands of poetry. The Venus in Rimbaud's poem is deformed by the words on her back, ironically, her least grotesque feature illuminates the extent to which she has mutated from the aesthetic ideal her

name communicates and demands. Bataille's poems describe or feature a scatological vocabulary of excrescence that signals their position as the excremental remainder of discourse. The representation of the obscene experience in Bataille's fictional and non-fictional writing is indirect, it circumscribes the experience and displays it without directly commenting upon it. Obscenity is distinct from transgression because it operates through desublimation and is thus an exposure of something that was always there; obscenity also possesses a linguistic aspect, albeit one that violently negates representation. Bataille's poetry approaches experience directly, displaying words nakedly without any of the conventional poetic apparatus that normally guides the reader towards a sense or meaning of the poem. Bataille's poems emphasise this exposure of poetry as the stripping bare of language in its markedly non-poetic style: in the lack of complete or even partial sentences and a near total absence of syntactical connection between words. One consequence of this is that the poems do not engender a meaning in their formulation or through their construction; it is the diction, the words, which remain the main feature and remain isolated.⁹⁷

The poem then, is a machine to undo the suppressed meaning within language and to expose it as obscene. It is obscene because it reveals the limits of language such as the incapacity of language to articulate a paradox such as silence; it can only suppress it. The revelation of poetry is the movement towards articulating a moment of desire, in evoking an experience beyond language. Poetry dissimulates immanent reality in as much as it exposes it by undermining, through parody, the illusory reality words systematise through their relation to objects.

The obscene, then, if taken in light of Bataille's initial definition in *L'Histoire de l'érotisme* is thought of as the unacceptable disfigurement of beauty, that is, obscenity is indexed to aesthetic considerations in physical terms. 'Obscene beauty' is the corruption of beauty yet a process that still retains the trace of beauty and, analogously, obscenity is the debasing of poetic language and of idealist conceptual thinking yet exercises its shock through representation of a disarticulated body and thus, a fragmented subject. The obscene with its origin in Bataille's thought on eroticism is thus thematically complementary to the erotic in that many of the poems in this chapter could be characterised as erotic as many of the poems in the next chapter are also plainly obscene yet the key difference between them is that the obscene is ideologically determined to corrupt and deface aesthetic categories; eroticism is not overtly ideological and does not, in linguistic form, militate against the oppression of language that Cels identified. Obscenity communicates experience through linguistic subversion and disruption, eroticism focuses more on subjectivity in relation to the

⁹⁷ Bataille writes in *Méthode de méditation*: '[...] des mots! Qui sans répit m'épuisent: j'irai toutefois au bout de la possibilité misérable des mots. J'en veux trouver qui réintroduisent – en un point – le souverain silence qu'interrompt le langage articulé'. Bataille, OC V, p. 210.

other and to the – no less destructive – experience of tracing the subject's encounter with the other through the ruination of his corporeality. Eroticism's representation of destructive exposure to the other is indexed to the conceptual situation of the writer and his sacrificially determined relation to his project. The body is, however, the focus of the next chapter exploring, on one level, erotic experience as a means to conceive of a destabilised subjectivity and, on another level, the effects of representation in the depiction of subjective destruction through the disarticulation of the body.

Chapter 5

Corporeal Poetry and Fragmented Being: Eroticism and Exscription

Je bois dans ta déchirure
j'étale tes jambes nues
je les ouvre comme un livre
où je lis ce qui me tue.¹

Rimbaud's poems 'L'Idole, Sonnet du Trou du Cul', 'Venus Anadyomène' and the 'Stupra' all, in distinctive ways, offer an articulation of the obscene. These poems, of which 'Venus Anadyomène' is perhaps the clearest example, desublimates desire and do so through their depiction of the body. Bataille's poems in *Douleur* replicate the process evident in Rimbaud's *œuvre* not only in the same way – in using the obscene to desublimates what discourse normally suppresses – but to the same ends: to privilege a material vision over and beyond an idealistic one. Obscenity in Bataille's poems operates more directly in his use of vulgar and explicitly obscene language that has the effect of situating poetry as a minor and wasteful (or excretory) byproduct of proper literary, philosophical or theological discourse. I suggest this is manifest in Bataille's poetry in the way words are considered as objects, their meanings questioned in the poem. The implication for Bataille's poetics is that the obscene materialism manifested on a linguistic level means a rejection of the normative, progressive spirit of enquiry literature assumes for itself. The reading of poems in this chapter continues the thematically oriented reading begun in Chapter 4 and, which, here explores the experience of the subject conditioned by eroticism.

The analysis here aims to consider two threads that have not been examined thus far in the argument and which this chapter seeks to tie together, specifically the relation between the poetics and writing practice. The first thread is the status of the subject in representation and the second is the position of the writer in relation to his writing. In a sense, then, the poems reflect the curtailed form of the writer's abandoned project. Because the body has been linked to the figure of the poet in Rimbaud's poems – and thus the auto-referential subject – primarily in *Une saison en enfer* (but also implicitly in poems such as 'Ophélie') any change in the depiction of the body means there are corresponding implications for subjectivity. To provide some context for the reading of Bataille's somewhat obscure and fragmented poems, I precede their reading by taking account of representational shifts in the depiction of the subject in Rimbaud's *œuvre*. I suggest there are three sequential movements in Rimbaud's poetic project, the first and second each reacting against the previous one and thus enabling the last shift: the first is representation of the body in a broadly Romantic context but derived from specifically Parnassian tropes and themes, in poems written from 1870 to 1871. The

¹ Bataille, OC IV, p. 15.

second phase situated around *L'Album Zutique*, written between 1871 and 1872, marks a shift away from this aesthetically idealised, representational paradigm to an explicit corporeality, focusing on grotesqueness and disfigurement as a parodic riposte, notably in 'Venus Anadyomène' and the provocative homosexual overtones of 'L'Idole'. The third phase is perhaps the most complex, in which the channels of representation are reversed so that where previously identity determined the body and thus subjective presence, for example in 'Ophélie' or 'Première soirée', in *Une saison en enfer* and 'Rêve' it is the body that is fragmentary and evoked through psychological terms which expose the subject as a construct sustained by the various networks of history and religion but most significantly, by non-mimetic language. The evocation of the body in this third phase moves beyond conventional, mimetic systems of representation that position the subject such that he is no longer *subject to* his body. That is, there is no trace of coherent physical form remaining: the substance of the subject is his experience, represented by the disarticulation of the body. The idea of subjectivity that takes account of alterity, from the date it is first appears as *Je est un autre* in May 1871, becomes central to Rimbaud's thought, reaching its highest pitch in *Une saison en enfer* in which subjectivity is decentred and dislocated by religion, history and metaphysics and is thus evoked and posited indirectly, that is, beyond the immediately corporeal.

This attenuation of negative representation means the subject is no longer depicted directly as such but is disclosed by their trace or the residual pressure of their being in their proximate environment, for example, in 'Nocturne vulgaire' and in 'Rêve'. This radical shift, I suggest, is taken as the starting point for the problem of subjectivity in Bataille's poetry, a problem that does not figure as largely in his other, prose writing such as *La Somme athéologique* but which nonetheless otherwise determines the thematic conditions of his poetry. The representation of the subject is thus the representation of the writer and it is this overarching metaphor that guides my reading. I follow the effacement of the subject at the limit of representation. Nancy's concept of exscription is useful here, as it allows a way to connect the corporeal depiction in the poems to writing. However, where Rimbaud reaches a dialectical end point of *Une saison en enfer* by positing the possibility of a reunited being as an answer to his split subject, the subject arguably never recovers from this ontological fission.² The poems are not merely an attempt to show the disarticulation of the subject, framed hermetically in the representational sphere but foreground the materiality of language.

The reading of Bataille's erotic poems focuses on the presence of subjectivity yet what I aim to show in my readings of the *poèmes érotiques* is their depiction of subjectivity arguably evolves beyond the subject. The questions I will attempt to answer then, first by looking at the evolution of the representation of subjectivity in Rimbaud's poems, is where

² '[...] et il me sera loisible de posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps', Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, p. 241.

the means of depiction alters, what happens to the subject and what trace, if any, remains?

There are three parts to this chapter: first is the establishment of the evolution of representation of the subject in Rimbaud's *œuvre*. Second, is the introduction of Nancy's article 'L'Excrit' which orientates the following close readings Bataille's poems from the *poèmes érotiques*. Exscription allows for experience to be articulated in terms that do not depend on mimesis, therefore Nancy privileges the act of writing itself as that which reveals experience. In the same sense that obscene words are exposed by reacting against the repressive pressure of language the erotic poems depict the metaphors that link eroticism and the act of writing. I suggest this is analogous to the exposure that takes place in exscription. In this light, the central theme of Bataille's erotic poems is that writing and eroticism reflect one another in the way they unveil or expose existence and the body respectively. The poems are read in pairs or small groups to highlight common features as well as to give a more coherent overview that charts the overall development or, perhaps more accurately, the undoing of the representation of the subject.

Romantic Phase

The depiction of the body in Rimbaud's poetry moves from a metaphorical to a literal depiction. Subsequently this literal, explicit depiction is displaced by a representational paradigm that no longer operates through overtly corporeal terms but rather on psychological terms in *Une saison en enfer* as well as intimated by an evocation of the body, in 'Rêve'. I trace these shifts in a chronological reading encompassing the span of Rimbaud's corpus, beginning with 'Première soirée' and 'Les Reparties de Nina' both written in August 1870 as examples of the first phase; 'Un Cœur sous un soutane' and 'Venus Anadyomène' also written in 1870 yet examples of the very different second phase; and, lastly, *Une saison en enfer*, written in 1873 and 'Rêve' as examples of the third phase. 'Rêve', written in 1875, holds the contested status of being Rimbaud's last known poem; some critics dismissing it as too obscure or fragmented to be considered a poem. In regard to this third phase, I briefly refer to 'Nocturne vulgaire', a poem from the *Illuminations*, written in 1874 to provide some continuity in the span between *Une saison en enfer* and 'Rêve'.

The body in Rimbaud's early poems is considered in typically Romantic fashion and greatly inflected by the tropes and concerns of the Parnassians, in association with external objects or sensations. Eroticism foregrounds the communication between subjectivities and subordinates references to the body to the register of the natural world through use of metaphor. In 'Première soirée', however, the simile is nonetheless relatively pedestrian:

– Je regardai, couleur de cire,
Un petit rayon buissonnier

Papillonner dans son sourire
Et sur son sein, – mouche au rosier.³

It is arguable from this stanza Rimbaud's interest in another style was largely based on his ability to subvert it. The hair or skin, for example are compared through similes to the natural world, in most instances. In 'Les Reparties de Nina', Nina is more conventionally depicted:

Ton goût de framboise et de fraise
O chair de fleur!
Riant au vent vif qui te baise
Comme un voleur,⁴

The second simile uses the flower to effect the comparison to Nina's skin. These similes suppress the presence of corporeal reality, instead creating a subterranean channel between internal, erotic sensation and the sublime immutability of the external, natural world. The second simile is notable perhaps for its banality and serves as an example of a style that would be criticised and essentially disavowed a year later in 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs'. This latter poem critiques the Parnassian tendency to mimetically articulate reality through a lexicon limited to flora.⁵ This tendency severely limits the ability of poets to express anything beyond a hermetic system of signifiers drawn from the natural world, creating a vision of reality that is idealised and banal. In refusing to move beyond these clichéd floral themes, the Parnassians fail to capture the ambivalent reality of the modern, industrialising world. Rimbaud's critique of the Parnassian obsession with the banal shorthand of beauty signified by flowers arguably acquires a much greater potency in the poem 'L'Idole' that marks the shift into the second phase of representation. The symbol of the flower as representative of beauty is subverted by and dovetails with the representation of the body, specifically, a certain part of the body.

The depiction of the body undergoes a radical shift in 'L'Idole', where the anus is subversively compared to a flower, mocking the Romantic tendency to treat the body as a part of the same discourse as part of the natural world. It is this latter tendency that is evident in Bataille's consideration of the body as the basis for his erotic poetry. I suggest the shift in Rimbaud's *œuvre*, from metaphorical to non-metaphorical representation correspondingly affects the depiction of the subject as the metaphorical representation is replaced by a non-metaphorical, explicit naming. 'L'Idole' is arguably at the median point between this transition from the first phase to the second. This process is even more evident in the section below in which I will show that the heart, which is typically represented as an abstraction,

³ Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, p. 62.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁵ The discussion on 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs' in Chapter 1 considers it as a precedent to Bataille's anti-idealism outlined in a strikingly similar register in 'Le Langage des fleurs'.

comes to be depicted as a physical organ. I conceptualise this evolution as a precedent to the obscene undressing and exposure of the words in the poem: a process that is evident in and is central to Bataille's poetry. Bataille's depiction of the body is difficult to differentiate from one poem to the next: in its explicit depiction of body parts, I argue it is precisely where the body is disassembled and parts are depicted in isolation that gives his poetry its obscene quality.

Corporeal Phase

Rimbaud's early prose work 'Un Cœur sous un soutane – intimités d'un séminariste', written in 1870, is an anti-clerical, ironic and cruel depiction of religious instruction as a discourse of indoctrination and power. Although the body is not strictly the theme of the poem, its depiction of faux mysticism is useful to note briefly, as it gives an insight into Rimbaud's consideration of mysticism in relation to its influence on poetry. However because this is a very early work, Rimbaud's consideration of mysticism in relation to poetic vision is far from being fully developed. My reading thus focuses on the depiction of the body. The church as an institution is portrayed as failing to uphold its own values; those who enter it, like the narrator Léonard, convinced of its sanctity are held up to ridicule for failing to see the reality. Léonard, in an interview with his superior is questioned about his poetry. The mention of the 'Vierge enceinte' in one of the lines provokes further interrogation on the grounds it explicitly acknowledges conception and thus, the truth of sexuality: 'La Vierge enceinte...! C'est la conception ça, jeune homme; c'est la conception'.⁶ This admission of worldly knowledge, beyond sanctioned doctrine, leads to suspicions falling on Léonard himself:

Il se tut... – Puis: Le jeune home J*** m'a fait un rapport où il constate chez vous un écartement des jambes de jour en jour plus notoire, dans votre tenue à l'étude [...] Approchez vous, à genoux, tout près de moi; je veux vous interroger avec douceur; répondez: vous écartez beaucoup vos jambes, à l'étude?⁷

The disdain Rimbaud holds for authority figures is clear, a disdain echoed more abstractedly in 'Le Cœur volé' and against a similar but distinct target of a bourgeois gentleman in 'Remembrances du vieillard idiot' from *L'Album Zutique*. The part Breton quotes (which includes the quotation below) perhaps to highlight this aspect of the text, features the object of Léonard's affection, Thimothina. An affection deepened by her mention of Lamartine in conversation, which spurs the narrator in his own poetic ambition.⁸ And when Léonard does

⁶ Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, p. 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸ Rimbaud's opinion of Lamartine, given in his letter of 15th May 1871 to Demy is neutral: Lamartine is perceptive but remains too formal: 'Lamartine est quelquefois voyant mais étranglé par la forme vieille.' Coincidentally, Lamartine is cited by Bataille as the exemplar of moribund poetry in the article 'De l'âge de pierre à Jacques Prévert'. Rimbaud, *Correspondance*, p. 86.

eventually summon the courage to recite his poetry to an audience, which includes his beloved, it does not go well:

Je rougis, je toussai, et je dis en chantant tendrement:

Dans sa retraite de coton,
Dort le zéphyr à douce haleine;
Dans son nid de soie et de laine,
Dort le zéphyr au gai mouton...

Toute l'assistance pouffa de rire: les messieurs se penchaient, l'un vers l'autre en faisant de grossiers calembours; mais ce qui était surtout effroyable, c'était l'air de la sacristaine, qui, avec l'œil au ciel faisait la mystique et souriait avec les dents affreuses!⁹

The woman is playing or acting the mystic; poetry should inspire mystic vision, as poetry itself is the result of such vision. The playing at mysticism reveals first, Léonard's poetry is such that it can only inspire sham mysticism and, second, the woman herself represented by the synecdoche of her teeth, could only ever play the mystic: real insight is as alien to her as it is to Léonard. The figure of the priest who takes advantage of seminarians is a theme familiar in Rimbaud's writings, in which sexuality is expressed as an abuse of power. Robb notes that: 'Like most of Rimbaud's satirical work, 'Un Cœur sous un soutane' occupies an ambiguous zone. It can be read as puerile farce, a political satire or as a sarcastic treatment of adolescent sexuality'.¹⁰ This ambiguity affects the representation of the body. Robb notes *cœur* at this time was slang for penis. In the same poem, Rimbaud makes the connection between the slang and the body part explicit:

J'ai fait ces vers-là hier [...] Puis, comme on vient m'enlever mes moindres papiers dans ma poche [...] j'ai cousu ces vers en bas de mon dernier vêtement, celui qui touche immédiatement à ma peau, et, pendant l'étude je tire, sous mes habits, ma poésie sur mon cœur, et je la presse longuement en rêvant...¹¹

The fact Léonard conceals his poetry in his underwear to fondle all day, leaves no doubt that the *cœur* in question is not the abstract ideal of poetic discourse but the euphemism for part of the anatomy that could not itself be named in poetry. An obscene poem, like 'L'Idole', disassembles the body into constituent parts rather than considering the body as a whole. Using the example of the heart, obscenity depends on the depiction of the body and not reference to the body as an abstract, symbolic part of poetic discourse.

In 'Venus Anadyomène' the body is desublimated to become an inverted, counter-figure to the positive, affirmative figure who typically stands for beauty and thus the truth of

⁹ *Ibid.*, *Œuvres*, p. 16.

¹⁰ Robb, p. 38.

¹¹ Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, p. 17.

mimetic representation. Rimbaud subverts the link between mimesis and truth by showing how these two ideals are as mutable as any individual body: there is no link between idealised beauty and the real body. The change in poetic style is also clear in that obscene discourse strips away the normal poetic language evident in more eroticised poetry where the body is depicted by association, usually with the natural world. ‘Venus Anadyomène’ is a realistic depiction of a putatively literal body, the tone of objective, quasi-scientific investigation the poet uses allows the body itself to become a presence, forming the basis of a new subjective identity, as if the woman under examination is a new sub-species. Her identity, by virtue of its physical imperfections, is separated from her classical name and becomes predicated by her body’s grotesque imperfections. Rimbaud’s Venus is *other* to her name and, joined to her body, is a rejection of her *je*: her historically-determined identity based on corporeal form.

Post-Corporeal Phase

Une saison en enfer is the site where subjectivity is examined by being taken apart. ‘Mauvais sang’ begins relatively concretely by anchoring the poet-subject to an historically defined although still vague place and time, identified primarily through his racial features: ‘J’ai des ancêtres gaulois l’œil bleu blanc, la cervelle étroite, et la maladresse dans la lutte’.¹² The physiognomy of the poet appears in isolation yet it determines his identity. His features, however, are considered as marks of shame: ‘Il m’est bien évident que j’ai toujours été race inférieure’.¹³ This inferiority complex arguably provides the psychological impetus for the dissolution of the subject as far as he is determined by genetic identity and historical context, a condition that reaches a climax:

Au matin j’avais le regard si perdu et la contenance si morte, que ceux que j’ai rencontrés *ne m’ont peut-être pas vu*.¹⁴

The subject is here so insubstantial that he can no longer be sure he exists as such for others. The question of recognition by others then is dismissed, leaving only the subject as the one in a position to construct a coherent self-image. The subject, however, conditioned as an indeterminate locus of a network of phylogenetic traces is therefore not autonomous and, subsequently remains condemned to be unknowable: ‘Connais-je encore la nature? me connais-je? – *Plus des mots*’.¹⁵ The poet’s epiphany is that as a subject he can neither express himself through language nor achieve sufficient objectivity to renew his identity beyond the

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 208.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

matrix of history.¹⁶ The subject, as poet, is fragmented through a series of inhabited personae. He must then discard poetry written as a subject, that is, subjectively; the implication is literature is always subordinate to the vagaries of subjectivity. Subjectivity, including the *autre*, internalised as part of the *je* is discarded: 'Puis j'expliquai mes sophismes magiques avec l'hallucination des mots!'¹⁷ Finally, mimetic representation is rejected in favour of reality:

Moi! moi qui me suis dit mage ou ange, dispensé de toute morale, je suis rendu au sol, avec un devoir à chercher, et la réalité rugueuse à étreindre!¹⁸

Une saison en enfer conveys the shifting and modulating forms of changes that affect the representation of the subject yet also articulates the problematic implications of such radical changes through a contradictory portrayal of subjectivity. The tension between the *Je* and the *autre* is not resolved, given the suggestion in the final lines that the truth of being is only accessible in a unified subject. This reading of *Une saison en enfer* aims to show first, the representation of the subject is subordinate to the larger difficulties that representation in language presents. The unstated rejection of mimesis implies that the representation of the subject is no longer structured around metaphysical morality or indeed, self-awareness. The subject is consigned to a depiction anchored in reality that posits the subject indirectly. It is this indirect, post-mimetic evocation of the subject I develop in the reading of 'Rêve'.

