

Documents in the 1970s: Bataille, Barthes and 'Le gros orteil'

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In sharp contrast to his current profile, the presence of Georges Bataille in the intellectual context of France and beyond was, up to his death in 1962, a relatively withdrawn, even hidden presence. Aside from his role as founder and director of the review *Critique* it is via the pathologising and indeed hysterical attacks on him by André Breton, in the *Deuxième manifeste du surréalisme*, in 1929, and by Jean-Paul Sartre, in 'Un nouveau mystique?', in 1943, that his name, for all but a few, would have been remarked, at least in the broader field of French culture and its translations overseas.¹ This is symptomatic, of course: that the two most powerful and influential intellectual figures of the French 20th century felt it necessary to mark their rejection of Bataille signals his importance, not only as a foreign body to be expelled 'hors de toute forme'² as he would say, but also as an object of desire. It was in the 1960s that this situation alters; Marguerite Duras was behind a brief *hommage* to the author of *Madame Edwarda* in the review *La Cigüe* in 1958, now more or less inaccessible, but the most consequent impulse for the re-inscription of Bataille from the 1960s onwards came with the obituary issue of *Critique* (1963), the review he founded in 1946, where key figures of the decade - Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Philippe Sollers - wrote alongside associates and friends of Bataille from earlier generations - Michel Leiris, Raymond Queneau, André Masson, Maurice Blanchot, Pierre Klossowski.³ The theoretical force of Bataille's thought was further pursued and perpetuated in a key article of 1967 by Jacques Derrida, included in *L'Écriture et la différence*.⁴ The review *Tel Quel*, which from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s was a major reference point for the avant-garde and for the emergence of what is now called 'French theory', had played the major role in the re-activation of Bataille, whose living presence had been evoked around its inception in 1960.⁵ *Tel Quel* published lectures by Bataille from late in his life ('Conférences sur le non-savoir'), and, in 1968, would publish 'La "vielle taupe" et le préfixe "sur" dans les mots "sur-homme" et "surréalisme",' alongside critical texts by Denis Hollier, the prime mover behind the recovery of Bataille's textual legacy.⁶ A climactic moment came in the early 1970s, with the publication of the first volume of Bataille's *Œuvres complètes* by Gallimard, prefaced by Foucault and including Bataille's contributions to *Documents*, as well as *Histoire de l'œil*, by Lord Auch. In 1972 *Tel Quel* organised a colloquium titled 'Artaud/Bataille: vers une révolution culturelle,' at which Bataille with Artaud provided the armoury with which *Tel Quel* - now overtly Maoist - launched anew its 'machine de guerre contre les idées reçues,' to paraphrase Leiris on *Documents*.⁷

But where is *Documents* in this redrawing of the map? It is perhaps worth pointing out that, somewhat like Bataille's other interventions, *Documents* disappears once its moment has passed, true to the function of an avant-garde. The afterlife of *Documents* can of course be traced



in the itineraries of its many contributors; in Bataille's case its persistence is there in the extended critical engagement with Breton and surrealism, to which, it must be stressed, Bataille and *Documents* were rigorously hostile, at least until after the war, when Bataille's critique of surrealism was reoriented towards a 'morale de révolte,' the principal adversary this time being Sartre.⁸ In the critical context, however, *Documents* disappears until Leiris' article in the 1963 issue of *Critique* sketches its character (as 'impossible'), and points to Bataille's contributions.⁹ The bibliography to the special issue (the first critical moment, I would wager, when Bataille appears as the author of an 'œuvre' featuring the *Documents* texts as well as the pseudonymous works *Histoire de l'œil*, *Madame Edwarda* and so on) lists all of Bataille's contributions to the review. Leiris would also contribute to a special issue of the review *L'Arc* on Bataille in 1968, this time specifically on *Histoire de l'œil*, but linking its thematics to those mobilised in Bataille's *Documents* texts.¹⁰

However, until the early 1970s *Documents* was not significantly present among the elements of Bataille's legacy that were reinscribed or revisited, partly perhaps simply as a result of problems of accessibility. There is no mention of *Documents*, or of any pre-war text save 'La notion de dépense' and "La vieille taupe" in Derrida's crucial article 'Un hégélianisme sans réserve,' for example. Until the more recent and exclusive focus and emphasis on this period of Bataille's output in the review *October* and on the part of its participants, and separately on the part of Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Documents* has not been a major element of the active legacy of Bataille... with a significant exception.

This is the perhaps surprising presence of *Documents* period Bataille in the work of Roland Barthes. Barthes himself comments on the incongruity he senses in relation to Bataille:

In the end I am barely affected by Bataille: what have I got to do with laughter, devotion, poetry, violence? What have I got to say about the 'sacred', or the 'impossible' ?

[Bataille en somme me touche peu: qu'ai-je à faire avec le rire, la dévotion, la poésie, la violence? Qu'ai-je à dire du 'sacré', de l' 'impossible' ?]¹¹

