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Georges Bataille on Experience

George Bataille sobre la Experiencia

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Resumen

George Bataille se consideró a sí mismo como un místico de la risa y, en la medida en que era un filósofo, un filósofo de la risa. Aunque éste segundo título no ha pasado por alto a los postestructuralistas intérpretes del pensamiento batailliano, estas apreciaciones limitan la risa a un asunto textual, castrando su experiencia de la risa e ignorando su confesado misticismo. Al otro lado, aquellos que interpretan a Bataille como un místico consideran a la risa un tema muy pequeño para representar la totalidad de la ateología de Bataille y excesivamente amplia para conformarse como único ingrediente de su religiosidad. Así pues, en cualquier perspectiva, incluidas las de aquellos que leen a Bataille tanto como un místico como un filósofo, se suele ignorar la experiencia de la risa, el contenido de su experiencia íntegra como demasiado particular para ser tomada seriamente.

En este artículo, defiendo que únicamente una lectura de Bataille como un filósofo de la experiencia puede hacer justicia al significado de la risa dentro de sus escritos, su pensamiento y su vida.

Después de explicar el conocimiento experiencial de la risa batailliana, pondré luz mediante otras ópticas que asocian misticismo y risa. Finalmente, concluiré que el misticismo de la risa en Bataille constituye una originalidad inédita. Estamos ante un "nuevo" místico, como ha señalado Jean-Paul Sartre, en el sentido de que propone una nueva forma de hacer mística; aunque Bataille aseguraba compartir esa experiencia con Nietzsche. Esta originalidad relativa trae la cuestión de la posibilidad de vivir esta experiencia para acceder al conocimiento que proporciona y, también, la pregunta por la validez del pensamiento experiencial adquirido por medio de una experiencia con caracteres propios.

Palabras clave: experiencia; bataille; misticismo; risa.

Abstract

George Bataille considered himself a mystic of laughter, and, as far as he was a philosopher, a philosopher of laughter. Although the later claim has not been disregarded by Poststructuralist interpreters of Bataillan thought, these interpretations make of laughter a textual affair, thus emasculating the French thinker's experience of laughter and ignoring his self-confessed mysticism. Those who interpret Bataille as a mystic, on the other hand, usually consider laughter too thin to represent the whole subject of Bataillan a-theology and too light to be the sole content of its religiosity. Thus, on either readings, as well as on those who read Bataille as both a mystic and a philosopher, the Bataillan experience of laughter—the content of his entire inner experience—is usually ignored as too idiosyncratic to be taken seriously.

In this article, I argue that only a reading of Bataille as a philosopher of experience can do justice to the significance of laughter in his writings, his thought and his life. After explaining the experiential knowledge of Bataillan laughter, I enlighten it through other views which associate mysticism and laughter. I reach the conclusion that Bataille's laughing mysticism is original—he is indeed a "new" mystic, as Jean-Paul Sartre had argued, but rather in the sense of a proponent of a new form of mysticism—although Bataille was certain he shared this experience with Nietzsche. This relative originality raises the question of the very possibility of repeating this experience in order to access the knowledge it provides, as well as the question of the validity of experiential knowledge acquired through an idiosyncratic experience.

Keywords: experience; bataille; mysticism; laughter.

*There is no theory of laughter,
there is only an experience*
Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 150.

*My experience of laughter is rather
remote from the common experience of it*
Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 90.

1. INTRODUCTION

The French 20th century philosopher and novelist, Georges Bataille, considered himself a mystic of laughter: "Laughter, considered as I have described it, opens a sort of general experience that, in my opinion, is comparable to what the theologians have named 'mystical theology' or 'negative theology,'" only this experience is totally negative¹. Following his extraordinary experiences with laughter where, "illuminated convulsively," he discovered that "laughter was revelation, opened up the depth of things," Bataille declared laughter divine and confessed to his fear of being ultimately "LAUGHTER ITSELF!"².

Moreover, Bataille asserts in "Unknowing: Laughter and Tears" that as much as he is a philosopher, he is a philosopher of laughter³; and at the end of his life, when asked in a rare interview by journalist Madeleine Chapsal, "What you considered was the most important thing you have discovered or contributed as a thinker?" Bataille answered that what he was most proud of was "having associated the practice of the most turbulent, most shocking, most scandalous, laughter with the deepest religious spirit..."⁴.

In order to do justice to Bataille's experiences of laughter and the experiential knowledge he derives from them, I begin by mapping the various interpretations of Bataille's writings in relation to this subject. I explain the need to read Bataille as he defined himself, a mystic of laughter. To that purpose, I present Bataille's unusual experiences with laughter and his interpretation of this experiences. Finally, I examine the possible idiosyncrasy of Bataille's experimental knowledge on the background of other forms of mysticism associate with laughter.