The lack of narrative in 'Rêve' is a feature common to most of the poems in the *Illuminations*, for example, the dense, complex writing of 'Nocturne vulgaire'.

Un soufflé ouvre les brèches operadiques dans les cloisons, – brouille le pivotement des toits rongés, – disperse les limites des foyers, – éclipse les croisées.¹⁹

'Nocturne vulgaire' is an example of the technique of a more objective poetry Rimbaud sought to move towards after the sacrifice of the poet-subject in *Une saison en enfer*, in which, I suggest, subjectivity is suppressed and signalled instead by phenomenological description. The dual system of representation consists of interior corporeality and external physical objectivity overlapping, both of which are attenuated in 'Rêve' however. In this sense 'Rêve' occupies its own space, neither entirely able to be categorised as the second phase, which displaces the former style in its anatomically detailed phallic/anal poems of *L'Album Zutique* nor the third phase, that of the fractured psychological portrait in *Une saison*

¹⁶ In terms of the narrative structure of *Une saison en enfer*, the subject-poet, like Dante and Virgil in one, must actualise infernal torment in order to transcend the redundant metaphysical system that corrupts concepts of the subject.

¹⁷ Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, p. 225.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

en enfer. In the barracks, it is the smells of the soldiers that are called out and overlap; all distinctive yet the same:

On a faim dans la chambrée
C'est vrai...

Émanations, explosions.
Un génie, Je suis la gruère
Lefebvre : Keller!
Le génie : Je suis le Brie!
Les soldats coupent sur leur pain: C'est la Vie!
Le génie : Je suis le roquefort
– Ça s'ra not' mort
– Je suis le gruère
Et le brie... etc...

VALSE

On nous a joints, Lefebvre et moi... etc... !

The simple, faux-naïve technique seems to show Rimbaud refuting the sophisticated techniques evident in 'Nocturne vulgaire'; further, he seems to be mocking his own formula of investigation into identity carried out to the limit of metaphor in *Une saison en enfer*. Breton's well-known reading of 'Rêve' from *L'Anthologie de l'humour noir* rests on the random character of the 'emanations' and 'explosions' in relation to the shouted names of cheeses.²⁰ It is, for Breton however, an example of objective chance: Rimbaud's 'dream' articulates the fusion between reality and poetry. Another reading, by Steve Murphy, links the exclamations to flatulence, blamed on the (distorted) brand names of respective cheeses. In 'Rêve', following Murphy's reading, it is the body, or more precisely, bodily functions, which very loosely form the basis of identity: identity, however, which is insubstantial and ephemeral, subsumed to the *appellations contrôlées* the soldiers shout out.²¹ In the last line, the *je* is joined with Lefebvre, *et moi*: the, implicitly homosexual, male group dynamic allowing the subject to be embraced in a mutual act of recognition rather than suffer abuse. Breton, in choosing both of these poems, necessarily ignores the role of the subject, preferring to accentuate the revolutionary and irreverent aspect of humour.

²⁰ Breton cites Rimbaud from *Une saison en enfer*: 'J'aimais les peintures idiotes, dessus de porte, décors, toiles de saltimbanques, enseignes, enluminures populaires; la littérature démodée, latin d'église, livres érotiques sans orthographe' et à l'entre tous admirable poème 'Rêve' de 1875 qui constitue le testament poétique et spirituel de Rimbaud.' Robb notes how Breton's high praise may be interpreted as a retort to Claudel's evangelical reaction to Rimbaud. In choosing this poem, rather than, say, one of the *Illuminations*, Breton is deliberately highlighting the base or populist characteristics of Rimbaud's poetry. Breton, OC II, p. 1017.

²¹ Neither the first collection of Rimbaud's writings by Gallimard in 1946, a second edition in 1954 nor Suzanne Bernard's 1960 Garnier publication include 'Rêve', not even within the context of his letter of the 14th October 1875 to Ernest Delahaye, in which it originally appeared.

Exscriptive Representation

This section considers the underlying link between Bataille's conception of writing as a means of erasing the author and the literal, textual trace of this paradigm in Bataille's poems. The reading of Nancy shows the connection of the primary paradigm of the writer in a destructive dynamic relative to his writing, one which is evident in a subordinate paradigm that prefigures the dynamic of subjectivities in the *poèmes érotiques*. In Bataille's poetry, it is expressed in the ontological struggle of the *ipse* subsuming the *je*; thematically expressed in the representation of burial as well as the expressed desire to erase his own writing. Ian James notes that, in an exscriptive mode, the body occupies an ambivalent space, able to span the conceptual gulf between sense and material presence:

[...] sense for Nancy, is in excess of any relation of signifier to signified; it is extralinguistic yet finite and embodied, but as such exists, or makes exist, only in the separation-touch of sense and impenetrable matter (conceived of as exteriority). The body then is that site of touch that makes sense but that, as materiality, is at the same time outside of all sense.²²

Rimbaud's soldiers in 'Rêve', I suggest, are exscribed in this way and thus cannot be represented as such within conventional representation. The reading of Bataille's poems below shows how the materiality of physical depiction in erotic communication, inscribes the body as the limit of the subject but at once exscribes the body as means to pursue Rimbaud's fragmented and finally intangible subject at the limits of representation.

Bataille's consideration of the body occupies a central role in his poetry, evident in the articulation of his vision in *L'Anus solaire*, which paradoxically presents a universe in corporeal terms yet does so in such a fragmentary way as to greatly diminish its own anthropomorphic foundation. The representation of subjectivity is less a concern in Bataille's prose, specifically *La Somme athéologique* but a major feature in his poetry. As discussed in Part II experience, as a phenomenon under investigation, inevitably inscribes itself onto the form of writing. *La Somme athéologique* is an example of such a process, as Nancy states, referring to ambiguity and meaning in general: 'L'équivoque est donc inévitable, elle est insurmontable. Elle n'est pas autre chose que l'équivoque du *sens* lui-même'.²³ Ambiguity is the means in which sense, or meaning, is communicated in that ambiguity is not an impediment to meaning but is incorporated into the operation of Bataille's writing. The ellipses, repetition, generic shifts and unexpected terminations that characterise large sections of *La Somme athéologique* foreground the failure of language in inner experience: communication therefore occurs in the gaps or slippage in the text, in the ellipsis or unfinished sentence. In a metaphorical sense, the text's instability is reflected in the portrayal

²² Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 149.

²³ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'L'Excrit', in *Une Pensée finie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990) p. 58.

of the subject's instability. I suggest in Bataille's poetry, this position is inverted and it is the body that comes to stand for subjectivity; a process which leads to a contagion between body and subject. Or in another way, the ambiguous and textual instability representative of experience is replaced by the direct and obscene depiction of the disarticulated body. The question in regard to poetry, then, is to what does it communicate over and beyond its verbal, literary mode of expression? In a letter of 30th August 1943 to Jean Lescure, Bataille summarises the ambivalence he sees within poetry:

Le langage [...] ne joue qu'un rôle trompeur (il inhibe autant qu'il étend la communication), la poésie un [rôle] peu plus réel, mais l'existence sans doute le plus âpre. C'est qu'à mes yeux la communication suit un chemin brisé. Il faut la destruction poétique du langage pour y parvenir (et non le langage du dictionnaire). Mais même il est nécessaire à la communication de supprimer d'abord, fût-ce par la mort, le second terme du dialogue. Ce qui me gêne [...] est que la poésie étant le tremplin de l'extase est en même temps l'obstacle sur sa voie.²⁴

Bataille here states poetry can go further than ordinary language in articulating experience and in delineating the subject. I suggest poetry does so by articulating the physicality of the body. Poetry is able – unlike ordinary language – to articulate its own weakness, that is, convey the destructive element that is critical to its own expression. In view of Bataille's negative view of language, poetry acts as the destroyer of language in order to overcome the inhibited meaning language engenders. It is then as much a struggle against poetic language, one in which the obscene plays a role in overcoming the repression inherent in language. The question of how the word can ever break free from language that is inhibited by cultural mediation is answered by Bataille who offers the flawed solution of poetry; poetry that can come closest to the immediacy of experience through the shock of the obscene. Obscene language militates against abstract thought and would therefore seem to be opposed to the ambiguity that poetry engenders. It is clear that eroticism destabilises the subject by exposing it to the presence of the other, in a traumatic encounter poised between recognition and non-recognition. Obscenity refuses the ambiguity of meaning because it makes its terms all too clear; eroticism however refers to experience, informed by Bataille's own lived experience and therefore proximate to what Nancy terms 'exscription'.

Exscription, as ffrench describes it in the article 'Sacrifice, Technique: Exscription' allows for mimesis to be displaced as the basis of representation.²⁵ As it relates to this discussion, exscription does not point to Bataille's lived experience in recognisably

²⁴ Bataille, *Lettres*, p. 204.

²⁵ A definition of exscription: 'The pulsation of exscription, of abuttal, displaces the dualism of mimesis, replaces distant projection and separation by proximity and contact. In exscription the word and the thing, abutting on one another, do not refer one to the other in the manner of a pointing.' ffrench, 'Sacrifice, Technique: Exscription', in *The Oxford Literary Review: Exposures – Critical Essays on Jean-Luc Nancy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 111-2.

biographical terms, or indeed, reality in any concrete form.²⁶ Writing and reality form a dynamic, which in broad terms, does not conceive of reality as a system of signifiers that signify but rather by positing reality as a presence: 'The one is exposed in the voicing of the other, such that one is not dealing with the duality of language and real but a form of relation, of overture.'²⁷ In Bataille's erotic poems then, the subject is isolated and is not ascribed an identity nor is the body determined by identity but, rather, it is Bataille as poet who depicts traces of the body in order to make subjectivity present through the ebb and flow of presence and absence. ffrench notes:

Signification poses a relation between the word as sign and the referent as thing, while the terms exscription and meaning [...] displace both of them and the concepts which pertain to them. What writing exscribes is not being as material substance or formed thing, but as *sens*, meaning as incomplete and therefore potentially 'coming (in)to being', that which Bataille, incidentally, sought to name with the terms incomplection (*inachèvement*) or wound (*blessure*).²⁸

ffrench highlights one of the salient features of Bataille's poems: the violence that indirectly circumscribes the depiction of the dismembered, butchered body; violence that accompanies nearly all of Bataille's depictions of the body. What is at stake for the subject here is that the body is no longer present in the subject, that is, the disarticulated body no longer discloses the subject. The disarticulated body is the site of absence or, in another sense, it is the trace of subjectivity.

The reading of the poems below shows that the subject is no longer portrayed as a coherent, monadic whole but is depicted through the evocation of the object so that the one implies the other. The subject no longer stands for being but, because the subject is longer represented as such, he stands for the nothingness that forms the essential yet invisible, intangible part of being. In 'Ô crâne', for example, from an isolated manuscript dated before the war, the void implied in subjectivity is metaphorically rendered in the image of a skull and furthermore juxtaposed with the anus, metaphorically standing for an emptying out of substance, the material presence of the subject:

Ô crâne anus de la nuit vide
ce qui meurt le ciel le souffle
le vent apporte l'absence à l'obscurité

Déserte un ciel fausse l'être
voix vide langue pesante de cercueils
l'être heurte l'être
la tête dérobe l'être

²⁶ 'Toutefois, ce 'dehors' n'est pas celui d'un référent auquel renverrait la signification (ainsi, la vie 'réelle' de Bataille, signifiée par les mots 'ma vie').' Nancy, p. 61.

²⁷ ffrench, p. 112.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

la maladie de l'être vomi un soleil noir de crachats.²⁹

The subject, dissolved in the generic reference to *l'être* is furthermore concealed by his own physical signifier 'la tête derobe l'être'. Subjectivity is evacuated in the last line, where the very centre of the individual, the conscious mind that stands for being, within the skull, is directly linked to the implied dissolution of the body in the last line.

In regard to Nancy's exscription, I argue that one major distinction is that the erotic poems conflate writing on eroticised experience with writing on poetry itself. This is clear from one of Bataille's most significant (untitled) poems, 'Je mets mon vit':

Je mets mon vit contre ta joue
le bout frôle ton oreille
lâche mes bourses lentement
ta langue est douce comme l'eau

ta langue est crue comme une bouchère
elle est rouge comme un gigot
sa pointe est un coucou criant
mon vit sanglote de salive

ton derrière est ma déesse
il s'ouvre comme ta bouche
je l'adore comme le ciel
je le vénère comme un feu

je bois dans ta déchirure
j'étale tes jambes nues
je les ouvre comme un livre
où je lis ce qui me tue.³⁰

The editor notes that this poem was found in the manuscripts of *L'Archangélique* (dating it to 1944) but is of such a markedly different tone to the other poems that he presents it apart.³¹ The erotic theme is arguably made obscene not only by the explicit vocabulary but the dynamic of association between the subject's body and the other's. The second verse furthermore, again associates the dynamic of the poem to butchery; the *bouchère* in the fourth line is complemented by the butcher's terminology *gigot* in the following line, both used as comparisons for the beloved's tongue. The third verse may well be considered more distinctly erotic, its language and stance different to the preceding verse and which enables the revelation in the final stanza. In itself, it is conventional in a series of similes that perform the familiar ruse of subverting high and low concepts. It moves from the mouth, in the second stanza, to the other pole of the body, the rectum and anus that are privileged over the mouth

²⁹ Bataille, OC IV, p. 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³¹ *L'Archangélique* is in the third volume of the *Œuvres complètes* whereas this poem is in the fourth. This is because the fourth volume groups posthumous writings.

or face and, furthermore, conflated with the mouth ‘ton derrière [...] s’ouvre comme ta bouche’. The final stanza however, is the most significant and explicitly links the idea of subjectivity to be dependent on the other: the body is metaphorically compared to the opening of a book that is inscribed by the truth of erotic experience: ‘j’étale tes jambes nues/ je les ouvre comme un livre/ où je lis ce qui me tue.’ The rhyme in the final line of ‘nues’ and ‘tue’, creates an association between the erotic and thanatonic: the merging of two opposites results in a kind of apocalyptic death, in the sense that death is revealed to be within the very activity that most affirms continuity and life. It is the concept that underwrites eroticism in order to make it fully meaningful; to consider life as objectively as possible by experiencing it at its very limit.

Nancy writes that this experience of reality is communicated by Bataille through interruption and disruption: the pleasure that is acceded to is lost at this same moment of accession. It is possible to read this poem as a succinct manifesto of the theory that Bataille would later fully develop in *L’Erotisme*. Erotic experience is necessarily marked by the acknowledgement of death. The majority of poems in *poèmes érotiques* as well as in *L’Archangélique* are investigations into the phenomenon of the limits up to which death informs and gives meaning to being. A consequence of this investigation is the dissolution of the coherent or discontinuous subject in an erotic experience in which the subject’s experience is destabilising, to the point where it seems deathly.³² This is because, as in the poem above, this destabilising experience is not represented but exposed, as Nancy writes: ‘La nudité de l’écriture est la nudité de l’existence. L’écriture est nue parce qu’elle ‘excite’, l’existence est nue parce qu’elle est ‘excrite’.’³³ Ironically, it is erotic poetry that uses the depiction of the body to give presence to the experience of writing:

[...] excrit le sens [...] elle montre que ce dont il s’agit, *la chose même*, la ‘vie’ de Bataille ou le ‘cri’, et pour finir l’existence de toute chose dont il ‘est question’ dans le texte (y compris, c’est le plus singulier, l’existence de l’écriture elle-même) est hors du texte, a lieu hors l’écriture.³⁴

It is clear that eroticism as it is approached in Bataille’s writings is inextricably linked to being. This is then the major point of distinction between eroticism and obscenity: while obscenity makes the body present in its materiality, eroticism equivocates the presence of the subject. Where obscenity substantiates an ontological position eroticism obscures this position. That is, eroticism, as an expression of a disarticulated, violently disassembled body,

³² Bernard Noël notes Bataille’s ontology is analogous to the conceptualisation of his poetry: that which does not die or become degraded is respectively neither truly human nor truly poetic; citing Bataille: ‘Qui ne ‘meurt’ pas de n’être qu’un homme ne sera jamais qu’un homme’. Bernard Noël, ‘Le Bien du mal’, in *L’Archangélique (et autres poèmes)*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), Noël, p. 9.

³³ Nancy, p. 63.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

obscures or effaces identity. Eroticism destabilises and effaces the coherence of the subject as it is given in Bataille's poetic discourse; Nancy's 'everything that is in question'. However, as Bataille notes in *L'Impossible*: 'La poésie n'est pas une connaissance de soi-même'.³⁵ The fundamental point these poems communicate is one analogous to the disarticulation of the body they depict: the disassembly and, ultimately, the effacement of the subject.

The Absent Body: 'Insignifiance' & 'Le Petit Jour'

The couple of poems I read here are grouped together to highlight the way in which absence is accounted for and how the sacrificial paradigm works through a process of division in the body and, by association, its represented aspect, the subject. These two poems, like 'Je mets mon vit', explicitly make the analogy, conditioned by excessive and wasteful energy, between eroticism and writing. The first poem presented in the *poèmes érotiques*, 'Insignifiance', contains a reference to the central part of the body in the third line, a link to the body, however, which is not literal. The body in this poem is subsumed by the *je* and is abstracted, resulting in the suspension of representation:

J'endors
l'aiguille
de mon cœur
je pleure
un mot
que j'ai perdu
j'ouvre
le bord
d'une larme
où l'aube
morte
se tait.³⁶

The subject is depicted visually along a vertical spinal column here, announced by the personal pronoun of the *Je* in the first line, yet in such a way as to form the basis from which everything is subtracted. The *Je* is not independent; it is determined by its verb in the same line. The poem, again in using this metaphor of the body, describes the attenuation of presence; furthermore, one reflected in its attenuated form. The denuded and exposed words that mostly have no connection, not even syntactical, to the following word posit the body as an absence rather than a presence. Absence is set out in the first line as sleep; sleep that acts as a dissimulation of death. The dissimulation is revealed in the penultimate line as death, which necessarily results in silence. However, the subject is lost to reason in the fifth and sixth lines: 'un mot/ que j'ai perdu': here it is the literal word that is lost. This is the major

³⁵ Bataille, OC III ('L'Orestie'), p. 221.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, OC IV, p. 28.

point in the reading of this poem, to show that the eroticism is of a morbid kind, perhaps typically Bataille in that sense, because there is no other to delineate the subject. The isolation of the subject here is analogous to the loss of meaning, explicitly expressed by the ‘word which I’ve lost’ in the poem. This poem functions as the mediation between the subject and death, resulting in silence that, arguably, represents the limit of perception itself: ‘où l’aube/ morte/ se tait’. If the poem is read in regard to Nancy’s exscription, it is the uncovering or exposing of reality itself that is exscribed; this poem achieves this in its nonsensical *non-savoir*, the constant interrupting of words and the foreclosing of the meaning they generate:

De l’une à l’autre passe la tension violente et légère de ce suspens du sens qui fait tout le ‘sens’; cette jouissance si absolue qu’elle n’accède à sa propre joie qu’en s’y perdant, en s’y renversant, et qu’elle se présente comme le cœur absent (l’absence qui bat comme un cœur) de la présence. C’est le cœur des choses qui est excrit.³⁷

Bataille’s poem demonstrates how, through the experience of writing, the same suspension of meaning in reality is depicted negatively by subtraction and, further, in such a way as to evoke its absence. In depicting absence as a heart, or more precisely, its absent presence in the sound of a heartbeat, Nancy invokes corporeal representation that bears the trace or presence of subjectivity and thus, of identity. Because these traces are insubstantial and ephemeral (French conceptualises writing as sensitive to the ‘pressure’ of the absent object it evokes) they ambivalently take account of absence as much as presence.³⁸ The second poem, ‘Le Petit jour’ similarly links being to writing and does so by positing a process of effacement; explicit in this poem rather than implicit in ‘Insignifiante’, for example. Here, it is the erasure of the step and of the word that paradoxically posit their presence:

J’efface
le pas
j’efface
le mot
l’espace
et le souffle
manquent.³⁹

The question of how to record experience that Nancy raises in ‘L’Excrit’ is here again considered by Bataille, perversely perhaps, suggesting it is writing that determines reality and not vice versa. The final two lines however, suggest, not death as such but a suspension of breath. Perhaps akin to Nancy’s heart beat, the paradoxical presence that discloses absence.