While Barthes says here that what makes Bataille's texts 'stick' for him is the association of the thematics he lists above with fear, it is significant that the elements of Bataille's work which Barthes does consider come from the period of *Documents* and before. He is less interested in questions of experience, sacrifice, and expenditure than in what he reads as the structural operations of displacement and subversion at work in *Histoire de l'œil* and in the *Documents* texts. It should be noted however that the choice of Balzac's 'Sarrasine' as the object of scrutiny in Barthes' idiosyncratic model of 'textual reading' – *S/Z* – is at least in part inspired by its inclusion in the preface to *Le Bleu du ciel*, as one of those books you feel must have been written 'in



rage.¹² Bataille functions to fracture, to displace, the structuralist paradigm. This operation is already at work in Barthes' article 'La métaphore de l'œil,' his seminal contribution to the 1963 issue of *Critique*. I have considered this critical encounter elsewhere and it is not the immediate concern here.¹³ *Documents* surfaces in Barthes' contribution to the 1972 *Tel Quel* colloquium, in a paper titled 'Les Sorties du texte' where he considers Bataille's 'Le gros orteil,' published in *Documents* 6, in some detail.¹⁴ It is this text that I want to discuss here, for the following reasons: firstly, it is a decisive step in the trajectory of Barthes' thought and writing; as a consequence it performs what I see as a epistemologically crucial step in the displacement of the paradigmatic model of structure which to a large extent had dominated literary-critical work in the 1960s. This displacement is also a key if discrete reference point in the recent work on the *informe*, and in the elaborations from and around Bataille taken forward by Rosalind Krauss in *The Optical Unconscious*, for example, and in the book which accompanied the 1996 exhibition on the *informe* curated by Krauss. Thirdly, a key element of the displacement effected by Barthes is the introduction of the Nietzschean notion of *value*, which supplements, exceeds and problematises the semiological concern with meaning, which had been at the forefront of Barthes' concerns up to that point. Related to the notion of value, dragged along with it, is the question of singularity, of the body; value is value for me, as an affective body, above and beyond the subject as producer and recipient of the sign, upholstered in this structural matrix into symbolic belonging. Finally, and in summary, I focus on this text as it is to my knowledge the first major critical engagement with *Documents* after its demise in 1930, prior to the later critical studies by Hollier, Krauss, Didi-Hubermann and others.¹⁵

Significantly, Barthes' reference to the text of 'Le gros orteil,' if I might be allowed some further indulgence of philology, is not to the recently published first volume of the *Œuvres complètes*, but to the edition of Bataille's *Documents* contributions by Mercure de France in 1968, edited by Bernard Noël, the French poet whose work in many ways most overtly extends the legacy of texts like *Histoire de l'œil*.¹⁶ Noël, significantly not allied to *Tel Quel*, appears extrinsic to the main literary and theoretical contexts and groupings of the time, and this publication comes at a time when he had explicitly distanced himself from literary creation. *Documents* does feature in *Tel Quel*'s re-affirmation of Bataille; in 1968 *Tel Quel* published "'La vieille taupe'" as I noted above, re-activating the polemic with surrealism partly for strategic reasons, appending a critical analysis by Hollier situating the text in the context of the polemical interchange sparked by Bataille's 'Le langage des fleurs' and 'Le jeu lugubre.' 'Le bas matérialisme et la gnose' and the dictionary entry 'Matérialisme' were also cited by Sollers in the elaboration of a materialism which would become the philosophical line of the review.¹⁷ Noël's re-edition, however, appears outside this context, appears extrinsically, just as Barthes text 'Les Sorties du texte' seems to me to stick out from the other all highly individual and exceptional contributions to the *Tel Quel* conference, by Julia Kristeva, Sollers, Hollier, Marcelin Pleyenet, Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean-Louis Houdebine



and François Wahl. Barthes' text is an exception among exceptions, if such an idea can be entertained, or, at least, it can be seen to resonate on a different wavelength.

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I have suggested that Barthes' text resists any easy contextualization within the polemical and strategic re-activation of Bataille's critical opposition to surrealism on the part of *Tel Quel*, and within the context of its version of dialectical materialism. Bataille functions differently for Barthes, in relation to a different problematic. This is borne out by his reference to the same *Documents* text in a slightly earlier article of 1970 which appeared in a dossier on Eisenstein in *Cahiers du cinéma*.¹⁸ The article, titled 'Le troisième sens' is concerned with several stills or photograms from Eisenstein films, and elaborates a notion of 'le sens obtus,' which has decisively Bataillean resonances. The obtuse meaning or 'third meaning' of the photogram is excessive, 'en trop,' supplementary.¹⁹ It is deployed outside the fields of culture and of knowledge: 'the obtuse meaning seems to open out outside culture, knowledge, information; analytically, it has a somewhat derisory quality' ['le sens obtus semble s'éployer hors de la culture, du savoir, de l'information; analytiquement, il a quelque chose de dérisoire'].²⁰ But the obtuse meaning is not a negation, it does not negate the cultural meanings that the same sign carries: it is 'a non-negating derision of expression' ['une dérision non-négatrice de l'expression'].²¹ It is a useless expenditure: 'it belongs to the species of word-games, jokes, useless expenditures' ['il est de la race des jeux de mots, des bouffonneries, des dépenses inutiles'].²² And it is also an evaluation: 'the obtuse meaning carries a certain emotive force... it is an emotion-value, an evaluation' ['le sens obtus porte un certain émotion... c'est une émotion-valeur, une évaluation'].²³ Its eroticism, finally, can 'include' the ugly but also 'the very opposite of opposition' ['le dehors même de la contrariété']:

This is to say : the limit, inversion, discontent, and perhaps sadism: the very things of which Georges Bataille spoke, particularly in the text from *Documents* which for me situates one of the possible regions of the obtuse meaning: *The Queen's Big Toe* (I don't remember the exact title).

[C'est-à-dire la limite, l'inversion, le malaise, et peut-être le sadisme: cela même dont a pu parler Georges Bataille, singulièrement dans ce texte de *Documents* qui situe pour moi l'une des régions possibles du sens obtus: *Le gros orteil de la reine* (je ne me rappelle pas le titre exact).]²⁴

Barthes' uncharacteristic mistitling of the text points to a focus on the end of Bataille's text and the story of the count of Villamediana who took his obsession with the queen so far as to touch her



feet. For Bataille this indicates 'base seduction' and a 'burlesque value' and points to the strategy of his own text:

The meaning of this article lies in the insistence on directly and explicitly bringing to light *that which seduces*, without taking account of poetic cookery, which in the end is only a detour.