2. INTERPRETATION

Ten years after Marguerite Duras' complaint about the silence of the critics on Bataille (1958), Bataille's writings have taken on an almost canonical status in the French literary avant-garde⁵. As Bataille is

- 1 BATAILLE, G (1988). *Inner Experience*. Trans. and with and introduction by Leslie Anne Boldt. Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, p. 34.
- 2 BATAILLE, G (2011). *Guilty*. Trans. Stuart Kendall. Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, p. 90.
- 3 BATAILLE, G (1986). "Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears". *October*, 36. Trans. Annette Michelson, p. 93. (9 February 1953).
- 4 RICHARDSON, M (Ed.,) (1998). *Georges Bataille. Essential Writings*. London, Sage, p. 224.
- 5 These include Blanchot and Klossowki, and later, Baudrillard, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva, Solers, and many more. Foucault read Nietzsche because of Bataille ("Structuralism and Poststructuralism," interview with Gérard Raulet, in: FOUCAULT, M (1999). *Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, 1954-1984. Edited by Paul Rabinow, 3 vols. 1997-9, Volume II: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology. New York, The New Press, p. 439; see also FOUCAULT, M (1998). "A Preface to Transgression" in: BOTTING, F & WILSON, S (Eds.,) (1998). *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. Oxford UK and Malden, MA, Blackwell, pp. 24-40. Nick Land complains about Derrida's influence, "a philosopher who has exercised a hegemonic power over Bataille's reception in recent years" (LAND, N (1990). *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism (an Essay in Atheistic Religion)*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 16). For the role of the special edition in homage to Bataille of the journal *Critique* (1963) and the role of writers associated with the journal *Tel Quel* in the reception of Bataille, see HUSSEY, A (2000). *The Inner Scar: The Mysticism of Georges Bataille*. Amsterdam, Rudopi, pp. 6-19. For an explanation of the role of Bataille as the acknowledged hero of *Tel Quel*, see FFRENCK, P (1995). *The Time of Theory: A History of Tel Quel 1960-1983*. Oxford, The Clarendon Press, pp. 25-8; and FOREST, Ph (1992). *Histoire de Tel Quel*. Paris, Editions du Seuil, pp. 19, 31, 41, 111-114. The translation into English in 1984 of Jürgen Habermas' influential essay, "The French Path to Postmodernity: Bataille between Eroticism and General Economics", similarly established Bataille's status as a prophet of post-modern thought.

read as a precursor of post-structuralism thought, the prevailing view of Bataille, in France and elsewhere, is as a thinker whose work has primary textual value.

But, assigning to Bataille's categories a radical and violently subversive opposition to the categories of a "traditional" discourse, while proximate to the exuberance of Bataille's texts, creates serious difficulties in interpretation. Few contemporary readings of Bataille have engaged with the language or content of mysticism in his writings in relation to lived experience⁶. Moreover, to see Bataille through Foucault, Derrida or Baudrillard, as Michael Richardson explains, is "to emasculate what is original in his work," a view that is echoed in Benjamin Noys' blunt assertion that "the recent appropriations of Bataille" are "a profound *failure* to read Bataille⁷. Aligning Bataille with post-modern strains of thought is problematic, because Bataille's work is primarily a communion of lived experience.

There is another way of reading Bataille, however. Following Jean-Paul Sartre's depiction of Bataille as a mystic⁸, as well as Bataille's situating his writing "in the line of the mystics of all times⁹, and abundant references to Christian as well as non-Western mystical canonical texts, there are commentators who read Bataille as a mystic¹⁰. Although Bataille is clear about the kind of mysticism he is advancing ("Laughter, considered as I have described it, opens a sort of general experience that, in my opinion, is comparable to what the theologians have named 'mystical theology' or 'negative theology'¹¹"), commentators who respect Bataille's religiosity are reluctant to reduce it to the phenomenon of laughter. More specifically, they do not single out laughter among other transgressive states, such as eroticism, tears, and drunkenness, although Bataille did¹² (see, for example, Hussey and Irwing¹³).

Interestingly, those critics who read Bataille as a precursor of post-structuralist thought are also those who give laughter a prominent role within Bataille's thought: Lisa Trahair explains how the relatively recent scholarship, such as exemplified in the work of Nick Land (1992)¹⁴, Joseph Libertson (1982)¹⁵, Arkadi Plotnizky (1993)¹⁶, as well as Jacques Derrida (1998)¹⁷, has deemed Bataille's laughter as capable of resuscitating the Kantian