³⁷ Nancy, p. 63.

³⁸ ‘But what is called or born to presence there may not be ‘the thing’ as such, nor the object, but the existence of what is voiced as potentiality or pressure.’ French, p. 115.

³⁹ Bataille, OC IV, p. 28.

As exscription is a means to read this poem's treatment of recuperating absence as a presence visible through the attenuated body, the mechanism at play here is sacrifice. Sacrifice enables absence and presence to condition each other, whereby words that are sacrificed are doubled by the sacrificial act which removes them. That is, they remain as traces and connected not only thematically to the two poems here but to the very act of writing: the presence afforded by writing only serves to more steadily obscure and efface the author. If read with Rimbaud in mind, it may seem like an affirmation of the paradoxical bind of poetry: the only way for poetry to genuinely articulate the nature of poetry is to snuff it out; to sacrifice it, as Bataille conceptualised Rimbaud's silence. The remainder of this sacrifice then is absence. However, the point at which presence becomes absence, at which language becomes silence, is the moment of immediacy, that is, experience; for silence to articulate the end of poetry dialectically it must account for and expose this absence.

These two poems demonstrate the attenuation of the subject bound in a trajectory towards ultimate effacement. Eroticism acts as the transgressive, immediate experience that realises the divided subject in the encounter with the other. It is always absence poetry is moving towards, the point of loss or silence both in the erotic, transgressive movement that accompanies the subject but at once, through the sacrificial paradigm that conditions Bataille's poetry. It is analogous in this sense with the subject's traumatic recognition of death in eroticism. Recognition, non-recognition and blindness constitute the themes that are explored in the three short poems below.

Blind Experience: 'Du Soleil mort', 'La Foudre' & 'Le Glas'

The following poems in 'La Lessive' all share a more formal composition as well as a much more explicit sexual diction.

Du soleil mort illuminait l'ombre velue
d'une trainée de foutre amer
le chapeau de ta langue aux yeux de sang.⁴⁰

This dense poem is stylistically very similar to English-language modernist verse, particularly Imagist poetry.⁴¹ It is clear however one of the central features of Bataille's poetry is its resistance to techniques such as metaphor that create imagery. The formal aspect of the poem is evident in the near-symmetrical scansion of the first and third lines although Bataille,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴¹ Probably the best-known example of which is Ezra Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro', written in 1916. Another poem from 1913 is 'Alba': 'As cool as the pale wet leaves/ of lily-of-the-valley/ She lay beside me in the dawn'. I suggest the tenets of Imagism, such as a wide scope collapsed to a dense focus, physicality juxtaposed with abstraction, its flat yet materially textured description as well as a minimal use of verbs, closely resemble Bataille's poetic style. Ezra Pound, *Lustra*, in *Selected Poems 1908-1969* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 53.

presumably, would have been dismissive of such techniques as merely decorative apparatus that detracts from poetry's effective communication. The first line contains the interplay of (sun)light and shadow, ironically associated with the verb 'illuminate'. As discussed in the previous part of this chapter, paradoxes in Bataille's poetry evoke the impossible. The ironies here are that a dead sun, often depicted as a black sun in Bataille's writings, cannot provide any illumination nor can a shadow be illuminated. The 'fuzzy' or indeterminate shadow is revealed as a trail of 'bitter' semen that runs across an anonymous face from the tongue to the eyes. The sole identifier is 'your' in the third line. An unusual metaphor at the beginning of the third line, 'the hat (or 'top') of your tongue', vividly contrasts with the final image, 'the eyes of blood'. The 'eyes of blood' refers back to the 'dead sun' at the beginning, where both the sun and the eye are corrupted; they are depicted in a state of ruination: the sun no longer providing light and the eyes no longer seeing. They see only blood that is, the true corporeal bind of the universe once the sun's enlightening radiance has vanished.

'La Foudre' rejects the link between vision and perception and, therefore, arguably to knowledge. Furthermore, it links the body to excrement, that is, to death. Santi's reading of 'La Foudre' is the familiar collision and inversion of higher, intellectual parts of the body with the lower, corporeal parts through a form that highlights the negligible difference between them.

Le canon tonne dans le corps
et la foudre dans l'œil de bronze
a la nudité de l'ordure.⁴²

In this reading, the Bataillean lexicon serves the purpose of reducing the distance between high and low poles in the corporeal sphere. It is also arguable, however that the dense form and deliberately limited lexicon, highlight Bataille's vision of eroticism as internalised, that is without the external perception another subjectivity provides, as in the poem 'Gonflée comme une pine', for example. However, the 'bronze eye' suggests the body as unreal (a statue perhaps) in that the eye is no longer capable of seeing and of recognition, it ironically reveals the metaphor in the last line in which excrement is as much a signifier of being as vision or thought. Yet the eye cannot function: it cannot see, it is only a surface, upon which the lightening plays, a metaphor that accompanies the thunder within the body. Excrement is linked to the body and the eye, of bronze, is unable to draw the relation: a relation that is corporeal rather than intellectual. If read with Nancy in mind, the 'ordure' is qualified by 'nudity' which is nonsensical if taken literally but, poetically, it suggests the shock excrement conveys when it is seen; the fact it is to be disposed of as quickly as possible reveals the association of it being uncovered or naked. The use of *nudity* here reveals being cannot be

⁴² Bataille, OC IV, p. 31.

signified by its own engendered signifiers that is, by its own presence, rather it is defined by that which suggests its presence.⁴³ Thus Bataille's post-metaphysical vision of the subject, is certainly materialistic and especially bleak but it is *naked*: a clear-sighted vision of the body open to continuity and thus to death. The irony of this poem is that the eye as Cartesian node of self-awareness is essentially blind in terms of linking consciousness to the body. It is this blindness, in Bataille's scheme that paradoxically reveals that self-awareness and human consciousness are substantiated in excrement and in nothingness; the bronze eye can thus be read as a metaphor for the blind spot in enlightenment thought. The eye that does not metaphorically acknowledge the body as part of identity is surrounded by and interpenetrated by the thunder and lightning yet always remains unable to access this higher state of being.

Santi and Noël argue the form of the poem and the manner of its composition, in regard to 'Le Glas' specifically, reflect Bataille's struggle with poetry as a kind of experience that seeks to convey the tension within it. In this context, it is worthwhile highlighting the sonority of the two poems, highlighted by their titles, 'Lightening' (positing the sound of thunder) and 'Knell' (or 'The Toll'). The striking consonance in the first line of 'La Foudre' contrasts to the assonance in the second line, producing a resonant, aural dynamic that is perhaps even more developed in 'Le Glas', where the first and third consonant lines are interspersed by the assonant second and fourth lines:

Dans ma cloche voluptueuse
le bronze de la mort danse
le battant d'une pine sonne
un long branle libidineux.⁴⁴

This play of resonant sounds highlights the blindness conveyed by the poem's theme in the emphasis placed on the material presence of the words and their meanings, for example, the cannon and thunder in 'La Foudre'. 'Le Glas' deals more directly with corporeal rhythm, the striking of an implied bell in the first line conveys the overt physicality of the body, through the signifiers of the heartbeat-driven throb of the genitals and lascivious rhythm of masturbation, which, then refers back to the sound signalled by the knell in the first line: 'le battant d'une pine sonne'. The network of rhythms is characterised as a dance, in the second line: 'le bronze de la mort danse'. A characterisation that emphasises, first, the reliance of

⁴³ In *L'Erotisme*, Bataille traces the sensation of obscenity from nudity. Obscenity is less of a shock here, as I argue above but further evokes a subsidiary sensation, in an erotic context, of undermining the subject's certainty of identity based on the body. It is precisely the body, or its functions that signal the effects of decline: 'La nudité s'oppose à l'état fermé, c'est-à-dire à l'état d'existence discontinue. C'est un état de communication, qui révèle la quête d'une continuité possible de l'être au-delà du repli sur soi. Les corps s'ouvrent à la continuité par ces conduits secrets qui nous donnent le sentiment de l'obscénité. L'obscénité signifie le trouble qui dérange un état des corps conforme à la possession de soi, à la possession de l'individualité durable et affirmée.' *Ibid.*, OC X, p. 23.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, OC IV, p. 32.

Bataille's poetry on techniques that are not visual and, on a thematic level, the inextricable link between erotic, rhythmic activity and its umbilical connection to its antonym, death. 'Le Glas' is composed of three octosyllabic lines framing one line (the second) of seven syllables. This formal arrangement suggests classical French verse. Santi notes the four drafts of this poem in which the same group of words are arranged into every possible sequence, suggests a method otherwise not evident in Bataille's poetry; it does, however, seem to be a unique example.

[...] il ne semble pas que Bataille craigne de donner à sa poésie un caractère de méthode, d'en attendre une réelle efficacité, espérant sans doute par là dépasser poésie, aller par-delà la poésie pour mieux se porter vers elle et l'atteindre. Les multiples répétitions autour desquelles les poèmes se structurent nous indiquent comment la poésie ne diffère pas de l'expérience: poésie et expérience participent toutes deux d'un même mouvement où l'une relance sans cesse l'autre.⁴⁵

Santi (and Noël) suggest that writing, rewriting and revising the same poem is indicative of the literal trace of experience. I argue in Chapter 3 that where experience is the theme of Bataille's work it is not a literal process of writing over and over again but incompleteness and the curtailing of meaning, through a reflexive metatextual commentary, which most clearly defines his writing. Writing, especially literature and poetry can never affirmatively reflect the writer's experience because language always and already fails. That is, Bataille's concept of experience is not marked by a palimpsest but rather ellipsis, a wish for erasure and the failure to complete projects. Bataille also states that writing is a kind of willed surrender to the vicissitudes of chance. Experience, in the poems, is reflected in the limited lexicon, which itself communicates several themes (dominated by the solar and corporeal) in poems expressing the difficulty precisely of writing beyond that which is delineated by genre, of a poetry beyond poetry, as Santi notes above. Writing and poetry cannot move forwards in time, as implied by the five versions of the same poem but rather occupies the space between the sense of literature and the non-sense demanded by its rejection or destruction. The underlying, extended metaphor of eroticism that provides the subject matter for the majority of Bataille's poems shows that awareness of material reality and of the limits of the subject is realised foremost in the subject's exposure to death.

'Le Glas' depicts another variant of the theme; the subconscious relation between the libido and death and the constant tension between them as an internalisation of the reality of death, a reality that can never be avowed. Bataille's poems I argue attempt largely to make the connection visible and to articulate the libidinous relation of sexuality to the subject's finitude; the obscene fact that life at its most affirmative is directly foreshadowing, or is the foreplay to, its termination. However, Santi's argument in relation to the (definitive version of

⁴⁵ Santi, p. 70.

the) poem above does chime with Bataille's statement that writing is a compulsion. It does not take into account that obsessive writing, according to Bataille's own schematic, is indicative of a wasteful and potentially self-destructive impulse. This mode of writing would seem to imply an impulse that does not seem to be characterised by careful revision and redaction of the same, short poem.

Erotic Disarticulation: 'La Belle' & 'Gonflée comme une pine'

These two poems demonstrate a significant theme in Bataille's poetry, transposing a physical framework over a metaphysical one in order to invert the ontology of the subject, or a subject who is not constructed according to metaphysical categories but one who is destabilised at his core: at the physical level. This internalisation of the encounter with the unknown other is no less evident in the interplay of the *je* and *ipse*, the solar vision of obscenity in *L'Anus solaire* and the dynamic of the subject and the unknown in *La Somme athéologique* yet these poems directly depict the psychological or conceptual paradigms in explicitly corporeal terms. The first draft (with its own title – 'La Belle') shows an even greater tendency towards a corporeal naming of body parts:

Dans le sang de mon cœur
une pine
et dans la vulve
le jet
j'ouvre les jambes
à la langue de boeuf
de la fourrure⁴⁶

Regardless of whether Bataille is using the same slang as Rimbaud did, from the late nineteenth century, where *cœur* refers to the penis, it is nonetheless perhaps an intentional attempt to equate the two organs.⁴⁷ It does raise the question however, of the use of slang – legitimised by Breton's quoting of Rimbaud's statement in favour of populism – which in this poem describes the male genitals but not the female. Indeed, the anatomical term 'vulve' contrasts to the metaphor used to describe it in the last two lines. The question of slang, discussed briefly above, in relation to the childish, obscene diction in some of the poems of *Douleur* enables obscenity in poetry to achieve a certain effect; arguably one in which the reader can see the capacity of poetry to oppose or subvert the proper nouns of normal language. However, the points to emphasise in the reading of this poem is the shift in Bataille's investigation into subjectivity: where the first couple of poems show the subject

⁴⁶ The revised version discards the first four lines and introduces two new lines following on from the unchanged, original ones: 'Une longue pine crachait/ dans l'église de mon cœur'. Bataille, OC IV, p. 360.

⁴⁷ The origination of this slang is probably based on the phonic similarity to *queue*, itself another slang word. Etymologically *queue* derives from the Latinate, *coitus*.

estranged from language and thus attenuated to the point of non-being, the second group show an intense depiction of the eroticism as the foundation of corporeal subjectivity. The explicit corporeal depiction of the body in 'La Belle' and 'Gonflée comme une pine' is literally internalised through reference to the organs within the body. They develop, too, the link between erotic abandon as a prefiguration of death. This consideration of the physical as opposed to the metaphysical allows Bataille to explicitly associate the heart and the penis, for example, as organs that both fill with blood, at differing rhythms, on a specifically anatomical level. The poem progresses to its climax, between the legs of the lover, echoing that of 'Je mets mon vit'. The latter poem uses the body (the legs) as a metaphor of the pages of a book to construct the analogy of sex as an exposure to death as well as identifying eroticism as inextricable from the same wasteful, self-destructive impulse as writing. 'Je mets mon vit' depicts an eroticised body, whereas 'La Belle' is restricted to the body and the two discourses of popular slang and anatomical vocabulary. It is the latter diction contextualised in sexual descriptions that ironically heighten the obscenity. Although it is clear that the most common obscene words in popular discourse are slang words for bodily parts, medical/anatomical words arguably retain their obscene shock when used outside of scientific discourse.

The longest, untitled fragment in the *poèmes érotiques* assumes a female persona. It is therefore a good example of how the body's representation can construct an image of the subject. The subject here, in a relatively rare instance, remains coherent; the body is neither disarticulated nor is the subjective coherence implied by the self's body dissipated by the erotic, transgressive logic of the poem. Although the body is still depicted primarily through separated parts and often in obscene terminology, as well as imagery, this is perhaps one of the clearest instances of how the erotic poem is a study of being. This poem is a relatively straightforward record of the body, not used in this case to deconstruct identity but which conversely, shows how subjectivity is subordinated to the demands of eroticism.

Gonflée comme une pine ma langue
 Dans ta gorge d'amour rose.

Ma vulve est ma boucherie
 le sang rouge lavé de foutre
 le foutre nage dans le sang.

Dans mes bas mauves le parfum de pomme
 le panthéon de la bite majestueuse
 un cul de chienne ouvert
 à la sainteté de la rue.

L'amour chevelu de ma jambe
 un panthéon de foutre

Je dors
la bouche ouverte dans l'attente
d'une pine qui m'étrangle
d'un jet fade d'un jet gluant.

L'extase qui m'encule est le marbre
de la verge maculée de sang.

Pour me livrer aux vits
j'ai mis
ma robe à fendre l'âme.⁴⁸

The first two lines begin by confusing subjective identity in the comparison between a tongue and a penis. The dissimulation is continued in the second line where kissing, the tongue in the mouth, is used as an analogy to sexual intercourse. The next line explicitly compares the vulva to 'butchery'. The butchery is elaborated by the image of twin streams of fluid merging, the 'semen swimming in blood' and is of different sense to that which has been applied to these poems so far. The butchery is not of the poem itself but the merging of bodies in purely physical terms; the two fluids, although blended in the same act of dissolution, remain distinct and overlapping. Unlike in 'Le Trottoir de Danaïde' then, the ejaculation is not a signifier of death; Bataille seems to be suggesting it is the female rather than the male presence which is parodic, a parody that represents death rather than enacts the death of the subject. The following line introduces a note of detail, the smell of underwear; incongruous in its position, preceded and followed directly by lines that focus on the body. The following three lines are more psychologically inflected however, allowing for a rare perspective on the eroticised behaviour that is seen as obscene in the unsavoury image: 'un cul de chienne ouvert/ à la sainteté de la rue'. The next line, takes up the word 'pantheon' from the previous verse, suggesting the uninhibited sexuality characteristic of paganism, in opposition to the puritanism of monotheistic religions. The reference to pagan religion is striking perhaps for its casual use as an image in the poem rather than determining the dynamic of the subject with God or the absence of God. This is not to suggest paganism has the same meaning for Bataille as it does for Rimbaud, as a system to refute monotheism. Violence is rather a symptom of negative theology that is analogous to the violence Bataille endows to poetry within the matrix of language:

L'expérience *négative* est seule digne à mon sens de retenir l'attention, mais cette expérience est riche. Nous ne devons jamais oublier que la théologie positive se double d'une théologie *négative*, fondée sur l'expérience mystique.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Bataille, OC IV, p. 30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, OC X, p. 28.

The portrayal of the woman in the following verse depicts her as passive, either sleeping with an expectantly open mouth or dreaming of the kind of feverish sexual activity that has been described in the verses above. The obscene words that feature in the poems of *Douleur* have here been replaced by the obscene image, the merging of blood and semen. All these images construct a pitch of sexual ecstasy that is ultimately conditioned by violence suggested in the penultimate verse; the signifier of the defining element of eroticism according to Bataille. The last lines emphasise again the detached perspective of this poem: the woman self-reflexively delivers herself to her rendezvous, reductively signified by the male genitalia. This poem, relatively long, by Bataille's standards, constructs a portrait of a subject obsessed with and defined by eroticism, albeit through an erotic *rêverie*. The body in this poem is depicted in images that metaphorically depict the erotic condition of losing the self: the semen in the same current as blood represents the merging of two subjectivities. The subject here seems to be less an autonomous being than one defined by her psychological relation to the body and its functions; the subject's desire is the dissimulation of the desire for death, to experience a momentary exposure to death, that is death without dying. It is the depiction of the body here that illuminates the psychological condition of the subject, who is defined by their erotic/thanatic desire, in the corporeal metaphors of semen and blood. Bataille reiterates this aspect of indistinctness in the introduction to *L'Érotisme*:

La poésie mène au même point que chaque forme de l'érotisme, à l'indistinction, à la confusion des objets distincts. Elle nous mène à l'éternité, elle nous mène à la mort, et par la mort, à la continuité: la poésie est l'éternité. C'est la mer allée avec le soleil.⁵⁰

The process considered above in Rimbaud's poetry, in which the depiction of the body changes from abstract to literal, is evident in this poem. The merging of two fluids, representing two different bodies thus depicts the dissolution of both. The following poem largely discards the nuances considered above and reverts to a fairly conventional depiction of a subject that posits death as subject, in which the unknown other is not assimilated and incorporated in erotic slippage but embraced, thus, destroying the subject completely.

*Embracing Death: Coryphea*⁵¹

This poem is the second of the two poems in the *poèmes érotiques* to assume a female perspective. Unusually, it is written as a single, coherent speech, a soliloquy in an affected and mannered style, as if written for the stage.

⁵⁰ The last sentence is taken from Rimbaud's 'L'Éternité', written in 1872. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵¹ The title may refer to the figure of classical theatre who leads the chorus although the French derivation *coryphée* refers to the second highest echelon of dancer in ballet. The editor notes the spelling is Bataille's own.