[Le sens de cet article repose dans une insistance à mettre en cause directement et explicitement *ce qui séduit*, sans tenir compte de la cuisine poétique, qui n'est en définitive qu'un détournement...]²⁵

This is to say that the obtuse sense has nothing to do with aesthetics ('ne fait pas acception d'esthétique,' writes Barthes).²⁶ For the opposition beauty/ugliness Bataille substitutes the opposition high/low, or more exactly, displaces and disables aesthetic or 'poetic' values by adding the supplement of the base or low to the contradiction beautiful/ugly. Aesthetics is not negated, it is simply beside the point.

The paper on Bataille, two years later in 1972, would allow Barthes to focus more closely on Bataille's text and moreover to develop the obtuse meaning within the more explicitly theoretical framework of Nietzsche's theory of values. Barthes insists on the proximity between Bataille and Nietzsche but also, implicitly, on the displacement Bataille operates in relation to Nietzsche. In this instance it is not the Nietzsche of the eternal return who is at stake, but the Nietzsche of the *Genealogy of Morals*; the nodal point of Barthes' analysis is the question of value. In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Barthes categorises the last 'phase' of his thought with reference to the 'intertext' of Nietzsche and the 'genre' of morality.²⁷ He also cites without commentary a section from 'Les sorties du texte' on the question of value and knowledge.²⁸ This suggests that Bataille's text plays the role, here, of a kind of hinge, introducing a Nietzschean orientation into his semiology.

A possible intertext is Gilles Deleuze's 1962 text *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, which I would wager is a major critical source behind Barthes' reading of Nietzsche, and which can serve to highlight the salient elements of Barthes' approach.²⁹ In the first sentence of *Nietzsche et la philosophie* Deleuze highlights the question of value in Nietzsche's work: 'Nietzsche's most general project is the introduction of the concepts of sense and value into philosophy.'³⁰ While a straightforward semiology receives the fact in so far as it signifies (as Barthes writes in 'Myth Today' in 1957), for Nietzsche, Deleuze asserts, phenomena have meaning and are appraised on the basis of values, which presuppose evaluations.³¹ Evaluations, moreover, are differential, premised on different 'styles of life' or 'modes of existence.'³² In a proposition which resonates strikingly with Barthes' text, Deleuze writes:



There are things that can only be said, felt or conceived, values which can only be adhered to, on condition of 'base' evaluation, 'base' living and thinking. This is the crucial point; *high* and *low*, *noble* and *base* are not values but represent the differential element from which the value of values themselves derives.³³

Any phenomenon is a sign or a symptom, moreover, of a force, of a forceful appropriation of a thing by a force or by forces. Deleuze writes: 'the whole of philosophy is a symptomatology, and a semiology.'³⁴ The sign is not a straightforward relation between signifier and signified; it is the symptom of the appropriation of a thing by a force. Seen in this light, Bataille's text on the big toe is a symptomatology of the foot; it asks: what forces have appropriated the foot, and on the basis of what kind of evaluations, what moralities and modes of existence?

In Barthes' itinerary this Nietzschean inflexion has the result that phenomena are of interest not only in so far as they signify, but in so far as they signify *for me*.³⁵ It is on the basis of the introduction of the evaluative moment in signification, and thus the introduction of questions of appropriation and power that the rest of Barthes' work will focus on questions such as pleasure, the body, love, living with others and the neutral. What is at stake here is a shift from semiology to what we might call a post-semiology, a shift of which Barthes' reading of Bataille is a motivating force.

A significant element of the challenge posed by Bataille as Barthes reads it thus relates to the notion of value and the history of values. Nietzsche and Bataille, Barthes argues, diagnose the decadence of the present in terms of a flattening of values ('*aplatissement des valeurs*').³⁶ The bourgeois denies the evaluations which support bourgeois culture and passes them off as self-evident truth, denies them as *evaluations*. The quasi-Nietzschean impetus of Barthes' *Mythologies* is retrospectively illuminated – mythological analysis diagnoses the evaluation at work in the tropistic *tourniquet* of the second-order sign that is the myth. At this level semiology, at least in its application to meta-languages, is Nietzschean in its unmasking of the will to power inherent in such forms of denegation. Bourgeois decadence is 'un système du mesquin' ('a mean system'), a petty, niggardly evaluation.³⁷ Both Nietzsche and Bataille trace an 'apocalyptic history of values,' and relate the present to another time, another temporality, in which primary evaluations were explicitly articulated as such.³⁸ Barthes thus detects two temporal levels in Bataille's text: ethnological time and historical time, the latter quintessentially that of Christianity. Two systems of evaluation pertain to each of these temporalities: in the first, the low is deprecated and the high exalted; in the second the low is censored. The deprecation of the low is itself an evaluation, as the low instantiates a *seduction*. In historical, Christian time, the seduction of the low is censored, the evaluation repressed and belied by the laugh. In the first case transgression is 'savage': 'value lies in the *savage* transgression of the interdiction,' in the second,



the condemnatory evaluation of the foot is flattened and repressed.³⁹ Bataille's *Documents* text becomes, in this light, a critical confrontation of the two value-systems, or rather, a confrontation of the 'savage' and mythical system of open evaluations with the repression and weakening of evaluation as such. Bataille's 'honesty' about the seduction of the foot, of the base (this is how I read the term 'sauvage' in Barthes' rhetoric), is part of a critique of the decline of values; it is a chapter in a genealogy of morals.