- 6 Experience and life experience is a concept studied by Barrientos-Rastrojo in several of his works: (2010b). "El rostro de la experiencia desde la marea orteguiana y zambranianiana", *Revista Endoxa*, Revista de la Facultad de Filosofía de la UNED, 25, pp. 279-314; Id. (2011). "La fisiología del saber de la experiencia y los frutos de su posesión", *Themata*, 44, pp. 79-96K; Id. (2013). "Abrir preguntas esenciales como quehacer del maestro. De la quiebra de la pedagogía bancaria de Freire a la pregunta esencial gadameriana y al saber de la experiencia zambranianiana", *Diálogo filosófico*, 86, pp. 325-352; Id., (2015). "La viabilidad de los conceptos de creencia y experiencial en Internet", *Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana*, 69, pp. 53-66.
- 7 RICHARDSON, M (1994). *Georges Bataille*. London, Routledge, pp. 9-17. Ibid. pp.7-11; NOYS, B (2000). *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*. London, Pluto Press, p. 1. For difficulties in aligning Bataille with postmodern strains of thought, see Bolt-Irons 1995), pp. 1-40; LIBERTSON, J (1982). *Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication*. The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, pp. 219-29; For a criticism of post-modern commentators' brushing aside of Bataille's mysticism, see HUSSEY, A (2000). *The Inner Scar: The Mysticism of Georges Bataille*. Amsterdam, Rudopi.
- 8 SARTRE, J-P (1947). "Un Nouveau Mystique", in: *Situations I*. Paris, Gallimard.
- 9 BATAILLE, G (1970). "Consumption", in: *Œuvres complètes*. Vol. VII, with an introduction by Michel Foucault. 12 vols. Paris, Gallimard, p. 197n.
- 10 For Bataille as a mystic, see: HEIMONET, J-M (1996). "Bataille et Sartre: The Modernity of Mysticism", Trans. Emoretta Yang, *Diacritics* 26, p. 2; IRWIN, A (2002). *Saints of the Impossible: Bataille, Weil, and the Politics of the Sacred*. Minneapolis, MN, London, University of Minnesota Press; HUSSEY, A (2000). *Op. cit.*
- 11 BATAILLE, G (1988). *Op. cit.* p. 34.
- 12 See AMIR: "The Laughter of Ecstasy Doesn't Laugh" (forthcoming) for Bataille's preference of laughter over tears and for his view of eroticism as comical (Cfr. AMIR, LB (Forthcoming) (s/f). "The Laughter of Ecstasy Doesn't Laugh": Bataille as a Philosopher of Laughter. *The European Journal of Humor Research*.
- 13 There are also interpreters who read Bataille as a mystic and a philosopher, such as CONNOR, PT (2000). *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin*. Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, and Andrew HUSSEY, A (2000). *Op. cit.* p. 159. But the problem of the significance of laughter is not fully solved by these readings as well. IRWING, A (2002). *Op. cit.*, p. 32.
- 14 LAND, N (1990). *Op. cit.*
- 15 LIBERTSON, J (1982). *Op. cit.*
- 16 PLOTNISKY, A (1993). *Reconfigurations: Critical Theory and General Economy*. Gainesville, University Press of Florida.
- 17 DERRIDA, J (1998). "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve", in: BOTTING, F & WILSON, S (Eds.,) (1998). *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. Oxford UK and Malden, MA, Blackwell, pp. 102-130.

noumenon, presenting a radical alterity to philosophy, and reinscribing the Hegelian dialectic to the point where the quest for meaning is forsaken¹⁸. Yet, those readings consider laughter a textual affair, not a visceral form of life, as it was for Bataille.

On the other hand, those who read Bataille as a mystic do not usually do justice to the essential role Bataille entrusts laughter within his philosophy. We can safely say, then, with Anca Parvulescu, that “most readings of Bataille, as well as second-order commentaries, do not quite know what to make of laughter in this context. Laughter is thought to be one of Bataille’s idiosyncrasies, an oddity that can be safely put aside”¹⁹. This is why a new reading of Bataille is needed, a reading that does justice both to the significance of laughter in Bataille’s thought and to his characterization of his experience with laughter as mystical: aligning myself with scholars who consider the post-structuralist reading of Bataille problematic, I read Bataille as he describes himself, a mystic; but I read him as a mystic of a special, original, kind, a mystic of laughter who differs from the rich tradition that associates laughter with mysticism. The difference lies in that laughter is not the after-effect of a mystical experience for Bataille; rather, after having remarkable and repeated experiences with laughter, Bataille uses laughter as the means for mystical experience; but, as mystical experience for Bataille is nothing but the experience of one’s limits, or a totally negative experience, there is nothing to communicate with beyond the mystical experience; this makes laughter itself, granted that we understand what laughter represents for Bataille, the sole content of the mystical experience. Therein lies, I suggest, Bataille’s uniqueness both as a laughter theorist and a mystic.