Malheur! le sang coule de mes seins, mon gosier s'ouvre à la mort sur un mauvais roucoulement... Je donne ma vie aux sourires sournois du plaisir: il est l'odeur enivrante de l'argent. Laisse une dernière étreinte donner à tes reins la robe gluante de la mort.⁵²

The woman is declaring her death, signified by the blood that is flowing from her breasts. Her death is further signalled by her cry or deathly 'coo', a sound issuing from her throat. The image of an open throat, is a common feature in the poems. The inclusion of money however, is relatively unusual, implying the woman's life is abject in a socially determined sense, of being destitute and probably a prostitute. Although it is implied that money is in itself intoxicating, the woman's embrace, perhaps an indicative echo of the life she has led, is saved for the embrace of the 'sticky dress of death'. The affected style of this poem-fragment seems to suggest the Renaissance image of death and the maiden, one to which forms a motif later in *Les Larmes d'Eros*.⁵³ The confusion and indistinct merging of objects and the subject in a dynamic common to the *poèmes érotiques* is absent here; the confusion is rather as to who is speaking and whether the dying woman is actively accepting or passively resigned to death as her last embrace. This last poem explicitly states the connection between eroticism, here loosely conveyed by the image of blood flowing from her breasts as well as the word 'pleasure' and death. There is no intermediary of another person or body: it is death itself which assumes and erases the subject.

Conclusion

In Rimbaud's *œuvre* I charted a shift from conventional representation of the body from a coherent whole to a fragmented and abstracted depiction, focusing on the anatomical organ of the heart that is depicted, first, as an idealised abstraction for emotion, second a smutty euphemism for penis and, finally, depicted literally – as a piece of meat – and exposed in Bataille's representation of the disarticulated subject. The representation of the subject correspondingly undergoes several reconfigurations and is finally portrayed in almost purely abstract, psychological terms in *Une saison en enfer* and in 'Rêve'. These two instances foreshadow subjective depiction in Bataille's poems and the role of exscription. The accent of exscription lies on the writer: in the erotic poems Bataille conceptualises the identical drives that determine the writing author and the desiring subject. Thus writing and eroticism are co-terminal: that is, the writer and the subject share the same fate; their disintegration and effacement in the force of what they encounter; the force of their own erotic-thanatonic drives.

⁵² Bataille, OC IV, p. 33.

⁵³ *Les Larmes d'Eros* contains several reproductions of paintings by Hans Baldung Grien, active in the sixteenth century, who painted women being embraced by a skeleton. The woman is usually passive and surprised, being seduced and the scene often functions as an allegory of vanity and mortality.

The disarticulated body indicates the inherent instability of the subject in the slippage caused by eroticism and, ultimately, as the trace of the dissolved subject in this encounter with the other subject.

The depiction of the subject in representation is informed by Nancy's theory of exscription. Exscription may be described as the abstraction of depiction, in this sense exscription transfers the emphasis of mimesis from the thing being depicted – in this case the subject – to the terms being used to describe him. In other words, the presence of the subject or subject's body is situated outside descriptive language so that evocation, referral, implication and connotation substantiate a presence beyond their corporeal, real and *literal* presence in the poem or text. Exscription comes into play at a terminal point in Bataille's poetics, fixing the disintegration of subjective coherence – the subject pushed to the limit of the unknown experience in corporeal disarticulation – as a trace or as an absence. This tendency or poetic demand to push beyond conventional depiction of the subject is Bataille's response to and continuation of the developments affecting representation in Rimbaud's project.

These readings therefore highlight subjective representation being pushed to its limit, the experience of the limit at which corporeal being fractures and disintegrates. The body has been central to the idea of subjectivity in Bataille's thought, evident, since the early article 'Sacrifices'. The intimate, physical materiality of eroticism is closely associated with the unavowable condition of being. This bloody vision thus defines erotic behaviour in terms of violence and corporeal disarticulation:

Et de même que la nature obscène, devenue libre, de leurs organes lie plus passionnément l'un à l'autre les amants embrassés, de même l'horreur prochaine du cadavre et l'horreur présente du sang lient plus obscurément le *moi* qui meurt à un infini vide: et cet infini vide est projeté lui-même comme cadavre et comme sang.⁵⁴

Bataille's poetry attempts to verbalise the thought that nothingness is part of something. This nothingness is excessive and is represented in the poems by their non-poetic style: this non-style indeed articulates the ruin and desolation of poetry in this attempt to articulate being as dependent on the other to concretise its presence. In regard to Nancy's exscription, the poems can be read as not just pointing to the unknowable trauma of death but of considering sexuality as an extended metaphor that forms the basis of subjectivity, analogous to that of the author and their writing. The *poèmes érotiques* show the subject cannot recognise the other and, therefore certainly cannot verbalise the encounter, thus the trace of excess is written on their ruined, disarticulated body. Death represents the impossible, *part maudite*, in Bataille's thought. Bataille's poems articulate this sense of non-utility in that they are always set against

⁵⁴ Bataille, OC I, p. 93.

poetry; much like Rimbaud's visionary quest for novelty is usually interpreted as perpetual reaction and revolt, so do Bataille's poems seek the zero point of nothingness at the centre of experiential flux.

This exposure of experience and disarticulation of the body both lead to the deconstruction of subjectivity; a post-representational evocation based not in concrete reality but on the shared, eroticised dynamic of the subject and the other. Noël notes a point of difference between Bataille and Mallarmé, who, when the latter wrote his letter of April 1866 that includes the famous term 'glorieux mensonges' accepts that nothingness defines yet opposes being.

Aux 'glorieux mensonges' de Mallarmé s'oppose donc 'l'obscène vérité' de Bataille, et cette opposition détermine des choix évidemment opposés.⁵⁵

Mallarmé acknowledges this condition – of the subject defined by language – as an illusion. Mallarmé sees the glorious lies as a defence against nothingness, lies which include God and poetry. The lies that are validated and reinforced by language thus justify the illusion of existence on their own merits. Bataille however takes the opposite approach: his poems radically and diametrically invert the values Mallarmé posits, that is, Bataille sees the obscene as that which is veiled by Mallarmé's lies: where Mallarmé uses poetry to construct an illusion, Bataille's poems rip the veil in order to destroy one of the most pervasive of these illusions – poetry. The intentions of Bataille's poetics are to subvert lyrical, normative tropes of poetry and to privilege obscene diction and erotic images as a perversion of and reaction against normative poetic discourse. Obscenity then, as an effect of desublimation, is equivalent to truth: analogous to the erotic poems that function as the veil for the fact of mortality, predicated by the body. This contrast arguably reveals what is at stake in regard to the conceptualisation underlying Bataille's poetics. The poetics express a fragmented ontology that overlaps significantly with his thinking on eroticism, an overlap I suggest, which produces an articulation to recuperate nothingness as part of being.

Bataille's theory of eroticism, as a theory of experience, shows eroticism itself to be a repressed desire to embrace the thanatic. In the *poèmes érotiques* this is represented by depicting the subject turned inside out and, thus, in exposing the interior organs and fluids that blur the boundaries, the poem initiates the disintegration of the subject. Eroticism is a desublimation or revelation of the desired body as a corpse: desire is a disingenuous means to affirm the subject in order to better weaken and destroy him, through fusion, with the object. The desire is not for the eroticised object but for his own annihilation. Obscenity, in its opaque shock, uses words to negate representation and shut down communication; they are

⁵⁵ Noël, p. 13.

tears in the fabric of the poem through which is felt the experience of nothingness at the heart of being.

The argument in this chapter has sought to trace the disarticulation of the subject and, in doing so, emphasise that the problem of representation in the poetics is implicitly yet inseparably linked to the problem of subjectivity defined through non-discursive discourse, specifically experience. The movement towards the destruction of the stable subject in his (and her) erotic disarticulation and dissolution represents the epistemological pressure within the conceptual programme of experience. The disarticulation of the depiction of the subject in representation communicates the subject's affective condition; an affect founded on the violence inherent to the sacrificial paradigm of poetry. The subject in the poetics then is inextricably linked to the writer; they are one and the same, at least, on the plane of representation.

The focus in Chapter 6 moves away from the poems back towards the underlying representational principles that guide the poetics away from mimesis and from aesthetic valorisation. In regard to project, I take account of representation in light of the disarticulation of the subject; the subject, arguably, representative of idealist and morally determined systems of mimetic representation. In other words, once the subject is sacrificed – the subject who stands for the rational and stable guiding presence in literary and philosophical discourse – what is left to represent and what becomes of representation? Or, how can experience or being be depicted without the subject? I will aim to answer these questions in the next chapter by proposing that the sacrificial paradigm and – also the erotic paradigm of fusion – operate as evolving concepts to give the poetics an ontological foundation. The sacrificial principle works to produce meaning based on something irreducible or ineffable, specifically experience, but, then, how do the poetics value or take account of this nothingness? One possible solution in light of Rimbaud's precedent is silence. Once Bataille's poetics have determined and, in turn, informed his writing practice – they are subject to scrutiny, examination and contestation, precisely on this point of lending a value to nothingness and silence, to projects that are abandoned and to systems based on loss rather than gain. The historical timeline that framed the discussion in Chapter 1 is taken up again in Chapter 6. The key difference, however, in the debate after the war is the status of the poetics; they have a very low profile in Bataille's writings yet, poetry (as a subjective discourse) in relation to Surrealism's reconfiguration in face of the emergence of existentialism, must be accounted for politically (in a context no longer determined by Modernism but by the popularity of poets such as Prévert). Bataille and Sartre, according to perspective, become part of Surrealism's self-reflexive narrative or seek to stake out their positions – determined by poetry and in Bataille's case, the problem of rejecting philosophical meaning in favour of experiential loss of meaning – relative to each other. Bataille's response was to reappraise Surrealism by

affording a value to its epistemological potential, a value precisely beyond its production of works and politically determined valorisation of project.

Chapter 6

A Poetics of Sacrifice: The Problem and Politics of Representation

Ce que Rimbaud sacrifia ce n'est pas seulement la poésie objet mais le sujet poète... Mise à mort de l'auteur par son œuvre.¹

There are two broad problems that are examined in this chapter: imagery and its relationship to the metaphor of sacrifice, and, second, Bataille's poetics and their relationship to politics. The first problem specifically relates to representation and how a poetics that seeks to move beyond conventional and mimetic representational paradigms can operate through poetry. The second, more general problem, is given that Bataille's poetics are opposed to an ideological purpose in the form of an anti-project, how do his poetry and poetics appear in a political context? I suggest that, at this historical juncture, Bataille's poetics are fully formed and thus determine his thought in relation to Surrealism and existentialism; a two-way process whereby his poetics are exposed to reciprocal scrutiny. The presentation and defence of Bataille's ideas on poetry forms the basis of the debate in which Bataille is criticised by Sartre who insists upon a political urgency in literature and poetry.

This chapter concludes the thesis along two lines: first, by situating Bataille's subject as a product of the poetics and a subject, furthermore, who is given an ontological status through his evolution as key to the conceptual unfolding of experience in the poetics. Because the poetics have significantly highlighted the presence and visibility of poetry in Bataille's thought and writing, they become susceptible to external criticism and, given Bataille's milieu, must be politically justified. In other words, what does the subject who is destroyed in sacrificial poetry stand for? Second, the problematic status of sacrifice is accounted for in the poetics – through two image paradigms – as to how they function within poetry and the representational, ontological and political implications and consequences of a system that seeks meaning through the loss it creates; that is, in taking account of experience beyond discursive systems of meaning, how do the sacrificial and erotic poetics overcome the nothingness and detritus their own operations produce? In taking an overview of Bataille's poetics and considering the problem, which is explored thematically in chapters 4 and 5, of representation in poetry, I consider this problem through an analysis of Bataille's writing on the image and the role it plays in his poetry. I problematise Bataille's poetics in a different political context to that of Surrealism, discussed in Chapter 1, as a means to draw out implications of sacrifice (considered in Chapter 2) in regard to the precedent of Rimbaud's project. Bataille's poetic project in this chapter is considered largely on its own terms, that is, without an introductory reading of Rimbaud's poems in order to focus more clearly on the

¹ Bataille, OC V, pp. 454-5.

internal operations of imagery. I suggest the problems are implicitly linked because – while sacrifice becomes a political as well as a moral issue in light of the historical event of the Holocaust – a poetics that moves to substantiate its ontological basis has to account for its revolt and the status of sacrifice that it represents. The epigraph conveys the destructive force within Rimbaud's poetic project – a force I suggest that is also evident in Bataille's project – such that it consumes and ruins the author. In this chapter I argue metaphor informs imagery and that the overarching metaphor of Bataille's poetics is sacrifice: poetry as a sacrifice of words. Therefore if Bataille's poetic project may be considered as the thinking through of sacrifice, I explore the implications of this project in the way the metaphor of sacrifice is projected through the poetic image. The epigraph also hints at the dynamic tension within Bataille's poetics in which the guiding metaphor and principle of sacrifice affects or contaminates poetic praxis itself. That is, where Rimbaud's project enacted its own sacrifice – Rimbaud sacrificing himself – Bataille's project represents sacrifice in a variety of ways, one of them being, as I explore in this chapter, through imagery.

The chapter is structured so that brief sections on elements of poetry relevant to this discussion; language, image and representation precede the central discussion on the two image paradigms in the poetry. A simplified assessment of Bataille's poetics might be: to communicate an experience of the unknown beyond language. In order to do this, Bataille uses the sacrificial concept that determines the imagery in the poems. There are two image paradigms: the first conveys the violence of sacrifice of which the image must represent this violence, leading to the paradox of an image tasked to convey the ruin of imagery. The second image is of fusion, which is more subjectively grounded and – picking up from the discussion on eroticism in Chapter 5 – suspends the difference between subject and object and their violent disparity. Following this I briefly discuss another solution to the contradiction Bataille's project presents in the use of the copula of the verb as an expression of the subject. This strategy brings Bataille's project close to Breton's and can be seen as indicative of their general rapprochement after the war. The last part of the chapter deals with the poetics in a political context, first by briefly discussing Baudelaire's subversive Romanticism in *La Littérature et le mal* as a prelude to the final discussion of the status of poetry in terms of its social-political responsibility. On this question of poetry's status Bataille and Breton are, for the most part, opposed to Sartre and his view of poetry as an aspect of the subject's commitment to existential engagement. The lines of engagement are not as clear as they were in Chapter 1, however, as after the war Bataille admits there is a greater similarity between his own projects and Surrealism than he had hitherto realised. Furthermore, there is common ground between Bataille and Sartre, albeit on the negative acceptance that poetry is not *useful* as such, as well as agreement between Breton and Sartre in their thinking that one of the ways – perhaps the only way – to lay claim to literature is by mobilising it for political engagement.

It is, I argue, Rimbaud, who provides the scene of Bataille and Breton's contestation during the 1920s and '30s and it is Rimbaud, again, who informs Bataille's reconsideration of his position in regard to Surrealism, after the war, notably in the article from 1946 'À propos d'assoupissements' as well as in the articles 'La Volonté de l'impossible', (1945), 'De l'Existentialisme au primat de l'économie' (1947) and 'Le Bonheur, l'érotisme et la littérature' (1949).

Language

The problem Bataille sees with language is that it is an obstacle which prevents the writer bringing his projects to a complete form in an authentic expression. Dada, for example and arguably in a more embryonic sense, the Romantic poets, identified language as a tyrannical discourse that needed to be subverted if not overcome altogether. Dada responded nihilistically with nonsense and noise, the Romantics by employing demotic and idiomatic language as an attempt to counter the prevailing discourse as representative of the hierarchical power structure. Poetry is already a problematic response to articulating counter-cultural projects, because metaphor is grounded in classical notions of rhetoric. I suggest that the image is distinct from the metaphor but also that the image is itself to some extent generated by the metaphor. The image is then arguably the representation of metaphor and, in this sense Bataille's poetry generally resists imagery as a function of representation, tending towards a dynamic active conceptualisation of the subject through metaphor and the copula of the verb. Metaphor in Breton's case and metonym in Bataille's case are poetic techniques which arguably reveal their respective approaches to the problem of overcoming the inhibitions within language. They reveal perversion and desire as obscene in Bataille's case, where the suppression is obscene because metonymic parody reveals how 'high' and 'low' objects are the same and thus how such distinctions are meaningless. Bataille's poetic project militates against fixed meaning within poetic language as a means to push the limits of representation. At other times Bataille acknowledges poetry to be the means to access subjective experience through an *experience of language* – an experience that leads to the unknown – and, in relation to Orestes, to evoke the sacred by an exposure of the impossible within the subject in an act of revolt. The unifying motif of the poetics, however, is Bataille's conceptualisation of poetry as a sacrifice: words enter a poem to be destroyed and this destruction leaves a trace signalling that words communicate something beyond their textual signification.

Image

There are three parts to this discussion on the image: first, the definition of the image and, second, how his project is programmed in the linguistic sphere and, third, the implications of moving beyond this sphere. I draw upon Paul Ricœur's account of the Aristotelian function of

mimesis and the role of metaphor in enabling poetry to move beyond the limitation of mimesis. I also refer to Nancy and his discussion on the image and its meaning in a post-mimetic consideration. This ideology accounts for the linguistic effects of Bataille's image, in that it neither depicts the marvellous nor subscribes to Prévert-esque naturalism but rather undermines and exposes a reductive meaning of the word in poetry. The shift in Rimbaud's corpus from mimesis in Parnassian symbolism – of the kind found in 'Ophélie' to fragmentation in 'Rêve' and in *Une saison en enfer* – use the subject, the *Je*, through which to re-present these subjective transformations. Rimbaud's project develops as an enquiry into poetry itself; reacting against normative poetic discourse as a means to articulate a break from the past. The project is an attempt to establish new forms of poetry to articulate the changing, kaleidoscopic depiction of subjectivity.

Nancy gives an account of the image in very Bataillean terms in *Au fond des images* in which he considers the image as a manifestation or trace of the sacred. Nancy is concerned here with the status of representation in trying to elaborate a non-mimetic status for the image and, I suggest, it is this ruin of mimesis that is operating in Bataille's poetry. In this sense, its impact or effect is not aesthetic as such but rather psychological and emotional:

L'image s'offre à moi, mais elle s'offre comme image [...] C'est ainsi qu'une intimité s'expose à moi: exposée, mais *pour ce qu'elle est*, avec sa force resserrée, non relâchée réservée, non répandue. Le sacrifice opère une assumption, une *relève* du profane dans le sacré: l'image au contraire se donne dans une ouverture qui forme indissociablement sa présence et son écart.²

The ambivalent status of the image, then, as a visible mark of the invisible, operates primarily as a signal of this disturbance: it is an image because it is distinct. It thus also becomes a presence because of its distinction yet not a *real* presence:

Ni monde ni langage, on pourrait dire que l'image est "présence réelle" si l'on veut bien se souvenir de la valeur chrétienne de cette expression: la "présence réelle" n'est justement pas la présence ordinaire du réel dont il s'agit: ce n'est pas le dieu présent dans le monde comme se trouvant là. Cette présence est une intimité sacrée qu'un fragment de matière livre à l'absorption. Elle est présence réelle parce qu'elle est présence contagieuse, participante et participée, communicante et communiquée dans la distinction de son intimité.³

Yet if the image is beyond the material world of definite objects, as a sign visible to those only who are conscious of an interior sacred experience, how then can the image represent anything? Furthermore, what actually constitutes it? Nancy states that the image, the poetic image, is always unavoidably a material presence, formed in and by the matrix of language. The image only conveys an evocation of the sacred; an analogy, from religion, is the

² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Au fond des images* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), pp. 14-5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Eucharist in the Catholic mass that is the wine and wafer yet is transubstantiated into the blood and body of Christ. An image then, much like a sign, can be said to have two elements: the first, the concrete signifier of the object and, the second, its invisible signified element. Bataille's images, which although similarly composed of two terms, usually the subject and an object, in which the latter is often abstract (typically death or God) show how one of these elements contrives to ruin the image.⁴ Boldt-Irons (although referring primarily to fiction) notes that the violence inherent in representing experience not only destabilises the relation between signs but also within them:

[...] the mutilation and sacrifice effected by Bataille's imagery does not always operate *between* signs. It may also be directed from signifier to signified within the boundaries of a single sign. There it is a question of Bataille setting a destructive reverberation in motion, a slippage by which the normally static objects of signifier and signified are disturbed into a movement upsetting their discursive equilibrium. [...] The slipping word, the sign in reverberation, becomes therefore the site of a mutual antagonism, an antagonism between signifier and signified, which discursive language had silenced for the purposes and profit of project, and which Bataille sets off in a gesture of poetic violence.⁵

The conflict in Bataille's imagery, then, which I suggest is visible in the poems, not only disrupts the poem itself, it sets poetic violence against discursive language; poetry – at the level of its signifieds or referents chaotically disrupts communication – effacing the presence of the subject and, thus, the stability of the discursive project. Bataille's poetry relies on this violence: the sacrifice of the word either reveals its interior essence of silence or a plenitude of meanings. As a result of this inherent instability in Bataille's writing, writing that foregrounds a depiction of the subject, a tendency develops that is not necessarily in opposition to this sacrificial system but operates independently to it and thus discards representation which depends on signifieds and posits the subject directly.