With the shift from ethnological to historical time, we move from a strong condemnation, from transgression and seduction, to a weak condemnation, with which is associated the sublime, the aesthetic, *la pudeur*. The effect of the introduction of value, or evaluation, is to disturb the hierarchy of the concept and the elevation of man. It also destabilises the autonomy of knowledge, since, as Nietzsche writes: 'Behind all logic and its apparent autonomy there stand evaluations.'⁴⁰ Barthes reads in Bataille's text two regimes of knowledge, two codes; the first is 'endoxal,' 'official,' so to speak. It is that, Barthes suggests, of Salomon Reinach, the esteemed archaeologist and historian of religion whose book *Cultes, mythes et religions* Bataille footnotes in 'Le gros orteil.' It is also that of the 'Messieurs du Comité de Rédaction de *Documents*,' in Barthes' words.⁴¹ Barthes thus posits *Documents* as representing orthodox or doxic knowledge, 'citational, referential and reverential knowledge' ['savoir citationnel, référentiel, révérentiel'] and Bataille's place within it as parodic and subversive.⁴² This assessment on Barthes' part may not be on the basis of a full reading of the journals themselves and of the heterogeneity and complexity of the contributions, for example, of Carl Einstein, not to mention Leiris, Robert Desnos and others. The point, however, is that this doxic knowledge is accompanied by a second 'code' of knowledge, specific to Bataille, which is 'a burlesque and heteroclit knowledge,' tending towards a culture of 'curiosities,' characterised by the 'strange' and the 'detail.'⁴³ This amateurish discourse troubles the 'arrogance' of science (a reference repeated in later works by Barthes⁴⁴) through the pluralisation of knowledge, against knowledge as a monolithic and totalising system. Bataille's approach to knowledge is not oppositional but textual, in so far as different elements or fragments of knowledge lie alongside one another without any one taking precedence. Knowledge becomes a series of 'curious facts,' a burlesque; subversion operates here not through hysterical or neurotic negation but through *bricolage*. While it may appear that Barthes is making Bataille out to be a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, Barthes points to this strategy with regard to knowledge as 'already an operation of writing,' an operation in other words of what, around the same time, he will call the *text*.⁴⁵

While the question of the text and of writing will return later, it is also worth emphasising at this point the effect of Bataille's writing in *Documents* on Barthes' text, on his writing strategy; the 'Dictionnaire Critique' of *Documents* provided Barthes with an intertext and a matrix for the critical style and the form he would adopt in his writing from the early 1970s onwards. This was the first instance of the alphabetically ordered fragments or 'entries' which characterised *Le*



Plaisir du texte, Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* and the 'course' *Comment vivre ensemble*. This formal strategy, as Barthes notes, undoes (*déjoue*) cohesion and avoids any rhetoric of 'development,' imposing a 'zero degree of order.'⁴⁶ It assures a pluralisation of knowledge and an indifference to hierarchy which counter the drive to appropriation (le 'vouloir saisir').⁴⁷ In undoing the logic of development it also tends to undo the conceptual security of the concepts of beginning and end. In parallel to this serialisation of the textual body, Barthes highlights the way that Bataille's writing undoes the hierarchy and cohesion of the organic body; in *Le Plaisir du texte* he had wondered if for certain fetishists the sentence ('la phrase') might not be a body.⁴⁸ The third section of Barthes' essay 'Commencement' ('Beginning') provides a link between the question of the body of the text and the text of the body:

Bataille asks the question about beginning in an area where it had never been asked before: where does the human body begin ?

[Bataille pose la question du commencement là où on ne l'avait jamais posé : *par où commence le corps humain?*]⁴⁹

What is at stake here, in this question about where the body begins, which Barthes takes from Bataille's dictionary entry 'Mouth'? Barthes' analysis suggests that what Bataille does is to bring to light the evaluations on which conceptions of the body are premised. An evaluation which starts with the head necessarily presupposes a deprecatory condemnation of the foot as low, and therefore as a site of seduction, of potential transgression. The semiotics of the body presuppose an evaluation; the body does not signify 'in itself.' Moreover, the question of the 'beginning' of the body implies a structuring of flows; psychoanalysis poses such an order of flows in the paradigm of mouth and anus and the narrative of stages, and, one might add, polarises the body around the phallus through the concept of fetishism. Bataille insists that the body starts nowhere; its flows are multiple and in all directions, erupting spontaneously and being intermittently audible. The semiotics of the body, the *sense* of the body depends thus on a 'vestorisation,' an ordering of flows according to a paradigm or an 'interpretative fiction.' Bataille's fiction of the body – it 'starts' with the toe - relies on the paradigm of foot and hand or toe/finger, but this is posed as a fiction. It is posed alongside the psychoanalytic semiotics of fetishism, not against it. It is another evaluation, another fiction which displaces that of orthodox or scientific knowledge, and outplays it not according to the paradigm of true/false, but as one of a series of fictions, as non-true, allowing a 'rest,' as Barthes suggests via Nietzsche, from the conflict for truth.⁵⁰

Bataille himself proposed alternative semiotics of the body, alternative fictions of the body, notably in *Histoire de l'œil* but also elsewhere in *Documents*, in the article 'Mouth,' for example, and also in *L'anus solaire* and in the pineal eye texts. It may be a mistake to see these



exclusively as a celebration of the object for its own sake. What Barthes' reading suggests is that Bataille's texts operate strategically, as structural re-calibrations of the semiotic codings of the body. Such structural displacements are also evident in the operations Bataille brings to bear on the language of flowers, on architecture, on the classical figure of the horse, and so on. The operation consists in displacing the evaluation on which knowledge is premised, making it appear as one of a series of fictions; alternative evaluative paradigms are proposed, different mappings of the body.