3. EXPERIENCE

Bataille had remarkable experiences with laughter, the first notable experience when very young:

Late in night...a space constellated with laughter opened its dark abyss before me...I became in this “Nothingness” unknown—suddenly...I negated these gray walls which enclosed me, I rushed into a sort of rapture. I laughed divinely...I laughed as perhaps one had never laughed; **the extreme depth of each thing opened itself up—laid bare, as if I were dead...I was illuminated convulsively**²⁰.

Later, reflecting on this experience, he explains that “from the first day onward, I no longer had any doubt: *laughter was revelation, opened up the depth of things*”²¹. Elsewhere, he relates a no less remarkable experience of laughter:

I went to a forest at nightfall...I evoked the image of a bird of prey going for the throat of a smaller bird. I thought of dark leafy branches turning on me, turning on my complacency, aroused with the anger of a predatory bird. The impression I got was of a dark bird swooping down on me...and opening my throat. The illusion of the senses wasn’t as successful as others I’ve had. I shrugged it off and I think I started to laugh at that point—saved from going overboard on horror and uncertainty. **In the depth of the dark everything was clear.** On the way home, in spite of being exhausted, I walked on coarse pebbles (which normally would have twisted my feet) light and airy as a shadow. **At that instant I wasn’t expecting a thing, but the**

18 TRAHAIR, L (2001). “The Comedy of Philosophy: Bataille, Hegel and Derrida”. *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*. 6/3, p. 17.

19 PARVULESCU, A (2010). *Laughter – Notes on a Passion*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, p. 91.

20 BATAILLE, G (1988). *Op. cit.*, p. 34 (emphasis added).

21 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

heavens opened and I saw. I saw: what a person can be kept from seeing only through intentional heaviness. All the useless fuss of the stifling day at last cracked open like an eggshell and was volatilized in the air²².

Finally, in *Méthode de méditation*, he tells us,

I was watching what a burst of laughter was revealing as the essence of things, to which I acceded freely; I was making no difference whatsoever between **laughing of a thing and to have its truth**; I imagined not seeing an object of which I was not laughing; it was not only comical themes, but generally **the existence of “what is”, and myself in particular which made me laugh**. My laughter engaged me, was playing me entirely and did not have any limit; I had a vague consciousness of the reversement which I was operating; I thought that, laughter explained, I will know what signify man and universe: that on the contrary laughter unexplained, knowledge was avoiding the essential.

I add today: That I do not see the object of which I did not laugh but only a rapport to the sphere of activity...In the same way in which common knowledge rapports objects to solids, that is, to the moment of subordinate activity, I can rapport them to the sovereign moment, where I laugh²³.

Bataille readily acknowledges that his “experience of laughter is rather remote from the common experience of it”²⁴. All the experiences he relates point to the epistemological function of laughter: laughter provides knowledge of no lesser object than the ground of things, the true being of the world, that otherwise is hidden.

Bataille asserts that laughter can only be understood as part of a philosophy that goes beyond it. In order to solve the puzzle of laughter, which if solved, would solve everything²⁵, he attempts to communicate his experiential knowledge, and in doing so, becomes a philosopher of laughter.

5. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF EXPERIMENTAL KNOWLEDGE²⁶

Laughter leads to an ultimate truth, that “the surface of appearances conceals a perfect absence of response to our expectation”²⁷. Laughter is knowledge of the void or “nothing,”²⁸ that Bataille calls “unknowing,” and that he recognizes as the true cause of laughter: “the *unknown makes us laugh*”²⁹. Part of a range of possible reactions to one situation—the suppression of the character of the known³⁰, laughter reveals the true nature of reality.

We perceive that finally, for all the exercise of knowledge, the world still lies wholly outside our reach, and that not only the world, but the being that one is lies out of reach. Within us and in the world, something is revealed that was not given in knowledge, and whose site is definable only as unattainable by

22 BATAILLE, G (2011). *Op. cit.*, p. 39 (emphasis added).

23 BATAILLE, G (1970). “Méthode de méditation”, in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., p. 214 (emphasis added).

24 BATAILLE, G (2011). *Op. cit.*, p. 90.

25 BATAILLE, G (1988). *Op. cit.*, p. 66.

26 Experiential Knowledge is an idea developed by Barrientos-Rastrojo based on Maria Zambrano's thought.

27 BATAILLE, G (1986.). *Op. cit.*, p. 91.

28 Bataille reformulates Kant's definition (KANT, I (1911). *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*. Trans. with seven introductory essays, notes, and analytical index by James Creed Meredith. Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 199) by quoting without referencing Bergson's translation: “The object of laughter...is always NOTHING, substituted for the anticipation of a given object; the miraculous moment is the moment in which the anticipation is resolved in NOTHING”. BATAILLE, G (1970). *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., Vol. VIII, pp. 252, 257.