Bataille's projects share a common feature or, at least a linguistically programmed solution to the problem of representation, in this instance with Breton's projects: a convergence upon the potential of the verb. That is, the copula of the verb *to be* as the active agent of poetic language. Bataille and Breton considered Rimbaud's project in terms that confirmed their own respective ideas: Bataille works Rimbaud's sustained revolt against poetic norms into the fabric of his poetry whereby his images seek to confuse normative consideration of poetry. Breton assumes Rimbaud's visionary tendency as proto-Surrealist and therefore adopts Rimbaud's alchemical project as one which can harness language to

⁴ For example: 'Tu es le vide et la cendre/ oiseau sans tête aux ailes battant la nuit/ l'univers est fait de ton peu d'espoir [...] ma douleur est la joie/ et la cendre le feu.' The subjective terms such as cinders or ash, the fantastical ones such as the headless bird are subsumed by abstractions such as emptiness or the night. The last line inverts normative perceptions by predicating the fire through the ashes. Bataille, OC III, p. 87.

⁵ Boldt-Irons, p. 97.

articulate not only transcendental impulses, such as in ‘Voyelles’ but, in the act of automatic writing, can function as the motor of such idealist change itself, free from the utilitarian constraints of ordinary language. In this sense Bataille and Breton converge on the verb as the determinant of poetry, in Bataille’s formulation: ‘le *copule* des termes’,⁶ in Breton’s more romantic language ‘Les mots font l’amour’.⁷ Bataille focuses on this frenzy itself to mime the extreme moment of experience, usually erotic, in which the subject grasps mortality as intrinsic to its condition of being. Bataille’s copulative formulation may be seen as the basis or at least sharing the same status as Nancy’s idea of *contagion*. Contagion is the effect of non-subjective and irrational energy that binds a group of individuals in a shared experience. Therefore the image in Bataille’s poetry, in the form of metaphor and copula moves beyond the linguistic sphere to depict the subject not just in terms of representation but in ontological terms as well. Bataille seeks to displace the mimetic status of the image as representation and move it towards contagion thus giving it an ontological status.

Representation

Ricœur’s analysis of metaphor in *La Métaphore vive* links it to mimesis, based on Aristotle’s poetics. Rimbaud’s own poetic system is an example of this, in which representational shifts towards abstraction and fragmentation enable the image to supersede mimesis. Aristotle’s definition of mimesis is the interpretation of myth through theatre, specifically tragedy. Mimesis is not an imitation of reality but a kind of rhetoric that exists in poetry. However, mimesis is not strictly rhetorical but rather a dynamic re-presentation and construction of myth and of narrative, through poetry. Ricœur’s linking of mimesis to metaphor therefore comes to affect the nature of metaphor. If metaphor is characterised purely in terms of language, it can be seen as an effect of its function that separates poetic language from normal language through its transgression of categories and shifting from one order to another. Comparisons are made between objects thus destroying natural or established taxonomical systems and suggesting new ones. Metaphor, or the image, therefore operates in two ways: first, by destroying natural or normative connotations in utilitarian language and, second, in relation to mimesis, metaphor not only functions as the signifier of formal, poetic language but as the inscription of poetry as an analogy and as an effect of mimetic re-presentation of myth. Ricœur notes:

Toute la stratégie du discours poétique se joue en ce point: elle vise à obtenir l’abolition de la référence par l’auto-destruction du sens des énoncés métaphoriques, auto-destruction rendue manifeste par une interprétation littérale impossible.⁸

⁶ *Ibid.*, *L’Anus solaire*, in OC I, p. 81.

⁷ Breton, OC I, p. 286.

⁸ Paul Ricœur, *La Métaphore vive* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1975), p. 289.

Rimbaud arguably makes the inherently destructive effects of metaphorical transformation into something more transcendently affirmative, certainly according to Breton. It is to Aristotle's definition of mimesis that Rimbaud is possibly making reference in his letter of 15th May 1871:

En Grèce, ai-je dit, vers et lyres *rhythment l'Action* [...] L'art éternel aurait ses fonctions, comme les poètes sont citoyens. La Poésie ne rythmera plus l'action; elle sera *en avant*.⁹

Poetry will, according to Rimbaud, not be merely descriptive, even if ornamented with metaphor and metonym but will take account of its own split nature, neither mimetic nor entirely divorced from myth but a transcendental synthesis of the two. As Ricœur notes, the function of metaphor is to articulate the underlying form of mimesis, moving from fundamental structures to their representation: 'La tension propre à la mimesis est double: d'une part, l'imitation est à la fois un tableau de l'humain et une composition originale, d'autre part, elle consiste en une restitution *et* un déplacement vers le haut'.¹⁰ This two-fold action is evident in the post-corporeal phase in Rimbaud's poetic project, one in which explicit and obscene depiction of the body in 'L'Idole' and the 'Stupra' is superseded by that in 'Rêve', as discussed in Chapter 5. Poetic language, in this post-corporeal stage, is no longer dependent on linguistic apparel such as metaphor or synecdoche in order to depict the subject or the theme.

Rimbaud at once ruins poetry and proves the ability of the poet to engage with literature by abandoning it. In pre-empting Sartre's critique, this does not demonstrate the worthlessness of poetry rather its ability to provide the same discursive power in communicating the sacred as para-religious or mystical discourse once did and, furthermore, maintaining its transgressive capacity. Rimbaud's centrality to Bataille's poetic project is evident in the more aesthetic aspect of poetry. Rimbaud's presence here can be gauged not in thematic concerns or even by using Rimbaud's project as one that leaps forwards into post-representational self-negation but by how Rimbaud's stance, the one that sacrifices his *œuvre* and thus destroys his own engagement with literature, is echoed conceptually throughout Bataille's poems down to the level of the image. In 'La Volonté de l'impossible', published in *Vrille* in 1945, Bataille writes the first draft of the section that would later become 'L'Orestie' in *La Haine de la poésie*:

Les figures poétiques tenant leur brillant d'une destruction du réel demeurent à la merci du néant, le doivent frôler, tirer de lui leur aspect louche et désirable: elles ont

⁹ Rimbaud, *Correspondance*, p. 68.

¹⁰ Ricœur, p. 57.

déjà de *l'inconnu* l'étrangeté, les yeux d'aveugle [...] La rigueur dissipant les figures poétiques, le désir est enfin *dans la nuit*.¹¹

This passage may be read as an assessment of the end of Rimbaud's poetry, in a sense, writing that tends to the end of literature. The quotation, if applied to a reading of the *poèmes érotiques* suggests that, instead of obscene diction, it is obscene imagery that serves to attenuate and disarticulate the subject at the limit of eroticised experience. Furthermore, the image communicates the poems' capacity to articulate this extreme point that at once affirms subjective identity yet simultaneously undermines it. In the article 'De l'Existentialisme au primat de l'économie', published in *Critique* in 1947, reviewing a book by Jean Wahl, Bataille reiterates some considerations on Rimbaud and Van Gogh as artists recognised for their unavowed subjectivity, unavowed as it does not take the place of the universal condition, it dissimulates it:

Mais ceux qui, à la condition de disparaître, expriment l'existence dans l'intensité ne sont pas détruits par une nécessité dont ils ont *conscience*. Ils n'atteignent eux-mêmes rien d'universel: seuls des commentaires et l'effet de leurs œuvres – et de leur vie – sur autrui font de leur particularité un universel. Mais une illusion est maintenue: dans la valeur prêtée à l'œuvre, on ne sait pas que l'intensité des sentiments, qui rend l'œuvre attirante, fonde aussi un universel, par la destruction de son auteur dont elle est la promesse; on sépare *Une Saison en enfer* du silence de Rimbaud: on perçoit mal, on ne discerne pas clairement dans le cri le silence déjà, dans le silence encore le cri.¹²

Bataille states here that Rimbaud's legacy is as much the impression of his legacy as it is the *œuvre* itself, moreover, the dialectical legacy is inextricable from the biographical one. It is Rimbaud's poems that disclose the silence indicative of pure subjectivity. The inexpressible, hidden cry of anguish is revealed in the paradoxical relationship between articulation and silence.

Bataille's Image

The reading of the image in Bataille's poems considers the problematic presence/absence of the image in Bataille's poetics: in poems generally based on textual, ideological and conceptual ideas and, not least, their intention to subvert normative channels of representation, what is the nature of the image? The reading here briefly takes account of Surrealism, which privileged images in the practice of automatic writing, as well as Bataille's reading of Proust whose writing he considers poetic not by its technique, style or linguistic programme to monumentalise a transient moment but how this practice inevitably leads to the failure and the collapse of the project. The prominence of imagery in Surrealism –

¹¹ Bataille, OC XI, p. 23.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 287-8.

notwithstanding, of course, that it is a painterly, photographic and filmic project – contrasts sharply with the avowed lack of normative poetic techniques in Bataille's poems. This is not to claim that there are no visual images or scenes in his poems but, rather, scenarios in which their value or position is conditional on the depiction of the subject, and/or the subjective moment of experience and/or the obscene word or the erotic scene. Images for Bataille, in general, are not generated by poetic technique of association or metaphor but by their emotional, affective charge – and shock (often through use of antonyms) – derived from one or more of the three scenarios above.

The second part considers the problem of how sacrifice may be represented in the image and whether or not the image is itself sacrificed as the sign of the word – of meaning – in the poems and what the broader implications of this are in regard to the poetics. I refer to Leslie Hill who writes on sacrifice as a kind of effect of critical thinking – to think Kojève's master-slave struggle as a scene that *simulates* or evokes the death of one or the other – but also in relation to the act of writing itself, specifically Bataille's situation in the 1940s where his increasing productivity as a writer conceals a kind of reflexive reaction against this very tendency to write:

What the chronology of Bataille's output reveals [...] is more a complex movement of integration and dispersion, interruption and return, continuation and displacement. Work on a whole range of heteroclite manuscripts was begun, abandoned, pursued, transformed, and fragmented. Bataille was evidently eager to publish his writing, but writing itself was clearly also no longer subject to an economy of work. Instead, writing in Bataille had become the site of a redoubled movement of sacrifice, sacrifice not as work or the production of objects, but as the abandonment of work, the sacrifice of sacrifice.¹³

Sacrifice here is presented in two spheres of thought: in an originary, anthropological form and, second, as a way of thinking beyond Hegelian dialectics, specifically through Kojève's interpretation. Therefore sacrifice is, respectively, a method of production (of sacred objects or beings) and a way to represent a power struggle; one of deferred violence. The *sacrifice of sacrifice* may then represent a kind of double-negative gesture that reverses or neutralises the flow of production and a disruption of the project of representation. Representation is therefore a simulation and a production of a fictive scene that evokes death.¹⁴ Hill suggests the sacrifice of sacrifice is a conceptual approach to allow literature to operate freely beyond the delimiting strictures of Hegelian philosophy yet this means that nothing remains to be seen, there is no trace of either the sacred object (or being) or of the project, the project as sign of the writer's struggle for recognition of meaning. Poetry, I suggest, is external or

¹³ Leslie Hill, *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the Limit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 71.

¹⁴ 'All relation to death partakes of the false, the fictitious, the fictional. Without any corresponding reality.' *Ibid.*, p. 68.

impervious to the scene Kojève presents – the struggle is not for recognition – but how to reconfigure meaning in poetry. The idea of a sacrifice of sacrifice is counter to the poetics in which the model is Rimbaud's sacrifice of poetry: the *Je est un autre*, is thus *other* as a *negation* of identity, waste or non-sense. Sacrifice of sacrifice, then, is not necessarily useful to approach either the structure of Bataille's writings – the formal instability and flux of *La Somme athéologique* indicate that philosophy and literature are not oppositional but, rather, that they inflect each other – or poetry, in which the concern is not how to represent sacrifice but ultimately how to depict its effect. In terms closer to Bataille's intent, poetry attempts to communicate an *affect* – in the shock of exposure to death – and the trace of this affect (emotional or physical) upon the subject. Poetry does not aim to evoke death but the unknown: poetry does not struggle against philosophy but against language. Sacrifice, in poetry, within the sphere of representation does not present an empty scene but rips a hole in the mimetic fabric: the *jouissance* of images Bataille refers to (in *L'Expérience intérieure*) breaks free from the oppressive, mediating weight of language to either parody or subvert poetic expression (in obscenity) or to debase it (in eroticism). Sacrifice functions within Bataille's writing as an irrational and non-discursive interruption of other modes of rational thought and discourse.

Poetry, for Bataille, as a sovereign discourse does therefore not follow a teleological, systematic trajectory of the kind of struggle Rimbaud engaged in because, as Rimbaud's project catastrophically demonstrated, this ended in failure. The event of poetry's failure and Rimbaud's sacrifice is that – following this terminal event – poetry is no longer able to present a coherently meaningful, mimetically-determined programme of representation. Rather poetry is bound to the negation of project and, in this sense on the linguistic level, it is a formless stain on the page that reacts against, if not denies outright any fixed meaning. Santi acknowledges that this makes it difficult to define a Bataillean image: '[...] ce n'est pas tant la pertinence de la description de l'image poétique proposée par Breton qu'il faudrait discuter, mais que c'est avant tout la pertinence même de proposer une telle description qui soit discutable.'¹⁵ In the Surrealist manifestos, Breton clearly sets out definitions and even a genealogy of his poetic structures. Santi notes that because Breton name-checks and appropriates certain lines from those he considered Surrealism's precedents in the first manifesto, and given that automatic writing was based on the premise of generating images, this seeming act of ownership may have repelled Bataille and pushed him to deny the power Surrealism attributed to images.

Et ceci doit être étendu à l'ensemble d'une réflexion sur la poésie dont le peu de considération qu'elle porte aux modalités de l'écriture poétique n'est pas du

¹⁵ Santi, p. 119.

simplement à leurs incessantes variations mais relève également, et peut-être plus profondément, d'une nécessité de savoir ne pas s'en inquiéter outre mesure afin d'extraire autant qu'il se peut l'acte poétique du monde du projet et d'établir ainsi les considérations les plus favorables à l'éventualité d'un dé-chaînement.¹⁶

Images, circulated as a kind of commodity or proof, do not have the same value in Bataille's poetic project as they do in Surrealism. They may therefore be seen as incidental: they do not form the basis of counter-cultural common identity nor as the results from the practice of automatic writing, which in seeming contradiction, do not rest on the author's name but the authenticity and novel strangeness of the image. The image in automatic writing is therefore always subordinate to the modality of its production.¹⁷ In Bataille's first formulations on poetry in relation to Proust, in *L'Expérience intérieure* he writes how the image is an imperfect record of memory:

A la vérité, les réminiscences sont si proches de la poésie que l'auteur lui-même les lie à leur expression, qu'il n'aurait pu ne pas leur donner qu'en principe. On rapprochera le domaine des images de celui de l'expérience intérieure... l'expérience met tout en cause, en quoi elle atteint des divers objets le moins irréel (et s'il paraît pourtant si peu réel c'est qu'elle ne l'atteint pas en dehors du sujet avec lequel elle l'unit).¹⁸

Bataille's writings in *L'Expérience intérieure* indeed give little indication of his thinking on poetry having been mediated by Surrealism's automatist practices. It is rather experience that affects memory and the organic generation of its expression in the poetic image. It is memory and experience that must form the basis of the image, without which the image seems inauthentic or unreal. Bataille's conception of the poetic image therefore has two aspects, the first, hinted at above is that images are always retrospective and furthermore, retroactive. In Bataille's view, philosophical or theological dogmatism, which seeks to delineate, explain or otherwise nominate the unknown is an attempt that will always fail because describing the experience of the unknown irredeemably alters that same experience. The second approach shows that images are subservient to the formulation of poetry: that is, poetry leads from the known to the unknown; the image, in order to be successful in this context, must show this.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Roger Caillois, after having left the Surrealist group, wrote of his distrust of automatic writing and how it bankrupts the poetic image: '[...] la croyance à l'inspiration absolue et incontrôlée, sous forme de l'écriture automatique; l'image que j'ai désignée ensuite indifféremment comme 'nulle' ou 'infinie' et qui me semblait avoir comme caractère principal d'être à la lettre 'in-imaginable'; enfin le refus systématique de la cohérence et de l'émotion, en somme, de toute transparence ou évidence, même sensible, – ostracisme qui refusait jusqu'à la sensation naïve'. Breton's most successful poetry, arguably, however, did not come out of the experiments of automatic writing. The adjective 'automatic', indeed, strongly implies that the automatic image is necessarily not one determined by emotional or spiritual conditions. Roger Caillois, *Approches de la poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 10.

¹⁸ Bataille, OC V, p. 170.

The authentic poetic image or metaphor shows that this is impossible and is thus already a ruin:

L'image poétique, si elle mène du connu à l'inconnu, s'attache cependant au connu qui lui donne corps, et bien qu'elle le déchire et déchire la vie dans ce déchirement, se maintient à lui. D'où il s'ensuit que la poésie est presque en entier poésie déchue, jouissance des images il est vrai retirées du domaine servile (poétiques comme nobles, solennelles) mais refusées à la ruine intérieure qu'est l'accès à l'inconnu. Même les images profondément ruinées sont domaine de possession. Il est malheureux de ne plus posséder que des ruines, mais c'est n'est pas ne plus rien posséder, c'est retenir d'une main ce que l'autre donne.¹⁹

The image is torn between a positive depiction of the first element that the second element must then subvert or destroy; the image must function as the trace of its own departure into non-sense, as the textual imprint of the unknown. The image itself, bound as it is to the known – the poem – cannot therefore illuminate or access the interior. In this case, Bataille seems to see the interior as analogous to the unknown.

Breton's project of automatic writing is thus flawed, because poetry, no more than any other form of writing or artistic enquiry, is unable to truly represent the processes of the psyche. Bataille, however, does not mention the vaunted influence of psychoanalysis upon Surrealism. Breton too, arguably, makes more of Surrealism as a purely poetic project (to a greater extent than either a painterly or photographic one) rather than as an artistic response to medical science, at least certainly after the experiments of automatic writing.²⁰ In the same part of *L'Expérience intérieure* Bataille explicitly refers to one of Breton's statements made in the *Second manifeste* in which Bataille identifies a shared aim, although he criticises the means by which to bring it about:

Le sens d'un au-delà est loin d'échapper à ceux-là mêmes qui désignent la poésie comme une 'terre de trésors'. Breton [...] écrivit: 'Il est clair que le surréalisme n'est pas intéressé à tenir grand compte de tout ce qui se produit à côté de lui sous prétexte d'art, voire anti-art, de philosophie ou d'antiphilosophie, en un mot de tout ce qui n'a pas pour fin l'anéantissement de l'être en un brillant intérieur et aveugle, qui ne soit pas plus l'âme de la glace que celle du feu.' 'L'anéantissement' avait dès les premiers mots 'belle' allure, et il n'était que faire d'en parler, faute de contester les moyens apportés à cette fin.²¹

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Bataille's first and most involved engagement with psychoanalysis, as an analysand, proved no less fruitful in producing *Histoire de l'œil*. However, as Hill notes, this encounter produced two distinct elements, the *récit* and the short epilogue 'Coincidences' that questions the meaning of the preceding *récit*. Hill suggests that writing, no more than reading, can offer a way out of the impasse in which meaning is at once given and then undermined. The paradigm of two texts, in which the latter repositions the former, is possibly derived from the *Chants de Maldoror* and *Poésies*. 'On one level Bataille probably intended this list of coincidences as a belated riposte to the reductive methods of analytic interpretation. But resistance to analysis, as Bataille, would have been aware, is not an answer to analysis; what it produces is just another set of symptoms demanding further interpretation.' Hill, p. 30.

²¹ Bataille, OC V, p. 171.