In the chapter 'Part Objects' of *Formless: a User's Guide* Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois interestingly propose a parallel between Barthes' account of the chains of signifiers in *Histoire de l'œil* and Deleuze and Guattari's critique of Melanie Klein in *Anti-Oedipus*.⁵¹ Here body parts are liberated from 'persons' and from intersubjective relations and become 'impersonal but permutational' elements of desiring machines.⁵² They detect this operation at work in *Documents*, not only in the textual subversion of the classical, psychoanalytic or scientific body, but also in the 'rotation' of the body in the photographs which appeared in *Documents*. Pierre Fédida, in a book which takes Barthes' question 'where does the human body begin' as its title, also writes that the effect of Bataille's textual operation is 'a change in the vision of the body – the body being always literally overturned by the "tasks" of words' ['un changement dans la vision du corps – le corps étant toujours littéralement *bouleversé* par les "besognes" des mots']⁵³ And while Krauss and Bois highlight the horizontal flipping of the body in the photographic practice of Man Ray, for example, they also foreground the proposition in Bataille's writing of a different verticality.⁵⁴ This operation is at work in the 'Big Toe' text; schematically, the argument goes as follows: the big toe is the most human part of the body because it is most differentiated from the corresponding part of the monkey. No longer tree-gripping, the big toe enables man to stand upright. Despite the fact that the big toe plays a vital role in the shift to upright posture of which humanity is so proud, the foot is seen as something vile, like spittle. This betrays a fundamental evaluation ('an indelible conception') of the body – the higher parts are noble, the lower parts are vile, hidden by modesty ('la pudeur') and obscured by aesthetics ('la cuisine poétique').⁵⁵ But they cannot completely obscure the basic vertical tendencies of the human body: aspiration towards elevation countered by an ineradicable anchoring in the mud. Bataille's text is thus structured around a repeated vertical opposition between movement upwards and movement downwards, of which we can list some minimal elements:

Up:

Erection / light headed / elevation / sky / celestial space / pure space / ideal / the purest energy / an elevated aspiration / ideal light and beauty



[Érection/tête légère/élévation/ciel/espace céleste/espace pur/idéal/ Elan le plus pur / Une aspiration élevée / La lumière et la beauté ideale]

Down :

Spit / foot / mud / hell / filth / atrocious pain in the toe / corns on the feet / fall flat in the mud / brutal fall / death / cadaverous look / derision / the base character of the foot

[Crachat/pied/la boue/enfer/ordure/ atroce douleur à l'orteil / les cors aux pieds / faire étaler dans la boue/chute brutale/ la mort/l'aspect cadavérique/dérision / la bassesse du pied]

This suggests a recurrent 'cosmic' vertical matrix in Bataille's work, a 'to and fro' between elevation and collapse, which may be figured in the image of a headless body with pineal eye erected upwards and monstrous big toe stuck in the mud. The exorbitant eye and the big toe meet in absolute tension in the characteristically explosive juxtaposition which closes Bataille's text: 'opening the eyes wide in front of a big toe' ['écarquillant les yeux devant un gros orteil']⁵⁶ This is presumably what the readers of Bataille's text were doing at the very moment of reading, with Boiffard's photographs in front of them.

Although, as suggested above, Bataille's critical re-evaluation as read by Barthes re-asserts the paradigm of high and low against the bourgeois 'aplatissement des valeurs,' and although Bataille's contributions to *Documents* bear the usual interpretation as a 'low blow,' the serial logic hinted at here is a further destabilisation. Barthes notes that in Bataille's text the apparatus of meaning is not destroyed, it is 'ex-centred,' made to limp.⁵⁷ This is how it seems to work: Nietzsche postulates what Barthes calls 'an unmoveable paradigm' ['un paradigme intraitable']: noble/vile.⁵⁸ In the first part of the *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche asserts that the received conception of morality derives from an original evaluation on the part of the powerful between themselves – the good – and the 'inferior' 'lower depths of humanity,' an evaluation which was essentially an affirmation of the style of life of the powerful.⁵⁹ Nietzsche then traces the movement by which, according to him, the weak and inferior came to dominate human culture. The positive affirmation of life is usurped, the story goes, by the logic of *ressentiment*. In other texts Nietzsche predicts the overturning of this nihilism into joyous affirmation, the acceleration of destruction and the triumph of the positive.

With Bataille, Barthes suggests, the paradigm is structured differently, and it follows that the account of history and of the future is different. Barthes suggests that the paradigm is ternary; there are three poles: noble/ignoble/base. He then proceeds to an accounting of expressions in these three registers, taken from 'The Big Toe' and from 'The Notion of Expenditure.' *Noble* pertains to the social stratae of rulers and kings, those who sacrifice, those who expend prodigiously. *Ignoble* pertains to shame, hypocrisy, the bourgeois, the grocer, poetry. *Base*, the



third term, includes all that is materially related to the body and to 'base matter': spittle, mud, blood, viscera, the corpse, the organs. On the one hand a social paradigm, on the other, matter. The two 'positive' terms of noble and base or ideal and material come to squeeze out as negative the mediocre term, which is not the contradiction of the noble nor the condemnation of the base, but the repressive and hypocritical flattening of both. In other words, what Bataille is about here is a positive evaluation of the basely material, which has the effect of illuminating the 'real' paradigm of high and low, eliminating the false value of the mediocre, repressive and ashamed, which in fact is not so much a value as a repression of evaluation as such. The affirmation of the base appears as an antidote to nihilism, whereby things appear not as shamefully repressed but 'as they are,' according to a quasi-cosmological tension between the seductions of sky and of mud.