29 BATAILLE, G (1986). *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

knowledge. It is, I believe, at this that we laugh. And, it must at once be said, in theorizing laughter, that this is what ultimately illuminates us; this is what fills us with joy³¹.

Laughter is a leap from the impossible (what can't be grasped in any way) or the unknown (an indefinite reality) to the possible (life), or the reverse—a leap from the possible to the impossible. An ideological excrement and an inferior mode of being, laughter is a dissolving power, which dissolves also God. Born of fear, it is a communication of dispelled anguish of the unknown or, finally, death, as all laughter is ultimately at death.

Anguish is dispelled through the sacrifice of the victim of laughter around which the laughers gather. The person who unwittingly falls is substituting for the victim who is put to death—a sacrifice which is at the core of any religious experience of the sacred, for Bataille—and the shared joy of laughter is that of sacred communion. Ideally, one is the sacrificed and the sacrificer at once, as there is always in the human being this necessity of suppressing himself while conserving himself. The unknown or the impossible is what we cannot reach without dissolving ourselves, what is slavishly called God. Laughter dissolves or liquidifies, thus enabling the communication—dying and coming back—with the indefinite reality called the un-known or the impossible. It is a religious experience by itself, which captures without residue all that is brought by Christianity, once Bataille's criticism of Christianity is accepted—that one should be lost instead of saved³².

Laughter is an opening that reveals the ground of things. Without recourse to laughter's outward physical attributes³³, self-laughter brings ecstasy through a simultaneous experience of destruction and joy, that is, of sovereignty: "To know oneself to be assured of insignificance is the laughter tearing apart the fabric of which man is made," on the condition that one "no longer" leaves "outside the laughter tearing apart the fabric of which man is made...—being itself—the fabric torn"³⁴.

Understood in that way, laughter fulfills Bataille's goal: "I aspire only to one thing in as much as I give myself still goals, it is to suppress myself," granted that "it is more amusing—maybe more cowardly also—to attempt to suppress oneself by a gymnastic of the spirit or by sensations"³⁵. Allan Stoekl explains that in "Hegel, death and sacrifice," Bataille notes the "comedy" of sacrifice, in which a mere vicarious experience of death, and hence only death's representation, is substituted for the real thing—one's own death—which by definition cannot be experienced³⁶. Generalizing his personal aspiration, Bataille asserts that "there is always... in man, this necessity of suppressing himself while conserving himself"³⁷, and finds that "when we laugh we

31 *Ibidem*.

32 Bataille asserts that the mysticism of laughter replaces Christianity without residue. At the time of the first experience with laughter, Bataille was deeply religious, having converted to Catholicism at the age of fourteen. Wanting to further descend within the sphere of laughter, he discovered that it made a game out of Christianity, transcending the dogma through a game of its own. The important consequence was that faith in the dogma could not persist, nor any faith for that matter (BATAILLE, G (2011). *Op. cit.*, p. 94), for laughter transcended the transcendent. He would make of laughter his new religion, he decided, and, ascribing it to Nietzsche, he adhered to him henceforth as passionately as he did to Christianity: "It very quickly became clear to me that there was nothing in my experience of laughter which was not to be found in my former religious experience... I could recapture all the impulses of religious experience, mingling them with the experience of laughter without feeling that religious experience in any way impoverished... The impulse of what I prefer to call my life rather than my work has essentially worked toward the maintenance... of the whole religious experience acquired within the limits of dogma." Unknowing, as Bataille understands it, does not eliminate the possibility of an experience which he considers "to be equally rich as the religious experience..." (BATAILLE, G (1986). *Op. cit.*, p. 95.

33 For Bataille, and in contradistinction to his reading of Bergson's book on laughter (BERGSON, H (1975). *Le Rire: Essai sur la signification du comique*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France; BERGSON, H (1999). *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Trans. C. Bereton and F. Rothwell. Kobenhavn and Los Angeles, Green Interger), "laughter is thought" (BATAILLE, G (1988). *Op. cit.*, p. 213). In *Méthode de méditation*, the sovereign or comical operation brings objects to the bottom of the world, which is senseless, it brings the known to the unknown, reversing thus the movement of thought (BATAILLE, G (1970). "Méthode de méditation", in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., Vol. V, pp. 216-217). And, as the meeting-point between emotion and thought, laughter opens up new possibilities for thought (BATAILLE, G (1988). *Op. cit.*, p. xxxiii). For the relation of Bataillan laughter to thought, see Amir, "The Laughter of Ecstasy Doesn't Laugh", forthcoming).

34 BATAILLE, G (1988). *Op. cit.*, pp. 80-84.

35 BATAILLE, G (2000). *Une liberté souveraine*. Ed. Verdier, Paris, p. 102.

36 STOEKL, A (1995). "Recognition in Madame Edwarda", in: *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*. Carolyn Bailey Gill (Ed.), London and New York, Routledge, p. 79.