Rimbaud's departure from Europe as analogous to his termination, or sacrifice, of poetry, reinforces Bataille's view that writing after Rimbaud will always be determined by the limitation of writing. Although Breton is apparently right that literature should move beyond conventional depiction of a singular subject, literature itself as the means to represent this destruction must be disavowed: poetry as a means of self-enquiry is flawed; it is only in the destruction of the subject that being can be vividly silhouetted. The key difference between Bataille's writing and Breton's is the value of metaphor and image: Bataille's obsession with sacrifice may be transcribed to mean, within the poetics, the sacrifice of metaphor. The sacrifice of the metaphor-image is the rejection of the assumption that literature and philosophy not only confer knowledge but that language itself is not a transparent conduit of this supposed knowledge but a material web that tends to condition everything to cultural and ideological ends. Language aims to create the illusion of its invisibility and, in this dynamic, Bataille's poetry works against language and through the sacrifice of words – by emphasising their materiality – points to the possibility of meaning outside of language. Hill notes that sacrifice as an economics is inseparable from sacrifice in poetry (as a poetics) and all that poetry can sacrifice, ultimately, is its own register of meaning; nothing means anything and anything can mean nothing:

The scene of sacrifice staged by Bataille [...] is necessarily a representation, it is a representation of a scene that cannot in fact take place except as a simulacrum of itself. The economics of sacrifice are therefore inseparable from a poetics of sacrifice. Bataille concedes of course that once it is finally subordinate to the economy of appropriation already operating within it, sacrifice literalizes representation by turning it into an action. But originally [...] according to the archaeological principle of Bataille's thinking, that representation is not an action, any more than the – workless – work of the literary intellectual. The scene of sacrifice presents a scene, but the scene is an absent event, and the representation no more than an empty frame or, says Bataille, a theatrical curtain opening on to 'un au-delà de ce monde-ci, où le jour qui s'élevé transfigure toutes choses et en détruit le sens borné.'²²

Hill, here, argues that sacrifice is actually not only a representation of action but the literal manifestation of action but, then, that this action does not belong in Bataille's thought or project. The difficulty for Bataille in regard to the problem of representation is not to try and somehow justify its existence or potential through action – Bataille, like Sartre (but arguably not like Breton) realises their incompatibility – but to dispense with the linguistic framework of representation as far as possible.

In the 'La Notion de dépense', first published in *La Critique sociale* in 1933, Bataille explicitly links poetic expression to sacrificial non-production: 'Le terme de poésie [...] peut être considéré comme synonyme de dépense: il signifie, en effet, de la façon la plus précise,

²² Hill, pp. 68-9.

création au moyen de la perte. Son sens est donc voisin de celui de *sacrifice*.²³ This notion of poetic language as one that sacrifices its linguistic expression in order to communicate an affect is developed throughout *L'Expérience intérieure* in which the primary consideration is to represent the experience or object on its own terms; thus, not the articulation of the wind, in Bataille's example, but the wind itself. In the article, he then proceeds to distinguish between two modes of poetry – a distinction he would later elaborate upon in *L'Impossible* and which is discussed in Chapter 2: the first kind is the normal, conventional and vulgar type that is dominated by an economy of symbolic expenditure (the kind that provokes the *hatred of poetry*) and the second, much rarer, kind which is negatively defined by not belonging to this regime of symbolic expenditure. Hill defines this 'minor' form of poetry as 'post-symbolic', a discourse in which normative poetic symbols and tropes are negated:

What this second, non-symbolic or post-symbolic mode of sacrifice offers its enthusiasts [...] in the form of a gift, is [...] disappointment, wretchedness, despair. Elusive, insubstantial shadows are all there is. There is no sacrificial object, and no culturally valued product. The protagonist who participates in this strangely ritualistic absence of ritual receives no reward. It is as though for this second form of sacrifice to take place what has to be sacrificed is the symbolic economy of sacrifice itself. Poetry, then, in the privative, restricted sense that Bataille gives it here, is a kind of sacrifice of sacrifice [...] an absence of category: a mode of sacrifice that is also an absence or suspension of sacrifice. And which, as far as poetry goes, is no more than a memory, a shadow, a remainder or trace.²⁴

In this light, arguably following Derrida's reading, poetry, with no symbolic power therefore neither has any ideological weight. Poetry is the discourse that negates itself by sacrificing words within its matrix: words, which paradoxically must yet still give meaning to this evacuation of symbolic discourse.²⁵ This is why Rimbaud's gesture of sacrificing his poetry carries such significance for Bataille as silence is the objectified evidence of this termination, the remaining trace of Rimbaud's negation of poetry.

The sacrifice of meaning that leads, according to Hill, to a suspension of the economy of sacrifice is, I suggest, a sacrifice of metaphor, of the image and it is this sacrifice – in which poetry sacrifices words and thus its own status – condemning it to remain the echo or shadow of the major discourses in Bataille's projects. In light of this sacrifice, Bataille's more general conception of poetry and the image may be seen as an articulation of the instability of the act of sacrifice as well as the nothingness beyond the sensation of the sacred given by sacrifice, thus turning poetry towards the unknown and evoking its own collapse:

²³ Bataille, OC I, p. 307.

²⁴ Hill, p. 46.

²⁵ '[La poésie] nie, et elle détruit la proche réalité, parce qu'elle y voit l'écran qui nous dissimule la figure véritable du monde. La poésie n'en admet pas moins l'extériorité *par rapport au moi* des ustensiles ou des murs.' Bataille, OC IX, p. 225.

Que des mots comme cheval ou beurre entrent dans un poème, c'est détachés des soucis intéressés. Pour autant de fois que ces mots: beurre, cheval, sont appliqués à des fins pratiques, l'usage qu'en fait la poésie libère la vie humaine de ces fins. Quand la fille de ferme dit le beurre ou le garçon d'écurie le cheval, ils connaissent le beurre, le cheval. La connaissance qu'ils en ont épuise même en un sens l'idée de connaître, car ils peuvent à volonté faire du beurre, amener un cheval. La fabrication, l'élevage, l'emploi parachèvent et même fondant la connaissance. [...] Mais au contraire *la poésie mène du connu à l'inconnu*. Elle peut ce que ne peuvent le garçon ou la fille, introduire un cheval de beurre. Elle place, de cette façon, devant l'inconnaissable.²⁶

Bataille shows how poetry reconfigures the sense of words to create an evocation of the non-sensical or of the unknown. Poetry must either surrender to its irrelevance or commit unreservedly to its own destruction; either way it must confront the real question of destruction and absence on the unreal plane of language. This absence reveals itself dialectically as silence. In this sense, I suggest, one of the central features of Bataille's poetry is this paradoxical articulation of silence by reducing poetry to its bare minimum; that is, resisting any poetic features that arguably commonly define formal ideas of poetry. These anti-poetic strategies are an attempt ultimately to posit silence as a means of perverting poetry:

Pour le couteau du boucher... le cheval certes est mort... mais il est plus et moins que cela pour le poème, pour lequel il n'est qu'*absent*. Absence dans laquelle 'rien n'est mort, rien ne pouvant l'être'. C'est vouloir mourir et ne pas le pouvoir qu'obéit le mouvement de fuite éperdue de Rimbaud. Mouvement que fit l'*échec* de la poésie [...] C'est à un mouvement analogue vers une mort impossible qu'obéit le cheval... le portant vers l'*absence*. C'est au bord de cette absence que se sont tenus les quelques poèmes qu'a écrits Bataille.²⁷

Surya extends Bataille's example to conflate the death of the horse (the sacrificed object) and the dialectical death of the word in the poem.²⁸ That is, their metaphorical death posits a real *absence*. This absence of logic and meaning is the symptom of Bataille's articulation of the silence Rimbaud created from words, in his alchemical transformation. Bataille's poetry seeks to expose the unknown that exists within it by expressing the silence that Rimbaud's project uncovered. Bataille's poems negotiate the tension between the known and the unknown, although their denuded and diminished style seeks to move as far away from granting images and metaphors a meaning as possible; instead they house the ruin of meaning. They mark the final stages of words, as terminal, and no longer able to render meaning; they stand only as ghosts of the sacrifice Rimbaud committed.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²⁷ Surya, pp. 400-1.

²⁸ Monnerot expresses a similar conception of words and the motivation of poets: 'Les mots sont des esclaves vicieux, le premier venu les débauche. Tout se passe comme si la pensée était continuellement coulée à pic par sa propre représentation'. Jules Monnerot, *La Poésie moderne et le sacré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 22.

Bataille's Image – Suspended

Moving on from the sacrificial paradigm that dominates Bataille's thinking during the war, I look at the modifications and deviations from this paradigm based on Rimbaud's poem 'L'Eternité' cited in *L'Erotisme*, *L'Histoire de l'érotisme*, 'De l'âge de pierre à Jacques Prévert' as well as the consideration of Baudelairean Romanticism in *La Littérature et le mal*. In *L'Erotisme* the image Bataille quotes from Rimbaud implies that there is a second, distinct idea of the image, which emerges, not necessarily in the poems themselves but in his poetics as a response to problems of representing the effect of sacrifice.²⁹

Sacrifice accounts for the central presence of the body in Bataille's poetry. Sacrifice, as a metaphor, is inscribed on a thematic level onto the human body or sacred thing, from which its life is made sacred by its destruction. One feature of sacrifice, hitherto not addressed, is its temporal aspect. It is not until 'De l'âge de Pierre à Jacques Prévert' that Bataille categorises poetry and sacrifice together through their temporal presence: where poetry is a cry that gives to see, sacrifice gives to see that in the object which arouses horror and opens out to the sacred. Suzanne Guerlac describes the notion of poetry that arises from the connection of sacrifice and poetry through time, highlighting the difference between Bataille and Sartre may rest on the temporal disjunction between the 'instant' and the 'project' respectively:

In the 1940's, Bataille elaborated his notion of poetry of the event (*poésie de l'événement*) or of the instant in response to the ideological pressures of Sartrean engagement. The instant is posed in response to the thinking of project. It refers us to the opening paragraph of his essay *L'Erotisme*. The instant involves an experience of immediacy, or 'continuity', that Bataille also calls 'communication'.³⁰

While Bataille does indeed refine and elaborate his idea of poetry at this time, however, as discussed in Chapter 2 and elsewhere, the idea of poetry as an interruption of prose or discursive discourse, thus pre-empting the completion of project, is explored as early as *L'Expérience intérieure* (analogous to the sovereign instant disrupting the linearity of project). The idea of poetry, then, as it appears in Bataille's *œuvre*, from the point of 'De l'âge de pierre à Jacques Prévert' to *L'Erotisme*, takes account of the sacred, conflating sacrifice and poetry by their temporal effect. They both evoke the sacred in this singular instance of affective violence. Guerlac identifies the instant of communication that, as discussed above, is generated from the sacralising, violent moment of sacrifice. Further on, citing Bataille in 'De l'âge de pierre à Jacques Prévert' Guerlac notes that the instant of the

²⁹ To clarify further, the image I propose in this paradigm is not an 'eroticised image', in the way Bataille refers to an image of a (nude) woman throughout *L'Histoire de l'érotisme* and *L'Erotisme*. It is instead, perhaps, an image of someone looking at himself – and not recognising himself – in a mirror.

³⁰ Guerlac, p. 89.

moment conceals a paradox: the instant is one of instability and of flux: ‘The sacred and poetry, Bataille writes are “par essence changement”.’³¹ Bataille’s discussion on the poetic image in this article considers how sacrifice and its momentary irruption into the present moment generate an affective shock. If the temporal model is applicable to poetry, then poetry must incorporate the necessary degree of destruction into its mechanism not only in a metaphorical operation that subverts or destroys one half of its equation but in an ideological sense as well. The moment or event of sacrifice is a moment of experience in the instant and is distinct from what remains. It is, according to Bataille, the ruin of whatever is sacrificed.³² In the account below there seems to be a tension between poetry that is fixated on the echo of the instant yet, when linked to eroticism, to express the immanent. The problem is that poetry cannot be the expression and the sign of the event yet at once the trace or residual testimony to this same event:

Quand l’élément de destruction n’est plus donné du dehors, dans le thème – quand la poésie n’est pas seulement mouvement sonore, si le jeu verbal opère à lui seul une suppression des objets comme tels, celle-ci n’est plus une accablante fatalité, mais une exubérance voulue, une marée rapide emportant les limites. Ce n’est pas le ciel atterrante (annihilant l’homme), mais la transparence infinie de l’homme, au contraire, se jouant (se reconnaissant) dans la transparence infinie du ciel. Le dieu allègue n’est rien autre en effet que l’homme lui-même et la confusion insensée des étoiles avec le quadrilatère borne d’un champ ne divinise l’homme, par une suppression de ses limites, que si l’homme aux bornes près de ses champs, lui-même et ce qu’il nomme un dieu. Et je ne puis douter que ce jaillissement de la poésie ne ‘donne à voir’ au fond du ciel *ce que je suis* (ma présence au bord de l’abîme et qu’un cri révèle dans l’instant).³³

The proposed solution here is to address what remains from the instance of experience, once it has exhausted itself in metonymic slippage and interpenetration. The destructive element of experience does not necessarily imply the destruction of the object but reveals a parity between subject and object. Thus the subject’s experience is affirmed through equanimity and balance with the external: experience dissolves the limits of subjectivity. The suppression of difference situates (or confuses) the subject in such a way that he *experiences* – in the sense of a false or recreated replication or imitation of reality – self-recognition externally but at once beyond himself. The exterior, whether represented by the stars or by God, is the same as the interior; the poetic moment of experience reflects the hitherto veiled aspects and prospects of the universe as echoes within the subject. Poetry, Bataille maintains, does not ‘give to see’ as such into the depths of the universe but rather the experience of conflating God, for

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³² ‘Entre l’homme – qui crie – et l’événement – qui est – s’interpose d’habitude le langage, dont la généralité et le caractère immatériel donnent de plain-pied dans la durée, l’immuable et l’Académie [...] La poésie criant l’instant suspendu, du fait que l’ordre émouvant des mots lui survivra, tend à n’exprimer qu’un sens durable: elle le fige en solennité funèbre’. Bataille, OC XI, p. 99.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

example, with the subject's own perception and thus what poetry *does* represent is the vertiginous realisation of being at the moment of sovereign, limitless self-recognition.

La misère à partir de là, donnée dans les termes mêmes (dieu, l'or) dont le sert le poète, veut que le poétique, comme le *sacré*, né d'une suppression des objets comme tels, étant par essence changement, se change pour finir en objet, soustrait sans doute à l'usage vulgaire, mais ayant de l'objet le caractère durable. Rien n'est plus essentiellement périssable que le *sacré* ou la poétique, qui ont en même temps la plénitude et l'insaisissable brièveté de l'instant.³⁴

The problem Bataille then raises is the temporal disjunction implied in the act of sacrifice, poetry, like the sacred, are both excessive yet fleeting. Sacrifice, in its poetic incarnation, creates the problem of duration for the remaining object, a duration that diverges from the transitory and ephemeral nature of the sacred.³⁵ Bataille specifies two simultaneous phases in the moment of sacrifice: the first makes the sacrificial object divine; the second destroys this divine essence within the material object, thus provoking a momentary feeling of the sacred. The problematic aspect in representing experience, then, is that it can only evoke the sacred. One possible solution, I suggest, that is implicitly evident in Bataille's poetry, is the freezing of temporal states – the instant and the duration – in the suspension of perceived differences between subject and object:

L'élément décisif dans la constitution distincte d'objets érotiques est un peu déconcertant. Cela suppose le fait qu'un être humain peut être envisagé comme une *chose*. En principe, il est tout le contraire d'une chose. Il n'est pas non plus une personne: mais toujours un *sujet*. Je ne suis pas une chose, je suis devant les choses, les objets, le sujet qui les voit, les nomme et les manie. Mais si j'envisage mon semblable, je ne puis le placer du côté des choses, que je vois et que je manie, mais bien plutôt de celui du sujet, *que je suis*.³⁶

However, it is Rimbaud again who provides the site for the emergence of a secondary image paradigm in Bataille's poetry, distinct from the sacrificial one. A key point, one already discussed, appears in *L'Érotisme* in which Rimbaud's poem 'L'Éternité' is used as the exemplar of poetry that confuses the difference between subject and object. The image does not function as the expression of its own internal paradox but rather expresses the moment of confusion and misrecognition that leads to the suspension of difference:

Elle est retrouvée.
Quoi? L'éternité.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 104-5.

³⁵ Bataille's theory of the awareness of the sacred in the sacrificial moment is distinct to Rimbaud's implicit, binary temporal structure in *Une saison en enfer*. Paganism is alluded to in terms of immanence as a marginalised, abandoned space opposed to the Christian, Western linearity that subordinates subjectivity to its genealogical model of identity as inheritance.

³⁶ Bataille, OC VIII, p. 119.

C'est la mer allée
Avec le soleil.

La poésie mène au même point que chaque forme de l'érotisme, à l'indistinction, à la confusion des objets distincts. Elle nous mène à l'éternité, elle nous mène à la mort, et par la mort, à la continuité: la poésie est *l'éternité. C'est la mer allée avec le soleil*.³⁷

The image here takes account of the flux generated from the moment of sacred violence – created by sacrifice – but also of the dynamic of desire in eroticism, one in which the subject misrecognises himself in his desire for recognition in fusion; misrecognition that stems from the aimless force of his own desire.

This is a marked shift away from the paradigm that defines the metaphysics of sacrifice in Bataille's writings on experience, throughout the 1940s, in which the object is destroyed or consumed in the ecstatic, frenzied instance of experience because, in 'De l'âge de pierre à Jacques Prévert' experience and poetry (or the poetry of experience) is thought of in conjunction with time. A *poésie de l'événement* rests on the primacy of the instant but how then does the image fit into this 'poetry of time'? The instant in poetry is, paradoxically, an instant of flux and the subject of eroticism suspends the instant by fixing or freezing it. The moment of the instant cuts across economies from the unreserved loss of the event or sacrificial moment to the libidinal imitation of this unreserved loss that is distinguished by a moment of misrecognition in the eroticised awareness of death. The sacred and poetry do not change the moment of the instant or the event but the condition of the event; the suspension of difference is the expression of misrecognised desire; a desire for self-annihilation in fusion.

However, the image here is itself considered as a metaphor for the eroticised experience discussed in this book that illustrates the psychological operations of eroticism on and by the subject; considered in the same way as mysticism and the sacred in *La Somme athéologique*. That is, poetry in *L'Erotisme* is not considered on its own terms but is used analogously to illustrate the workings of erotic experience in regard to the subject's exposure to the unavowable fact of its death.³⁸ Although there may be two distinct modes of poetry evident in the images of Bataille's poems, the latter one of suspension privileges the body as

³⁷ *Ibid.*, OC X, p. 30.

³⁸ Guerlac reads *L'Erotisme* as a reworked deferment of Kojève's interpretation of Hegel's recognition scene between master and slave, the roles, taken up respectively by the man and the woman: 'Eroticism, then, or what will come to be known as transgression, involves a peaceful correction of Hegel's scene of recognition – a recognition essential to the specifically human, that is, lucid, experience of eroticism as distinct from mere brute sexuality. [...] If [...] we interpret Bataille's opening opposition between fusion and discontinuity in Hegelian terms, that is, in terms of identity and difference (or negativity), we see that it lines up with a number of other oppositions that enter into Bataille's elaboration as he leads up to the presentation of the "dual operation" of transgression/interdiction – oppositions between violence and reason, nature and culture, as well as between the sacred and the profane.' Eroticism reconstitutes Hegel's *risk of death*, Kojève's *fear of death* into an awareness, or *misrecognition* of death. Guerlac, pp. 26-7.

the site which bears the trace of the instability: thematically, in relation to experience and dialectically in relation to the poetic image functioning as the middle term between the instant and the duration. The problem of communicating or representing the duration and the instant diverge. Guerlac refers to the instant that derives from an experience or event, I propose that Bataille's notion of duration also fixes and valorises the instant, as the reading below will outline, in the paradigm of the image that suspends violence, yet, in *L'Erotisme* it is not *only* a temporal effect; this is to account for the fact poetry remains as words, as the remainders and detritus of the event of the sacrificial instant.

Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, in their book *Bataille*, make use of the trope of the labyrinth to show language, or in terms closer to this argument, poetic representation, disperses the ontological presence of the subject. As discussed above in Chapter 2, in regard to *L'Expérience intérieure*, language – as a labyrinthine edifice – compromises the stability of writing and thus the integrity of the subject. They use (coincidentally or not) the same terms as does Bataille in *L'Erotisme* of the sun and the sea:

The subject disappears not as 'the result of an external accident or imaginary exercise' outside language but at its very heart, at the centre where the labyrinth suddenly offers the *same* and being meets its mirror image, discovers *itself* as a mirror, and disappears down the never-ending series of displacements deflected in the virtual space of the glass. Like the labyrinth, language offers up an impoverished, but marvellously proliferating experience of limitation that transgresses the sovereignty of the one who speaks, the subject becoming erased by the recurring tide of a sea of impossibility whose endless horizon dims the violent brilliance of philosophy's sun.³⁹

Bataille's use of the metaphor in Rimbaud's poem conveys the dazzling illusion of recognition – the subject is reflected back to him as *other*. The sun, which represents the subject's unreserved erotic desire, narcissistically mis/recognises itself in the sea – that which annihilates him by replicating, reflecting and dispersing his desire, the proof of his being. Botting and Wilson, citing Foucault (in lines 1-2), argue language no longer affirms subjective presence or even, as Bataille writes, conceals it but endlessly defers the subjective – his desire – in a series of encounters with others, all defined by misrecognition and alterity.