What Bataille appears to do to Nietzsche here then is to displace the paradigm of noble and vile – which functions in terms of power and will to power, by that of high and low, which does not, which functions instead in terms of a cosmology. Nietzsche's will to power, that of the Overman, for example, is reviewed by Bataille as an 'Icarian' tendency toward solar elevation.⁶⁰ The paradigm of noble and vile is subverted by its displacement towards a materialist and gnostic diagnosis of solar elevation and entropic collapse.

Bataille's interpretative fictions, moreover, are not straightforwardly logical. Barthes notes in passing that Bataille uses a 'falsely naïve' transition, 'en outre' (besides) in moving from a discussion of high heels to the sexual anxiety regarding the foot.⁶¹ Indeed in the *Documents* texts at large and in Bataille's writing as a whole the indications of logical relation are extremely weak. Those terms such as therefore, however, because, and so on, which would order elements according to a logic of predication, contradiction and cause and effect are 'falsely naïve' in that they appear to promise logical consequence but in fact offer none. We can see this elsewhere in 'The Big Toe,' in which Bataille 'borrows' the language of logic and argument : 'in the sense that', 'this pertains to the fact that...' 'is one of the explanations of the tendency', 'on the other hand', etc. ['en ce sens que,' Ceci tient au fait que..., 'est une des explications de la Tendance,' 'Par contre'].. But the appearance of a logic of consequence and opposition seems to hide a logic of association and seriality, more like that proposed by Bataille in 'L'anus solaire': 'It is clear that the world is purely parodic, which is to say that each thing one looks at is the parody of another, or even the same thing in deceptive form' ['Il est claire 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'].⁶² X is to Y as A is to B collapses into x1, x2, x3, x4 etc. This form of materialism, Barthes indicates, sometimes borrows the ready-made associative chains of idiom and etymology, and works according to the 'tasks' of words rather than of concepts. We can see this at work again in *Histoire de l'œil* and elsewhere in *Documents*, and the operation is given a theoretical 'programme' in the celebrated entry 'Informe,' where, as Barthes notes, Bataille proposes that 'A dictionary would begin from the moment where it would give not the meanings of



words but their tasks' ['Un dictionnaire commencerait à partir du moment où il ne donnerait plus le sens mais les besognes des mots'].⁶³ Barthes reads 'besogne' as 'the work of the word' ['le travail du mot'] and the *jouissance* of the word ['la jouissance du mot']: 'the way the word "rummages" in the inter-text, in connotation' ['comme le mot "farfouille" dans l'inter-texte, dans la connotation'].⁶⁴ He thus displaces Bataille's strategy in *Documents* towards a textual materialism, in which, as he puts it, 'the body is engendered on the very surface of language' ['le corps s'engendre à même la langue'].⁶⁵

Ultimately, then, or at least in its last serial fragment, Barthes' reading of 'The Big Toe' deflects the quasi-cosmological angle of the values of high and low and insists on the textual nature of the operation Bataille undertakes here. The strategy is allied to writing ('écriture' rather than 'écrivance'⁶⁶), and to textual work ('travail textuel'⁶⁷), where textual does not imply a formalism but an operation carried out on language insofar as it is a vehicle of values instilled in the associations of words, in what words do, their tasks. Fédida suggests something similar when he writes that the affirmation of the base, of the Nietzschean 'l'envers des choses,' relates not to a hermeneutics - that is to a search for a truer version of things - but to what he calls 'a sort of physiological philology.' Bataille's strategy would thus be 'to make the thing fantastic and allow writing to make the vocable of the word exceed the name of the thing' ['d'émerveiller la chose et laisser l'écriture excéder le nom de la chose par son vocable'].⁶⁸ The vocable – the word exists in English – would not be the meaning of the word but its formal effect beyond signification, the value of the word. For Barthes, as for Fédida, Bataille's text would thus subvert the security and arrogance of knowledge through the irruption of value in the very tissue of the text, and through the production of fictions of knowledge by the values of words, or word-values. Barthes ends his article with the hypothesis of a 'linguistics of value,' where the focus would not be on the exchange-value of meaning but on the combative or erotic use-value of words.⁶⁹ But this linguistics of value is at work, in practice, in the Text, in writing: textual practice would be a science or a genealogy of values in action.⁷⁰ In an essay which in many ways extends and elaborates the propositions of Barthes' 1972 essay, Pierre Fédida suggests that the *mot-valeur*, which in Bataille's text is written as *besogne* or as *aspect*, removes the repression to which the word is subject in being limited to meaning. The erotic use-value of the word exceeds its meaning and gives access, Fédida proposes, to a *jouissance* of language structurally prior to the repression necessary for symbolic meaning:

Through the resonance of the word and of silence the vocable is a value which undermines 'knowledge words' behind their back : it retains, even in writing, the *aspect* of things, which has somehow escaped repression.



De par sa résonance de parole et de silence le vocable est une *valeur* travaillant à leur insu les « mots-savoir » : il réserve jusque dans l'écriture *l'aspect* des choses, en quelque sorte soustrait au refoulement.⁷¹

And further:

To say that writing, if it is driven by the movement of the vocable, opens words out to the value of non-repression, is to bring the corporeal into the physical action of language, a corporeality which challenges its own representations, even those of fetishism.

[Prétendre que l'écriture, si elle est entraînée par le *mouvement* du vocable, ouvre l'accès des mots à la valeur du non-refoulement, c'est faire venir dans l'action physique du langage, le corporel qui défie jusqu'au fétichisme de ses propres représentations].⁷²

The apparent opposition between readings of Bataille that emphasise the affirmation of the base or construe it as abject, low or base in the moral sense, and readings of Bataille that emphasise the structural operation at work in his texts may be resolved here, by seeing the operation as one which is carried out in and on language rather than in terms of axiological values. Readings of Bataille which celebrate a 'return' to a 'primitive' state would thus miss the point that the operation Bataille undertakes is one which dissects and redistributes the body of culture insofar as it is carried by and in language.