37 BATAILLE, G (2000). *Op. cit.* p. 102.

retain deep within us that which is suppressed by laughter³⁸. Asked “what is the purpose of laughter?” he answers: “There is in the fact of laughing at oneself a radiance whose foundation is on the whole a *collapse*. It is sometimes difficult to express³⁹. This unity of radiance and collapse provides “a moment of infinite laughter or ecstasy⁴⁰, which cannot be maintained. Celebrating “defeat’s marriage to power” when laughing⁴¹, Bataille asserts that “that which is revealed in our laughter is a fundamental accord between our joy and an impulse to self-destruction. [And] the difficulty of that accord⁴²”.

We have seen that Bataille is explicit about the relation between mysticism and laughter: “laughter, considered as I have described it, opens a sort of general experience that, in my opinion, is comparable to what the theologians have named ‘mystical theology’ or ‘negative theology,’” only this experience is totally negative⁴³. Bataille christens this experience, together with its accompanying reflection, with the name of “atheology,” and presents its fundamental idea as follows: “God is an effect of un-knowing. He can nevertheless be known as an effect of un-knowing—like laughter, like the sacred.” The entire laughing atheology of Bataille is summed up in the following statement: “God is not the limit of man, but the limit of man is divine. In other words, man is divine in the experience of his limits,” because the “incursion into the sphere of the divine” is “his dying unto himself,” his sacrifice⁴⁴.

Bataille uses a quote from Nietzsche’s *Nachlass* (1882-1884), published in the french translation of the *Will to Power*⁴⁵, “To see the failure of tragic natures and to laugh, that is divine⁴⁶,” in order to explain that failure, or insufficiency, at which we laugh, is an intimation of death, and this is why it always makes us happy:

Born of anguish, laughter is communication with each other and with death: Which is also to say, by identifying with the other, and the two of us together with this third who makes us laugh. We loose ourselves in another, and, with him, in this great panic laughter which gathers us together around our own loss, our own death. All of which, cannot take place unless we let ourselves go, unless we ourselves burst out in laughter. There is no theory of laughter, there is only an experience⁴⁷.

We can approach community through the “experience” of the void, even if this cannot be retained, so it does not have to be with other people that the communication occurs—it can be with all that is “other”⁴⁸. Laughter communicates the dispelling of anguish through the sacrifice of the person who is being laughed at. Yet, “the one who laughs is himself laughable and, in a profound sense, is more so than his victim...⁴⁹”. As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen explains, “it is the brutal toppling of the other into insignificance and perhaps death which reveals to me, through laughter, my most ultimate and sovereign being, “the inanity of the being that we are⁵⁰”.

38 BATAILLE, G (1986). *Op. cit.*, p. 97.

39 RICHARDSON, M (Ed.) (1998). *Op. cit.*, p. 223.

40 BATAILLE, G (2011). *Op. cit.*, p. 139.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

42 BATAILLE, G (1970). “Sacrifice”, in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., p. 70.

43 BATAILLE, G (1988). *Op. cit.*, p. 34.

44 BATAILLE, G (1970). *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., Vol. V, p. 350; BATAILLE, G (1970). “Sacrifice”, in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., p. 72.

45 *Will to Power*. II, p. 380

46 BATAILLE, G (1986). *Op. cit.*, p. 96. BATAILLE, G (1970). “Sur Nietzsche”, in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., Vol. VI. p. 189.

47 BATAILLE, G (1988). *Op. cit.*, p. 150

48 Bataille also offers the term “le pal” as a variant on this “communing” with (or in) the nothingness of being. For a view of “being impaled” as the painful, degrading awareness that is the loss of awareness and subjectivity (BATAILLE, G (1970). “Sur Nietzsche”, in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., Vol. VI, pp.78-79), see: HEGARTY, P (2000). *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist*. London, Sage, p. 86.

49 BATAILLE, G (1988). *Op. cit.*, p. 97.

50 BATAILLE, G (1970). “Labyrinth”, in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., Vol. V, p. 107; BORCH-JACOBSEN, M (1998). “The Laughter of Being”, in: BOTTING, F & WILSON, S (Eds). (1998). *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. Oxford UK and Malden, MA, Blackwell, p. 152.

Bataille uses self-laughter as the experience of both collapse and triumph, and makes of his voluntary symbolic self-immolation through laughter the sovereign act *par excellence*, the sole content of his meditation or mystical experience which represents for him the pinnacle of the good life. Bataille deems the sovereign operation comical, that is, derisory, because real sovereignty does not exist, except as failure. We become sovereign in ceasing to be. The radical recognition of sovereignty is the collapse of the intellectual in laughter, which is the religious experience. But the religious experience is nothing else than laughing itself, which explains how laughter is deemed "divine." And this, I suggest, is an unprecedented and unfollowed view of laughter, as well as of the divine.