Bataille's image doubles itself, not in the sense where the first part is strange and alien to the second part as it is in Surrealism but rather in which the subject is mirrored in the universe and, as part of the same process, the universe is reproduced within the individual: 'l'univers est en moi comme en lui-même/ plus rien ne m'en sépare/ je me heurte en moi-même à lui'.⁴⁰ Yet in this dynamic, as seen above, one element fails, the finite is always dissolved before the infinite:

³⁹ Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, *Bataille* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 49-50.

⁴⁰ Bataille, OC III, p. 77.

le néant n'est que moi-même
l'univers n'est que ma tombe
le soleil n'est que la mort

mes yeux sont l'aveugle foudre
mon cœur est le ciel
où l'orage éclate

en moi-même
au fond d'un abîme
l'immense univers est la mort⁴¹

These untitled verses, from the long sequence of several poems in *L'Archangélique*, 'Le Tombeau' shows that the paradox which conditions being infects both the subject and the universe. The two terms of the subject and the unknown universe are not shown as suspended, as in Rimbaud's 'L'Eternité' but are intimately and inextricably interwoven with each other.⁴² The distinction of what is living and what is dead is suppressed.⁴³ It is these terms of life and death that centre on the heart in the second stanza where the most internal organ is associated with a symbol of infinity, the sky, so that because the body is locus of both poles of desire and repulsion, desire equates the living body with the decomposing corpse. This intimate proximity of erotic and thanatic drives projected onto and associated with the body, I suggest, accounts not only for the centrality of the body in Bataille's poetry but for the subject in Bataille's thought who is haunted by his own body. The use of Rimbaud's consideration of eternity therefore seems to equivocate both terms of the subject-object image and posit continuity as the muting of the awareness or recognition of death.

Writing after this point, in *La Littérature et le mal*, published in 1957, Bataille's conceptualisation of the poetic image is affected, in his essay on Baudelaire, by Sartre. In relation to Baudelaire, Bataille highlights apparently contradictory positions in Sartre's reading of Baudelaire in which poetry seeks a fusion between subject and object yet, at once, to transcend the object. In regard to Bataille's poetics, against Sartre's idea of a transcendental poetry, informed by and signified by the future, Bataille reiterates the Romantic position in which poetry is not conditioned by transcendence but fixated on the instant with the consequence that, on the thematic level, the image implodes:

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁴² In 'L'Histoire de l'érotisme' Bataille notes: 'Il n'y a plus dans la fixation de l'amour de distance entre une totalité confuse mais purement concrète de ce qui est universellement et l'objet de cet amour: l'être aimé dans l'amour est toujours l'univers lui-même'. *Ibid.*, OC VIII, p. 138.

⁴³ 'With Bataille, the desire for annihilation involves an identification with the energy of the life-force which finally abandons the traditional life/death dualism; the 'incessant motion' of death is now barely distinguishable from the life-force, and the human identification with it is stronger than ever.' Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), p. 250.

La poésie, en un premier mouvement, détruit les objets qu'elle appréhende, elle les rend, par une destruction, à l'insaisissable fluidité de l'existence du poète et c'est à ce prix qu'elle espère retrouver l'identité du monde et de l'homme.⁴⁴

Bataille continues in his assessment to state that poetry is not merely a descent into destruction, it attempts to maintain the status quo:

Mais en même temps qu'elle opère un dessaisissement, elle tente de *saisir* ce *dessaisissement*. Tout ce qu'elle put fut de substituer le *dessaisissement* aux choses *saisies* de la vie réduite: elle ne put faire que le dessaisissement ne prît la place des choses.⁴⁵

In subjective terms, then, the realisation of death as the condition of life is this attempt to 'grasp' the moment of 'ungrasping' or letting go that is the fleeting moment of experience. In quoting Blake's well-known poem 'The Tyger', Bataille shows that subjective experience is evil because it is sovereign and thus not subject to any moral authority; the subject's experience burns brightly within him as symptomatic of his efforts to be affirmed beyond the limits of the divine that seek to delineate him:

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?⁴⁶

The tiger depicted by Blake is as something beyond description and is characterised negatively, twice, inhabiting both a forest and the night, elements that at once frame the tiger yet also obscure and fragment it. The tiger cannot be represented, even from a divine perspective, because it burns too brightly, its impossible brightness is inextricable from the blindness it provokes, a paradox emphasised by the rhyme 'bright' and 'night'. In the Romantic context, Bataille's image is the self-negating mode that is superseded by or momentarily affected by the secondary or underlying paradigm that blurs the subject-object difference. In this sense and – similarly to 'Le Bateau ivre' – death appears as the unknown object, the tiger in Blake's poem is held in unresolved tension of inchoate representation, as both presence and absence, symbolic too, perhaps, of the alienated figure of the Romantic poet.

In *La Littérature et le mal* Bataille concludes his essay on Baudelaire by stating Baudelaire's response was to refute the myths Romanticism itself had generated, by denying or ironically depicting metaphysical notions of evil while simultaneously negating good. That is, to gain a clearer perspective on good, Baudelaire stood outside of it and became committed

⁴⁴ Bataille, OC IX, p. 197.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ William Blake, *Selected Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 36.

to evil. This position is one Sartre sees as opposed to liberty and one Bataille acknowledges as a minor, powerless one: equivalent to that of the child. Baudelaire's uncompromising irony however, has the consequence of sapping the poet's will:

Du côté des écrivains, comme elle mit fin aux splendeurs de l'Ancien Régime et remplaça par les utilitaires les œuvres glorieuses, elle provoqua la protestation romantique [...] Le romantisme, immédiatement donnait une forme concrète à ce qui nie, à ce qui supprime la réduction de l'homme à des valeurs d'utilité.⁴⁷

It is Romantic poetry that analyses the consequences of the loss of individual autonomy even if this, like the obsession with nature, is largely misplaced. The fusion evident in Bataille's secondary image paradigm thus has its roots in Romanticism's obsessive quest to reunite humanity and nature, searching for the moment of interpenetration between the subject and the immanence of nature in the event of the sublime. Romantic poetry's revolt is significant precisely because, in Bataille's view, it is ambiguous: it expresses and approves of bourgeois myths of individualism as much as it betrays them. The fusion of subjectivity and the attempt to grasp the disappearing moment of experience represent a problematic engagement with poetic discourse in its Romantic expression as well as, within the logic of the poetics, an attempt to reproduce the effects of sacrifice without representing the violence of sacrifice directly.

To Be

Another consideration of overcoming problematic representation of experience is only considered theoretically by Bataille and, as such, remains tangential to the main body of the poetics. A linguistic approach in the consideration of the verb nonetheless demonstrates the profound connection between the ontological concerns of his poetry and their representation. The copula obviates the problems of metaphor and representation by short-circuiting poetic language; on a simple, linguistic level it links the subject to a predicate. The copula places the subject – or at least the presence of the subject – directly into discourse; the copula signifies being.

However, as Ricœur notes below, the function of the copula becomes more complicated than its connotation suggests. Ricœur notes how the verb is central to a paradigm of substitution, which is the metonymy in Bataille's poetics and one of tension:

De cette conjonction entre fiction et redescription nous concluons que le 'lieu' de la métaphore, son lieu le plus intime et le plus ultime, n'est ni le nom, ni la phrase, ni même le discours, mais la copule du verbe être. Le 'est' métaphorique signifie à la fois 'n'est pas' et 'est comme'.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Bataille, OC IX, p. 206.

⁴⁸ Ricœur, p. 11.

The copula of the verb does not suggest the subject but rather compromises the effect of metaphor itself by rendering it ambivalent: the subject is at once *like* and *unlike* something else. *L'Anus solaire* is the programmatic text for Bataille's poetry, discussed above in terms of establishing the system of parody that features in the poetics, here further marks the point of intersection between ontology and language. In his analysis Santi writes that one reason Bataille's poetry does not generate concrete images is as a direct consequence of the subjective tenor of the poetic language:

La poésie de Bataille n'est pas une poésie qui aime les images, elle se présente plutôt comme une poésie qui les abandonne, tente de s'écrire sans elles et sans doute pour une part contre elles. Ce refus de l'image n'est pas une caractéristique tardive de cette poésie mais apparaît au contraire dès les premières lignes de *L'Anus solaire* au moment précis où le narrateur s'écrit 'JE SUIS LE SOLEIL'.⁴⁹

Poetic language is not guided by images, in the Surrealist sense, where two random elements join to create a point of insight into the subject's self-perception in relation to society. As discussed above, the disruption of the subject-object relation that underlies Bataille's thinking in *L'Expérience intérieure* has its origins much earlier in *L'Anus solaire*. This process of stable objects becoming displaced by slippage and indistinction is considered in ontological terms in that the subject is not represented through the metaphor, albeit a reductive kind of metaphor but is sublimated by the function of the verb. The Surrealist subject is a means of production of the images. In contrast, the subject in Bataille's poetics is central to the mechanics of language as Santi notes:

La transformation aussi soudaine que spectaculaire du corps de celui qui dit « je » montre que les mots ont un effet direct et immédiat sur le réel. C'est que dans *L'Anus solaire*, il existe une proximité très grande entre dire et être, dire et devenir: le verbe être n'unit pas seulement les mots qu'il relie, il unit également les référents auxquels ces mots renvoient.⁵⁰

In this sense then, *L'Anus solaire* is a text that functions as a poetic manifesto even, arguably, as a poem in its own right: one which privileges the verb (and its predicates) rather than the noun or the overtly complex metaphor. In one sense 'De l'âge de pierre à Jacques Prévert' elucidates, in terms of poetic discourse, what is unequivocally and explicitly stated in *L'Anus solaire*: an anthropomorphic universe.

Mais le *copule* des termes n'est pas moins irritant que celui des corps. Et quand je m'écrit: JE SUIS LE SOLEIL, il en résulte une érection intégrale, car le verbe être est le véhicule de la frénésie amoureuse.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Santi, p. 137.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Bataille, OC I, p 80.

The copula subverts metaphorical systems yet also the system this text describes, one of metonymy. It is arguable that as *L'Anus solaire* depicts a parody of parody, it thereby renders analogy meaningless. The same subversion affects the role of the subject in language as well as, ultimately, the capacity of language to function. Metaphor is rendered meaningless here too as the earth, as synecdoche of the universe, literally assumes the shape of human body parts, all of which are subject to analogous psychological movement. Language can only parody the behaviour of organisms and their reproductive impulses and the subject can only be accurately depicted in writing, through language, only as far he is subordinated to the external universe. It is the copula working through language in replicating the underlying functions of the natural world that in turn enables poetry to operate in ways which allows the subject to be represented according to his fundamental, corporeal condition rather than through any mimetic system. Botting and Wilson write that language is permanently affected and inscribed by the representation of the subject within it:

Language, then, in the relations with others that it establishes and severs, becomes more than the field in which being makes its appearance, more than the instrument which mediates being: it is the locus in which subjectivity experiences, as an effect of signification, both the fullness and the loss of being, precisely the scene of writing which presents being and places it under erasure.⁵²

The corporeal subject is given presence in language but is also effaced from the index of its existence; as Ricœur notes at the beginning of this section, the copula performs an ambivalent role, affirming the unique presence of the subject – unlike anything else – yet at once no different from anything else; all meat tastes the same. Representation, then, when fully determined by the unmediated presence of the subject via the copula of the verb, erases the depiction of the subject. This kind of representation – one defined by the subject's presence in the verb – leads to a paradoxical, parodic affirmation through nullification.

Bataille, Breton, Rimbaud and Sartre

The focus of this chapter now shifts from linguistic exploration, highlighting the shared use of the copula in Bataille and Breton's writing, to introduce Sartre into the argument, arguably prompting Bataille's reconsideration of Surrealism.⁵³ *La Littérature et le mal* represents

⁵² Botting and Wilson, *Bataille*, p. 49.

⁵³ Sartre's assessment of Bataille's legacy in 'Situation de l'écrivain en 1947' is dismissive and his writing demoted to a position beneath Surrealism: 'Au reste la littérature de l'entre-deux-guerres se survit péniblement: les gloses sur l'impossible de Georges Bataille ne valent pas le moindre trait surréaliste, sa théorie de la dépense est un écho affaibli des grandes fêtes passées; le lettrisme est un produit de remplacement, une imitation plate est consciencieuse de l'exubérance dadaïste.' Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 241.

another assessment that is not based around a defence of Surrealism as such but the moral conditions of literature:

La génération à laquelle j'appartiens est tumultueuse. Elle naquit à la vie littéraire dans les tumultes du surréalisme. Il y eut, dans les années qui suivirent la première guerre, un sentiment qui débordait. La littérature étouffait dans ses limites. Elle portait, semblait-il, en elle une révolution.⁵⁴

This repositioning takes place around the status of poetry, where it is Surrealism that comes to be contested by Bataille and Sartre. However Bataille's distance from Sartre, which developed during the war because of Sartre's critical reading of *L'Expérience intérieure*, is not maintained after the war, or at least, not to the same extent. Bataille notes he does not disagree with Sartrean existentialism's drafting of literature as a means of engagement but rather that Sartre has not acknowledged the roots of this engagement as being found in Surrealism. This essential point is made in a footnote in 'A propos d'assoupissements':

Non que je m'oppose... au principe de la littérature engagée. Comment ne pas se réjouir aujourd'hui (même insidieusement) de la voir reprise par Jean-Paul Sartre? Il me semble néanmoins nécessaire ici de rappeler qu'il y a vingt ans Breton misa sur ce principe toute l'activité du surréalisme.⁵⁵

This reconsideration can be traced by a reading of their shifting relation to Rimbaud; much in the same way Rimbaud's *œuvre* was contested in the 1920s. Enough time had passed so that Breton and the Surrealists could begin to consider their historical legacy in a very different cultural and political landscape. This is not to suggest however, Bataille's references to Rimbaud are always determined and mediated by Surrealism, which much more overtly laid claim to Rimbaud. Rimbaud was, however, only one of the many figureheads Breton appropriated; Rimbaud also comes to stand for the difference between Bataille and Breton's approach to poetry as well as to the project of Surrealism. That is, the debate between Bataille and Breton on the worth and relevance of Surrealism is analogous to the debate on Rimbaud:

D'ailleurs, si l'on veut bien voir, le surréalisme n'est pas moins qu'à l'*écriture automatique* elle-même liée à l'affirmation de sa valeur, en tant qu'elle révèle la pensée. Ce qu'enseigne Breton n'était pas moins de prendre conscience de la valeur de l'automatisme que d'écrire sous la dictée de l'inconscient. Mais cet enseignement ouvrait deux voies: l'une allait du côté des œuvres, sacrifiait même rapidement tout principe aux nécessités des œuvres, accentuait la valeur d'attrait des tableaux et des livres. Ce fut celle où s'engagea le surréalisme. L'autre allait arduement du côté de l'être: de ce côté, l'on ne pouvait donner qu'une faible attention à l'attrait des œuvres, non que celui-ci fût insignifiant, mais ce qui alors était mis à nu et dont la beauté, la laideur n'importaient plus, c'était le fond des choses et dès lors commençait le débat de l'être dans la nuit. Tout était suspendu dans une solitude rigoureuse. Les facilités

⁵⁴ Bataille, OC IX, p. 171.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, OC XI, p. 32.

qui relie les œuvres au « possible », au plaisir esthétique avaient disparu. (Ce qui était aussi continué était le débat de Rimbaud.)⁵⁶

Bataille writes that Surrealism's initial genesis as a psychoanalytically-inflected project to record the (unconscious) mind in a conscious reality necessarily engendered a body of work, in order to maintain an expression of intent that, invariably, became aesthetically determined. The important impulse within Surrealism was disavowed: that which seeks to privilege the limits of subjectivity and the subject's freedom rather than its expression. This then marks the significant difference between Breton and Bataille in regard to Rimbaud and beyond ideological interpretations of Rimbaud's *œuvre*: Breton seeks to preserve Rimbaud for the cause of advancing Surrealism, first as a poet in the *Premier manifeste* then as a political radical in 'Qu'est ce que le surréalisme?' These are both strategies that revive and continue the violent transformation Rimbaud's project initiated. This, for Bataille, is to miss the crucial point: what Rimbaud's project initiated was its own destruction. Although the Surrealists were committed to destroying the bourgeois social order within which they existed they did not want to destroy either their own works or themselves. Dialectically, Rimbaud stands for the end of dialectics: there is nothing left but silence. This point, ironically, also marks a point on which Bataille and Sartre agree; Sartre notes a contiguous tendency of the Surrealists in 'Situation de l'écrivain en 1947':

Les surréalistes ont plus de santé: leur mythe de destruction dissimule un énorme et magnifique appétit; ils veulent tout anéantir sauf eux-mêmes comme en témoigne leur horreur des maladies, des vices, de la drogue.⁵⁷

Bataille's assessment, at the time of writing in 1946, differs slightly as he sees that the priorities and expectations made of Surrealism have changed. Surrealism at this point had become historicised and its works familiar and absorbed into the larger cultural discourse, therefore Bataille sees its legacy as an examination of the position of the individual rather than the expression of this position.

In 'Le Surréalisme et sa différence avec l'existentialisme', published in *Critique* in 1946, Bataille defines Surrealism in a way that considers poetry as something Surrealism overcomes. Bataille's conception of poetry as a discourse unchanged therefore since before the war as something redundant:

Il est vrai qu'il faut définir le surréalisme comme une école artistique et littéraire... il est comme tel fondé sur *l'écriture automatique*. Il donne une valeur décisive à cette sorte de pensée, l'analogue du rêve, qui ne se soumet pas au contrôle de la raison: c'est ainsi qu'il dérobe l'esprit de l'homme à toute autre fin que poétique.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵⁷ Sartre, p. 228.

⁵⁸ Bataille, OC XI, p. 71.

Bataille recognises it is this question of being that distinguishes between freedom defined by Surrealism and that which existentialism considers. According to Bataille, the critical difference is that existentialism conceptualises freedom as resulting from a choice; the freedom to choose thus proves the existence of freedom. For Surrealism, having to choose at all negates the concept of freedom; rejecting choice in view of *post facto* consequences is the, problematically perverse, acceptance of freedom. That is, for the Surrealists, freedom is already and always present. For Sartre, freedom is dependent on actions in the present to ensure a freedom that is posited in the future. Bataille illustrates his argument by the example of poetry:

Si je ne l'asservis pas, la liberté existera: c'est la poésie; les mots, n'ayant plus à servir à quelque désignation utile, se déchaînent et ce déchaînement est l'image de l'existence libre, qui n'est jamais donnée que dans l'instant. Cette saisie de l'instant – où la volonté en même temps se dessaisit – a certes une valeur décisive.⁵⁹

Poetry itself is here used as the mark of personal freedom, the trace of the instant that defines the individual's affirmation of his sovereign freedom. This article is ostensibly a review of Breton's *Arcane 17*, a kind of diary of Breton's time spent in Canada towards the end of the war and in it Bataille notes Breton's problematic return to a mythopoeic vision of language, indicating Surrealism's subordination to a historically determined project, begun with Romanticism. It is automatic writing, however that is evidence of Breton's disdain for the future, expressed in illogical and unreserved expenditure of energy in the moment: 'La rationalisme, rejetant dans l'ombre cette activité, mettait en lumière l'enchaînement des actes et de toute pensée à la fin poursuivie.'⁶⁰ Automatic writing is a rejection of the future and thus a truly poetic activity that is equivalent to an ecstatic embrace of the present, albeit a contradictory one:

'Je ne fais jamais du projet', dit-il dans la *Confession dédaigneuse*. Et le principe de l'écriture automatique est clairement d'en finir avec les buts. Exprimée comme il le fallait en propositions assez ordonnées, une telle attitude n'allait pas sans contradictions. Le langage de Breton est un effet de la conscience de ces contradictions et de la volonté de les dépasser au besoin par d'illogiques violences.⁶¹

It is by accentuating the irrational aspect of Surrealist production that Bataille can draw common cause with automatic writing, criticised by Caillois as pseudo-mystical, as an indication of accessing the sacred, although Bataille notes that this is distinct from anything that may be termed mystical:

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

L'opération, c'est vrai, ne va pas sans difficultés, que le surréalisme a révélées, non résolues. Mais le possible en jeu va plus loin qu'il ne semble. Si nous brisons véritablement la servitude à laquelle l'activité utile soumet l'existence de l'instant, le fond se révélerait soudain en nous avec un insoutenable éclat... La saisie de l'instant ne pourrait différer de l'extase (réciproquement, il faut définir l'extase comme la saisie de l'instant – rien d'autre – opérée *malgré* les soucis des mystiques).⁶²

Bataille's avowal of Surrealism as containing the potential for a transcendent approach to the sacred places Surrealism in opposition to existentialism's demands for a useful language; poetry is thus dismissed by Sartre in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Sartre dismissed the Bataillean concept of transgression as a futile revolt, paralysed by its inability to permanently affect the prohibitions which engender it.