Barthes' final words – continuing the fantasy of a linguistics of value – propose that such an analysis would pick out in a text those words which were 'sufficiently outlined, sufficiently brilliant, to make themselves loved, like fetishes' ['suffisamment découpés, suffisamment brillants, triomphants, pour se faire aimer, à la façon de fétiches'].⁷³ The return of fetishism here recalls Bataille's infamous challenge in 'The modern spirit...' – to find an art lover who loves a painting as much as a fetishist loves a shoe. Given the deflection of any unilateral reference to the psychoanalytic theory of fetishism by Bataille, or by Barthes, what is suggested here is an erotics of language which stands outside any definition in terms of perversion, which fashions an affective body with deviated word-values. Bataille in *Documents* is the symptomatologist of this body.



¹ See André Breton, 'Deuxième manifeste du Surréalisme' in *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Paris 1972, 144-49 ; Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Un nouveau mystique ?' in *Situations I*, Paris 1947, 174-229.

² In the polemical text 'La Valeur d'usage de D.A.F. de Sade' Bataille says he envisages readers who are unlike those he already knows but are rather 'men (and especially masses) who are comparatively decomposed, having become amorphous and even violently expelled outside any form' ['des hommes (et surtout des masses) comparativement décomposés, devenus amorphes et même expulsés avec violence hors de toute forme']. Cf. *Œuvres Complètes II*, Paris 1970, 55.

³ *Critique* (195-6) Aug-Sept 1963, 'Hommage à Georges Bataille.'

⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale : un hégélianisme sans réserve' in *Écriture et Différence*, Paris 1967 (originally published in the special issue of the review *L'Arc* of 1967).

⁵ Cf. Patrick ffrench, *The Time of Theory: A History of Tel Quel*, Oxford 1996.

⁶ *Tel Quel* 34, Summer 1968; Denis Hollier, 'Le savoir formel.'

⁷ Michel Leiris, 'De Bataille l'impossible à l'impossible Documents' in *Critique* (195-6), 689.

⁸ See Patrick ffrench, 'Donner à Voir: Sacrifice and Poetry in the Work of Georges Bataille' *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (42), 2006, 126-138.

⁹ Cf. Michel Leiris, 'De Bataille l'impossible.'

¹⁰ Michel Leiris, 'Du temps de Lord Auch,' *L'Arc : Georges Bataille*, Paris 1967. Leiris suggests that the 'Dictionnaire critique' of *Documents* 'completes the exegesis' of *Histoire de l'œil* on a different level, 12.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Paris 1975, 147.

¹² Cf. *S/Z*, Seuil, Collection 'Tel Quel,' Paris, 1970, 23 ; Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes III*, Gallimard, Paris, 1971, 381. Bataille gives the title as *Sarrazine*; Barthes, who cites the passage in *S/Z*, adds '(sic.)'.

¹³ Cf. Patrick ffrench, *The Cut: Reading Bataille's Histoire de l'œil*, British Academy/Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte' in Philippe Sollers (ed.), *Bataille*, 10/18, Paris, 1973.

¹⁵ Cf. Denis Hollier, *La Prise de la Concorde*, Gallimard, Paris, 1974; Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, MIT, 1993 ; Georges Didi-Hubermann, *La Ressemblance informe ou le gai savoir visual selon Georges Bataille*, Macula, Paris, 1995 ; Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless : A User's Guide*, Zone Books, New York, 1995.

¹⁶ Cf. Bernard Noël, *Le Château de cène*, Gallimard, Paris, 1969.

¹⁷ *Tel Quel* 34 (Summer 1968): Denis Hollier, 'Le savoir formel,' Philippe Sollers, 'La grande méthode.'

¹⁸ *Cahiers du cinéma* No. 222, July 1970, 12-19., and in *L'Obvie et l'obtus ; Essais critiques III*, Seuil, Paris, 1982, 43-61. The co-incidence between Bataille and Eisenstein in Barthes' article, and the inclusion of a montage of stills from *The General Line* in *Documents* no. 4, provides a pretext for Didi-Hubermann's assertion of a parallel between Eisenstein's practice of montage and the 'dialectic of forms' in Bataille's *Documents* contributions and the associated images (see Didi-Hubermann, *La Ressemblance informe*, 284-297). As Krauss and Bois note, however, Barthes' emphasis is on how the 'third' or 'obtuse' meaning exceeds and undercuts Eisenstein's aesthetic (*Formless: A User's Guide*, 72-3, 266). See also Annette Michelson, 'Eisenstein at 100: Recent Reception and Coming Attractions', *October*, vol. 88, Spring 1999, 69-85.

¹⁹ Barthes, *L'Obvie et l'obtus*, 45.