Yet Bataille reads this philosophy into Nietzsche, with whom he believes he has created a community—a communication—founded on a shared fear of going mad⁵¹. Bataille reads Nietzsche as a profoundly mystical thinker, whose mysticism of laughter Bataille repeats. The tragic is intimately related to laughter, that is, to joy; to laugh tragically is all that is left for us, now that we have no purpose, no "project," no "work." This Bataillan Nietzsche, read through the eyes of Alexander Kojève's Hegel, is at the origin of the laughing Nietzsche that influenced all subsequent French philosophers, a laughing Nietzsche that never took complete hold of the Academic English-reading public⁵². Bataille appropriates what he sees as Nietzsche's goal, emasculating Nietzsche's own vision of autonomy and freedom by reducing Nietzsche's project to a sham of sovereignty: In the Nietzschean highest moral goal, to be the creator of one's values or an autonomous individual who is at once the "judge, the avenger, and the victim of [his] its own law"⁵³, Bataille sees only a will for self-destruction which is best accomplished through laughter.

For Bataille, experience is the point of departure of thought and is "sole value, sole authority." His is a philosophy founded on a repeated experience of laughter's epistemological and communicative power, and which does not even make any further claim. It is a philosophy which casts off problems other than those provided by that precise experience⁵⁴. More than a philosophy or a theory of laughter, then, we find in Bataille what Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen aptly calls "a practice of laughter"⁵⁵. Bataille's own skeptical remarks on the feasibility and desirability of a theory of laughter are along this grain: not only does the "contagious nature" of laughter preclude the possibility of observation, but laughter's main asset, liberation, excludes theoretical analysis: "Laughing at the universe liberated my life. I escape its weight by laughing," he explains; "I refuse any intellectual translation of this laughter, since my slavery would commence from that point on"⁵⁶.

6. THE IDIOSYNCRASY OF BATAILLE'S EXPERIENCE

Of what value is Bataille's experiential knowledge for us? Does the fact that Bataille had to communicate his experiences for personal reasons (in order not to get mad) at all significant for us? Can his experiences be repeated? Is this possibility important at all when assessing Bataille's thought?

Peter Connor⁵⁷ tells us that Bataille's contemporaries took him to be an egomaniac (Jean-Paul

51 BATAILLE, G (1970). "Sur Nietzsche", in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., Vol. VI, p.11.

52 Assessing the Bataillan interpretation of Nietzsche is beyond the scope of this article. For Nietzsche's laughter, see: AMIR, LB (2006). "When Nietzsche Laughed: The Sanctification of Laughter in Nietzsche's Thought", *Metaphora* 6, pp. 109-125 (in Hebrew), and the second chapter of *Laughter in the Good Life* (work in process under contract by SUNY Press). For Bataille's role in the French interpretation of Nietzsche as a philosopher of laughter, see the "Prologue" of Amir: *Nietzsche's Laughing French Followers: Bataille, Deleuze, Rosset* (work in process).

53 NIETZSCHE, F (1954). "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", in: KAUFMANN, W (1954). *The Portable Nietzsche*. II. Trans., W. Kaufmann, New York, NY, Vintage, p. 226.

54 BATAILLE, G (1986). *Op. cit.*, p. 91.

55 BORCH-JACOBSEN, M (1998). *Op. cit.*, p. 150.

56 BATAILLE, G (2011). *Op. cit.*, p. 16. For further explanations on Bataille's views on laughter, especially as related to laughter theory, see AMIR, LB (2015). *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard*. Albany, NY, State University of New York Press.

57 CONNOR, PT (2000). *Op. cit.*

Sartre, Gabriel Marcel, Patrick Waldberg), a view that Bataille shared, a madman (again Sartre, André Breton, Simone Weil), or a mystic (once again Sartre, Nicolas Calas, Roger Caillois). Perhaps the characterizing difficulty of Bataille's thought originates in the oddly undefined self in his writings. As Peter Bürger explains, the Bataillan self is "neither the universal self of the scientist nor the fictive one of narration nor the personal self of autobiography, which could vouch for the authenticity of what is reported"⁵⁸. Along the same lines, Sartre diagnoses the difficulty of Bataille's writings as follows: the crucial content of *Inner Experience* is neither philosophical nor literary, but human or "carnal," as Sartre expresses it, which means that that content is Bataille himself⁵⁹. We are fascinated, repelled, held in suspense by the "man who offers himself up [*se livre*] in these pages": "It is a man who is before us, a man alone and naked, who disarms all deductions [...], an unpleasant and "absorbing" [*"prenant"*] man—like Pascal⁶⁰.