It is perhaps ironic then that as Bataille is repositioning Surrealism as a project whose poetics reveal a hitherto concealed irrationality that Breton, in the *Second manifeste* in 1930 disavowed one of the Surrealist figureheads – Rimbaud. However, Breton's rehabilitation of Rimbaud's (negligible) role in the Commune in 'Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?' in 1934 as a herald of the Bolshevik revolution, pitches Breton close to Sartre. They share a similar, neo-Hegelian perspective of history as a process unfolding and ascending to reach a state where social justice may be realised. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Sartre uses one of Rimbaud's poems as an example of the poet's tendency to objectify language, that is, to turn human emotion or thought into an abstraction; something that qualitatively shares the same blank opacity as an object. Words thus prevent emotion of any kind from being recognisable as such and therefore the nature of words cuts off any possibility of the poet's engagement with the demands of the real world. An excerpt from Rimbaud's 'Ô saisons, Ô châteaux' demonstrates, according to Sartre, the distance it maintains in regard to the reader:

Pour le poète, la phrase a une tonalité, un goût; il goûte à travers elle et pour elles-mêmes les saveurs irritantes de l'objection, de la réserve, de la disjonction; il les portes à l'absolu, il en fait des propriétés réelles de la phrase; celle-ci devient tout entière objection sans être objection à rien de précis. Nous retrouvons ici ces relations d'implication réciproque que nous signalions tout à l'heure entre le mot poétique et son sens: l'ensemble des mots choisis fonctionne comme *image* de la nuance interrogative ou restrictive et, inversement, l'interrogation est image de l'ensemble verbal qu'elle délimite...

Ô saisons Ô châteaux
Quelle âme est sans défaut?⁶³

Sartre's assessment of a poetic image is here expressed in materialist terms that may initially seem similar to Bataille's. Words are considered as material and sensational objects that the poet takes to an absolute point. Yet the image remains here for Sartre on the textual level,

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁶³ Sartre, p. 68.

where the image is not a subversive rejection of poetic metaphor but a representation of meaning itself. That is, the important part of the word – its meaning – comes to dominate the literal, textual presence and sound of the word:

Il a fait une interrogation absolue; il a conféré au beau mot d'âme une existence interrogative. Voilà l'interrogation devenue chose, comme l'angoisse du Tintoret était devenue ciel jaune. Ce n'est plus une signification, c'est une substance; elle est vue du dehors et Rimbaud nous invite à la voir du dehors avec lui, son étrangeté vient de ce que nous nous plaçons, pour la considérer, de l'autre côté de la condition humaine: du côté de Dieu.⁶⁴

Sartre's essay, in one sense, acts as a retort to *L'Expérience intérieure* and throws back the examples Bataille uses in his own explication of poetry in relation to words.

[Les poètes] ne songent pas non plus à *nommer* le monde et, par le fait, ils ne nomment rien du tout, car la nomination implique un perpétuel sacrifice du nom à l'objet nommé ou pour parler comme Hegel, le nom s'y révèle l'inessentiel, en face de la chose qui est essentielle [...] On a dit qu'ils voulaient détruire le verbe par des accouplements monstrueux, mais c'est faux; car ils faudrait alors qu'ils fussent déjà jetés au milieu du langage utilitaire et qu'ils cherchassent à en retirer les mots par petits groupes singuliers, comme par exemple 'cheval' et 'beurre' en écrivant 'cheval de beurre'.⁶⁵

Sartre repudiates Bataille's claim that poetry is the mechanism that allows for words to shed their instrumentality and move beyond their primary naming function to shelter the known within them while, at once, they point to the unknown. Sartre notes a seeming contradiction in Bataille's poetics which is that poetry is a refusal to utilise language such that words become things, thus creating the illusion that words originate as if they are natural, organic entities:

Le poète est hors du langage, il voit les mots à l'envers, comme s'il n'appartenait pas à la condition humaine et que, venant vers les hommes, il rencontrât d'abord la parole comme une barrière [...] Faute de savoir s'en servir comme *signe* d'un aspect du monde, il voit dans le mot l'*image* d'un de ces aspects. Et l'image verbale qu'il choisit pour sa ressemblance avec le saule ou le frêne n'est pas nécessairement le mot que nous utilisons pour désigner ces objets. Comme il est déjà dehors, au lieu que les mots lui soient des indicateurs qui le jettent hors de lui, au milieu des choses, il les considère comme un piège pour attraper une réalité fuyante; bref, le langage tout entier est pour lui le Miroir du monde. Du coup, d'importants changements s'opèrent dans l'économie interne du mot.⁶⁶

Sartre portrays poetry as an essential reflection of the world, a mimetic distortion of reality that denies poetry the ability to engage with the world. Sartre's linguistic system cannot allow for words to become estranged from their meanings. Perversion in the sphere of language leads to confusion in interpretation. And if this interpretation is politically determined it can

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

lead to a language that approximates propaganda, used by both poles of the political spectrum: propaganda which invariably sets the conditions for social violence and disorder.

In Bataille's poetics words are considered as things, exposed and often made obscene by this exposure, in order to highlight the repressed, inhibiting and culturally mediated effects of language upon desire and its expression. Furthermore, the poems support and communicate an expression of other economies of meaning in Bataille's thought: the anthropomorphic universe in *L'Anus solaire*; the vertiginous experience of self-recognition in 'De l'âge de pierre à Jacques Prévert', subjective instability in *La Somme athéologique* and, most significantly, the figure of Rimbaud as representative of how poetry can dialectically communicate through the silence that results from the sacrifice of poetry. As Bataille makes clear in the notes of *L'Expérience intérieure* it is images as well as words that are sacrificed:

L'importance profonde de la poésie c'est que du sacrifice des mots, des images, et du fait même de la misère de ce sacrifice... elle fait glisser de l'impuissant sacrifice des objets à celui du sujet. Ce que Rimbaud sacrifia ce n'est pas seulement la poésie objet mais le sujet poète... Mise à mort de l'auteur par son œuvre [...] le sacrifice que Rimbaud fit de la poésie n'est pas poétique en ce sens qu'il eut lieu vraiment, qu'il ne prit pas forme [erased word, possibly: 'uniquement'] dans l'ordre des mots, qu'il changea la vie⁶⁷

To counter Sartre's accusations of poetry as remaining within the sphere of language, Bataille holds Rimbaud as the example of poetry moving beyond this sphere. All these economies are rooted to the status of the subject in Bataille's own poetry and the effort to express being as an ontological presence rather than a visual depiction; the subject, as metaphor for being, rarely survives his encounter with the unknown on the representative plane: an encounter accounted for in minor incidents of transgression such as laughter or profligate existence to the extreme point of this spectrum, the necessary self-destruction of the subject in the slippage of eroticism.

As an example, Bataille refers to Rimbaud in the article 'Le Bonheur, l'érotisme et la littérature', from *Critique*, published in 1949. It shows Bataille also read Rimbaud for his sense of humour, however black at times: Rimbaud's early poem 'Les Reparties de Nina' is quoted in its entirety as an example of poetry's ability to point to a simple moment of experience:

La volupté en effet ne peut être définie comme une catégorie logique. À ce point même où elle est en cause, l'impuissance du langage est dérisoire. La poésie en d'autres points libère une vérité différente de celle à laquelle elle semble liée: c'est alors simplement la poésie. La volupté n'est pas la poésie. La poésie a seulement le pouvoir qui me manque, et comment ne pas m'attarder... à l'expression du bonheur. La littérature est si malheureuse d'ordinaire, elle se dérobe par tant de détours à la

⁶⁷ Bataille, OC V, pp. 454-5.

simplicité de la joie que cela me remue vraiment de lire entre les poésies de Rimbaud... ces phrases où l'animalité heureuse est retrouvée:

[Bataille quotes the first few stanzas of 'Les Reparties de Nina']⁶⁸

The obdurately ambiguous and ambivalent nature of Rimbaud's poetry however is starkly presented as Bataille notes that the poem which was written subsequently was 'Venus Anadyomène' and its sardonic and acid tone is foreshadowed in the final bathetic line of 'Les Reparties de Nina':

La repartie finale répond à la *rhétorique* du malheur:

ELLE: – Et mon bureau?⁶⁹

This dynamic is evident in Bataille's poetry, although in the two poems by Rimbaud Bataille quotes above, in which the ruining of the poem's concept or idea takes place rhetorically, while in Bataille's poems it functions structurally through the image. Rimbaud presents both, albeit in an ironic and detached way, such that vision is always framed by rhetoric and metaphor. This is arguably what Sartre objects to in poetic discourse and what Bataille insists upon: the *subjectification* of poetry; in Sartre's mind this can only lead to violence, disorder and the destruction of language. In Bataille's poetics the violence is not so far reaching as Sartre perhaps envisages it: violence is instead turned inwards in the form of sacrifice. This violence is necessary to overcome the repressive and debilitating effects of language upon subjective experience. Sacrifice does destroy the poem and the words within it but in this destruction it births a creation of silence and meaning beyond language yet within the subject.

Conclusions

I have sought to establish a perspective in this chapter that – in viewing Bataille's poetics at the level of the image, metaphor and verb – two conflicting paradigms are revealed that may be seen in the association of poetry as a function of sacrifice, followed by a move to neutralise the aimless destruction generated by the sacrificial moment in the paradigm of erotic fusion. Hill's writing on the sacrifice of sacrifice points to the evolving, dynamic thought in approaching writing practice and highlights the reciprocal influence at the heart of the poetics in which representation bleeds into form and form reflects representation. These two paradigms – sacrifice and its effacement – are arguably overcome by the use of the copula of the verb that directly posits the subject as an effect of language yet does so as an affect of the communication of experience and of subjectivity.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, OC XI, pp. 440-1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 441.

I argue in this chapter that the way Bataille overcomes the problem of representation of the subject – a method he shares with Breton who possibly influenced him in this respect initially – is through linguistic rather than visual, or poetic means, using the verb *to be* as the indicator of subjectivity. Bataille's consideration of the copula is evidence of a move to resolve the representation of ontology through the subject. In the same way Mallarmé referred to a guarantee of syntax to determine meaning, Bataille – as well as Breton – privilege the material aspect of the word and thus, the dynamic agent of the verb to stand for ontological presence. It is the verb that not only generates the presence of the subject within the poem but also fixes the poem's meaning to this subjective and thus, subversive and unstable, signifier.

The foregrounding of the subject opens up the poetics to political interpretation. Bataille's intentions for his projects after the war and his defence of Surrealism, in the face of Sartre's criticism, not only revolve around the political responsibilities of poetry but the value accorded to literary works and to writers in general. The ontological status of the subject that is core to the projects of Bataille, Sartre and Breton, may then be determined in terms of representation, a representation that Bataille – and to a similar extent Breton – argue is best communicated through poetry. The point of difference with Sartre is thus that he claims poetry distorts communication; communication and poetry are conflicting because poetry does not reliably or objectively say what it means. This, for Bataille, is precisely the point: poetry is a perversion of language and thus represents the agitation of being; poetry's anarchic, obscene or erotic disorder reflects the intrinsic guilt of the subject. Bataille's approach to poetry – in developing a poetics that theorises the destruction of poetry – is, I propose, intrinsic to subjectivity, not only in the vital sacrificial paradigm and operation but in a consideration of the subject residual from his own lapsed Catholicism (and probably no less the case for Rimbaud's subject) and thus one who confronts his inner experience and is guilty for doing so. *La Littérature et le mal* outlines the literary genealogy of guilt and evil – the subject's recognition and assumption of his own experience as sovereign is the cause of guilt and which is perceived as evil because it admits no higher philosophical or theological restraint – that has no *use* in any economy or system. Sartre and Breton strongly disavow and contest this uselessness and seek to situate and affirm the subject's authority through *revolt* in a social-political economy as well as in a cultural-linguistic one. These differences on the status of the subject are thus legible in the debates on the status of poetry: Breton and Sartre view poetry, variously, as an irreducible, elitist or rebellious discourse that cannot be recuperated by society or the law or by a rational mode of subjectivity; for Bataille the problem is that he initially perceives poetry to be symptomatic of the oppressive, moral and aesthetic systems that are manifest in beautiful poetry and, more generally, in the useless projects literature and philosophy produce. I suggest that this accounts for Bataille's strong albeit implicit association of poetry and experience. By confronting the impossible part of

being the subject is exposed to in the experience of sacrifice or eroticism, the nothingness that exists in the subject is not given a value – there is nothing redemptive in Orestes' crime – but it is avowed as essential to the subject's existence. This irreducible something, evil and guilt, is that which Bataille confronts and seeks to expose and desublimates in his representation of the subject; a representation – contrary to representational models thought by Sartre and Breton (to some extent) – that militates against itself because, in seeking to frame or evoke experience of being at the limit of formal, moral and aesthetic conventions, representation collapses: the subject is disarticulated in the poem as an effect of poetry's sacrificial mechanism of sacrificing words. This disarticulation of subjectivity informs the collapse of project and thus, while exposing the failure of language to depict experience, the experience of being at the limit is more worthwhile because the recognition and avowal of subjective lack is more liberating than becoming socially or politically engaged in a subservient role to fight for a system that is, essentially, indistinguishable from any other. Sacrifice is the means to expose this lack; the subject's fragmentation in experience is, arguably, overcoming this lack.

In regard to sacrifice, Rimbaud stands for the violence that consumes poetry and in its stead leaves the trace of this sacrifice in the image that is, in Nancy's terms, half within language and half already within the wordless sphere of the sacred. The two image paradigms detailed here represent, in broad terms: first, a violent depiction of sacrifice in the self-destructive and unstable image and, second, an attempt to represent experience through the eroticised configuration of fusion. This second mode threads together an operation of metonymy that takes the place of a disrupted metaphor (from the first paradigm), subjective recognition and alterity as well as the legacy of Romantic revolt. The suspended image approaches the ontological problem of the poetics by maintaining the experience of the subject in balance or in fusion with the exterior world related to – yet distinct from – the parodic system outlined in *L'Anus solaire*. Yet this desiring system still exerts its influence in that what is suspended is also the difference between states, including the living body and the dead body. The suspension in the conditions of differences in fusion, however, results in the compressing and crushing together of the erotic and thanatic drives within the subject. The image of 'L'Eternité' in which the sun is reflected in the ocean as a symbol of effacement, is the subject's perception of himself as an external projection: a reflection that is at once similarity and alterity. In affective terms the subject is alienated by the knowledge of his own death, the reflection is a doubling of the subject and thus a signal of his annihilation.

Poetry – be it through obscene or erotic themes – is bare or exposed representation; communication which attempts to undermine or subvert language, in either its functional, ordinary mode or lyrical, poetic mode. The significance of Rimbaud's project, according to Bataille, lies in its implicit, self-reflexive subversion of poetry, language and dialectics, with

the result that this transforms its ending – as well as the silence that results from the project's sacrificial terminus – into the most valuable and meaningful yet at once the most the inscrutable and useless part of the project. Rimbaud's poetic project provides a precedent in the evolving discourse of representation, a discourse that, through the thinking of the *voyant* project, becomes self-reflexive and, ultimately, self-destructive.

The starting point for the central argument of this thesis is that because Rimbaud determines the ideological meaning, formal precedents and representational eschatology of Bataille's own poetics he stands for poetry itself. Rimbaud is the exemplary poetic figure for Bataille because, by terminating his poetic project, Rimbaud thus delineated the position poetry was to stake out in Bataille's thought. The main reason for this is that Bataille, like Rimbaud, places the subject at the centre of his enquiry into experience. Rimbaud is criticised for having abandoned poetry because of his own lack of will. It may be possible then, to characterise Bataille's poetics as a determined attempt to act where Rimbaud failed – to experience the sovereign instant. Poetry is the best means to do this, to move beyond ordinary language and record the perversion of language as a means of communicating the willed determination not to weaken and surrender to beautiful poetry. Bataille rather wants to ruin poetry: the obscenity and the erotic scatology both mark the terrifying ordeal of the subject exposed to the extreme limit.

The core drive in Bataille's poetics, particularly his thought on sacrifice linked to experience, is to move beyond the perceived failure of Rimbaud's project; when Rimbaud reached the threshold of self-destruction but did not go through it. The poetics, then, occupy an ambivalent yet sharply delineated space in Bataille's *œuvre* at once critical to illuminating conceptual enquiries into experience and eroticism by way of articulating sacrifice but always and already destabilised by the violence sacrifice demands. Rimbaud's project pointed to the failure that destabilises a project, through the perversity poetry engenders in his *voyant* project, in which he tried to conjure a new means of expressing love in an unrepressed form of language. However, he could not resolve the conflicting impulse that was generated by undermining morality, distorting and mocking beauty and stripping formal rationality from poetry. This destructive impulse dominated his project. Bataille, uniquely I suggest, recognised this risk in Rimbaud's *œuvre*: Bataille's poetry expresses the ambivalence of being; an ambivalence that poetry can articulate because it perverts rational language.

The problem, in terms of poetry aligned to a guiding sacrificial metaphor, is that it militates against conventional communication, functional language and completion. Bataille's poetics repudiate poetry: therefore how does one of the central functions of poetry – representation – operate in a project destabilised by the conflicting aim of exploring the experience of subjectivity while already aware that experience – and thus its representation –

cannot succeed. Failure (of the poet's will) is the end point of Rimbaud's project and therefore failure and instability are built into the architecture of Bataille's poetics at both a conceptual level – one which is expressed through sacrifice (what is being sacrificed is the project or language and thus what is communicated is loss and failure) – and on a representational level (the disarticulation of the subject). Representation in the image must communicate failure. The image must depict failure because poetry itself is a discourse that articulates its own failure. The metaphor comprised of two parts creates a duality, which, as the basis of Surrealist poetics generates a novel and unpredictable tension in the dyadic image, which Breton likened to electricity. In Bataille's poetry, however, metaphor forms the basis of a parodic system in which the subject-object or object-object imitate each other in a metonymic operation that disrupts the original metaphor. Surrealism exerted a strong influence upon Bataille, albeit one he initially strongly reacted against on ideological grounds, while coming to recognise the Surrealist methodology generated – or at least had the potential to generate – a powerful representation of subjective revolt and ontology inscribed by the irrational.

The polemic between Bataille and Sartre in the 1940s, drawing in Breton and Surrealism, not only echoes the one between Bataille and Breton in the 1920s and '30s but revolves around the same issues of materialism and idealism. While the argument in the 1940s initially retains the same ideological framework, it develops to confront more overtly political problems conditioned by the demands made by existentialism. These problems were primarily perceived to be ones regarding the extent of personal and political responsibility. In regard to poetry Sartre cannot countenance the subversive quality of Bataille's poetics, which in his view, weaken poetry's capacity to engage politically. Sartre's criticism of Surrealism – that it did not commit fully to political engagement – is redolent of Bataille's yet Bataille is also criticised for retreating too far from politics. In quoting Rimbaud's poem as an example, Sartre affirms poetry's capacity to affect the reader in sharing the strangeness of poetic perception, based on its material aspect but this strangeness must be limited by language. Sartre sees direct action as more useful than poetic strangeness or linguistic perversity. While it is clear that direct action has more of an immediate effect – Bataille and Breton would not disagree – they also realise, however, that poetry should not be so easily dismissed. Bataille, like Breton, acknowledges social and political freedom is not worth much if there is no freedom of communication or representation in the artistic or personal spheres even if, in Bataille's case, a commitment to articulating this kind of freedom destabilises the conditions necessary to sustain it. Thus poetry and, specifically its material aspect, become contentious. For Rimbaud and for Bataille language should not represent the limit for poetry because if language cannot be approached or engaged with then it correspondingly delimits the subject in the poem. The poem is the voice of the subject and must revolt against the inhibiting codes

operating within language that suppress expression. The projects of Bataille and Rimbaud show this fight cannot, on these terms, ever be won but whether through an obscene word or through irreducible silence, it is this revolt that defines the subject because it is his sovereign experience of freedom that is at stake.

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