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- ²⁰ Barthes, *L'Obvie et l'obtus*, 46.
- ²¹ Barthes, *L'Obvie et l'obtus*, 51.
- ²² Barthes, *L'Obvie et l'obtus*, 46.
- ²³ Barthes, *L'Obvie et l'obtus*, 51.
- ²⁴ Barthes, *L'Obvie et l'obtus*, 53.
- ²⁵ Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes I*, 200.
- ²⁶ Barthes, *L'Obvie et l'obtus*, 53.
- ²⁷ *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, 148.
- ²⁸ *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, 161-2.
- ²⁹ Barthes' refers to Deleuze's text in the Collège de France lecture courses *Comment vivre ensemble* and *Le Neutre*, in 1976-77 and 1977-78 respectively. See *Comment vivre ensemble: Cours et séminaires au Collège de France 1976-1977*, Paris: Seuil/IMEC, 2002, 33 and *The Neutral*, trans. Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, 202. Cf. also Duncan Large, in his introduction to the translation of Kofman's *Nietzsche et la métaphore*, who signals the 'seminal' importance of Deleuze's 1962 book on the reception of Nietzsche in France; Duncan Large, 'Translator's Introduction' in Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor* trans. Duncan Large, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993, xi.
- ³⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlison, London and New York: Continuum, 1986, 1.
- ³¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 196.
- ³² Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 2.
- ³³ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 2.
- ³⁴ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 3.
- ³⁵ Cf. Barthes, in 'Le Gros orteil': 'value, according to Nietzsche, extends the question : what is it for me ?' ['la valeur, selon le mot de Nietzsche, prolonge la question: *qu'est-ce que c'est pour moi?*'] (Barthes' italics), 'Les Sorties du texte,' 59.
- ³⁶ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 50.
- ³⁷ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 50.
- ³⁸ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 50.
- ³⁹ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 50.
- ⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, 35.
- ⁴¹ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 51.
- ⁴² Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 51.
- ⁴³ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 51.
- ⁴⁴ Cf. *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, p. 51.
- ⁴⁵ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 51.
- ⁴⁶ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 49.
- ⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that Barthes refers to the dictionary Bataille provides 'at the end of *Documents*,' referring one supposes to Noël's 1968 book edition of Bataille's contributions rather



than to the journal itself. *Documents* was republished in a facsimile edition in two volumes by Jean Michel Place in 1991.

⁴⁸ Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, Seuil, Collection Tel Quel, Paris, 1973, 82.

⁴⁹ 'Par où commence le corps humain' is also the title of a book of 2000 by Pierre Fédida, a psychoanalyst whose work is drawn upon by Didi-Hubermann in his account of *Documents*. See Pierre Fédida, *Par où commence le corps humain: Retour sur la régression*, Paris: PUF, 2000, and Georges Didi-Hubermann, *La ressemblance informe*. Fédida refers explicitly to Barthes' 'Les sorties du texte' (see later in this article).

⁵⁰ 'The role of value is not to destroy, or even to dialecticise, nor even to subjectify, it is perhaps, simply, to rest... "it is enough to know that truth has a great power. But it must be able to struggle, and it must be opposed, and one must from time to time be able to take a rest from the struggle in non-truth"["Le rôle de la valeur n'est pas un rôle de destruction, ni même de dialectisation, ni même encore de subjectivisation, c'est peut-être, tout simplement, un rôle de repos... « il me suffit de savoir que la vérité possède une grande puissance. Mais il faut qu'elle puisse lutter, et qu'elle ait une opposition, et que l'on puisse de temps en temps se reposer d'elle dans le non-vrai. »] (Nietzsche)'. Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 54.

⁵¹ Krauss and Bois, *Formless : A User's Guide*, 156-57.

⁵² Krauss and Bois, *Formless : A User's Guide*, 156.

⁵³ Fédida, *Par où commence...*, 13-14.

⁵⁴ 'There [in the pineal eye texts], in opposition to the idea of the civilizing change of axis that lifted man off the horizontal plane of his animal condition to set him erect on his two feet and thereby to initiate the long process of education and sublimation, Bataille interposes the image of another form of verticality, this one obscene.' *Formless: A User's Guide*, 156-7.

⁵⁵ Bataille, *Œuvres complètes I*, 204.

⁵⁶ Bataille, *Œuvres complètes I*, 204.

⁵⁷ '...the apparatus of meaning is not destroyed [...] but it is ex-centred, made to limp' ['l'appareil du sens n'est pas détruit [...] mais il est *excentré*, rendu boiteux'], Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 58. In view of Barthes' insistence, via Bataille, on the 'tasks' (*besognes*) of words one can see how the *vocable* is functioning here, both at the level of metonymic contiguity (*orteil-sorties*) and metaphoric association (the exorbitant big toe causes the apparatus of knowledge to limp). Barthes himself notes that the etymology of *scandaleux*, 'scandalous', links it to *boiter*, to limp.

⁵⁸ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 57.

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *La Généalogie de la morale*, Gallimard, idées, Paris, 1964, 'Première dissertation.'

⁶⁰ Cf. 'La "vielle taupe" et le préfixe « sur » dans les mots « surhomme » et « surréaliste »' in Bataille, *Œuvres complètes II*, Gallimard, Paris, 93-109 ; 'Nietzsche was condemned by circumstances to conceive of his rupture with conformist ideology as an icarian adventure' ['Nietzsche était condamné par les circonstances à concenvoir sa rupture avec l'idéologie conformiste ainsi qu'une aventure icarienne'], 99.

⁶¹ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 54.

⁶² Bataille, *Œuvres complètes I*, 81.

⁶³ Bataille, *Œuvres complètes I*, 217.

⁶⁴ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 61.

⁶⁵ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 56. This expression would bear interesting comparison with the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy, especially in *Corpus*, Métailié, Paris, 2000, the phrase *à même* being



particularly recurrent throughout Nancy's work and in his consideration of the relation between writing and the body.

⁶⁶ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 51-52.

⁶⁷ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 56.

⁶⁸ Fédida, *Par où commence...*, 12.

⁶⁹ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 61.

⁷⁰ Julia Kristeva makes this point in the discussion following Barthes' reading of his paper at the 1972 colloquium, distinguishing Nietzsche's 'teaching' from Bataille's *practice*.

⁷¹ Fédida, *Par où commence...*, 13.

⁷² Fédida, *Par où commence...*, 14.

⁷³ Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte,' 62.

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