Bataille, however, asserts that "nothing is more foreign to me than a personal way of thinking. My hatred for individual thought...attains calmness, simplicity: when I put forward a word, I play upon the thought of others..."; moreover, he insists that "it is from a feeling of community linking me with Nietzsche and not from an isolated originality that the desire to communicate arises in me"⁶¹. Denis Holier even suggests that inner experience might as well have been called the experience of Nietzsche⁶².

Can we reconcile these two views? And, what are the consequences of each for the value of the experiential knowledge which constitutes Bataille's philosophy?

I propose the following explanation of Bataille's communication, which is the drive behind his literary work, that which Jean Durançon calls Bataille's secret⁶³. Writing and the Bataillan "dramatization" it presupposes comes from fear as the final words of *On Nietzsche* testify: "What forces me to write, I imagine, is the fear of going mad." Out of fear, out of loneliness in fear, Bataille imagines himself or "dramatizes" as not being alone: "I imagine myself...and in imagining it, I weep," he writes, and as Denis Hollier explains, dramatization makes presence burst forth, "it makes it burst out laughing"⁶⁴.

Roland Barthes' short entry in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, entitled "Bataille, fear," should be taken seriously; Barthes suggests that fear is the key to Bataille's work: "Bataille, after all, affects me little enough: what do I have to do with laughter, devotion, poetry, violence? What do I have to say about 'the sacred', about the 'impossible'?" But he continues: "Yet no sooner I made all this (alien) [étranger] language coincide with the disturbance in myself which I call *fear* than Bataille conquers me all over again: then everything he *inscribes describes* me: it sticks [ça colle]⁶⁵."

There is ample biographical evidence of Bataille's breakdowns, repeated anxiety attacks, and pathological guilt, of which Bataille talked openly,⁶⁶ and which gave raise to repeated, even obsessive themes

58 BURGER, P (2002). *The Thinking of the Master: Bataille between Hegel and Surrealism*. Trans. and introduction Richard Block. Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, p. 36.

59 SARTRE, J-P (1947). *Op. cit.*, p. 145.

60 SARTRE, J-P (1947). *Op. cit.*, pp. 187, 151; quoted in IRWIN, A (2002). *Op. cit.*, p. 155.

61 Both quotes from HOLLIER, D (1993). *La prise de la Concorde et Les dimanches de la vie: Essais sur Georges Bataille*. Paris, Gallimard, p. 76.

62 NIETZSCHE, F (1954). *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

63 DURANCON, J (1976). *Georges Bataille*. Paris, Gallimard, pp. 18-20.

64 *Ibidem*. "If you are afraid of everything, read this book, but first listen to me: if you laugh, it is because you are afraid. A book, as you believe, is an inert thing. And yet what if, as is the case, you cannot read? Should you be apprehensive...? Are you alone? Are you cold? (Do you know the point to which the man is 'yourself? An imbecile? And naked?)" (BATAILLE, B (1970). "Madame Edwarda", in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., Vol. III, p. 15. This note is not included in the English translation of "Madame Edwarda". Quoted and translated by RICHARDSON, M (Ed.,) (1998). *Op. cit.*, p.4.

65 BARTHES, R (1994). *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Trans. Richard Howard. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, p. 144; quoted in CONNOR, PT (2000). *Op. cit.* p. 160.

66 See Michel Surya's biography of Bataille (Cfr. SURYA, M (1992). *Georges Bataille: la mort à l'âme*. Paris, Gallimard.

in Bataille's work: death, sacrifice, ecstasy, expenditure⁶⁷. Whilst there is a difference between existential anxiety and an anxiety neurosis, and the later is considered unapproachable by philosophy, this is nonetheless what Bataille attempted to do: he attempted to spell out the philosophical meaning of the repeated experience of anguish. The result is distinct from the anxiety depicted by existential philosophers, such as Søren Kierkegaard⁶⁸ and Martin Heidegger⁶⁹. Among other differences, anxiety for both of them leads somewhere else, to religion or to authenticity, that is, to more stable places than anxiety can ever be. Because anxiety cannot be maintained by a sane person, anguish leads somewhere, and for Bataille, it leads sometimes to laughter, but to a certain kind of laughter, a laughter that does not laugh ("the laughter of ecstasy does not laugh, instead it opens me infinitely" Bataille writes⁷⁰).

That anguish is the key to Bataille's work has not eluded the journalist Madeleine Chapsal, who compared in a memorable interview Bataille to Heidegger.⁷¹ In attempting to differentiate himself from Heidegger, however, Bataille insists that he begins with laughter rather than anxiety⁷². This is the case, because laughter is "a state of communication"⁷³, an opening, even in loneliness, especially in loneliness. Bataille's contemporary, the French philosopher, Gilbert Simondon, explains the relation between anxiety and community thus: The risk of the individual's dissolution experienced as anguish necessarily creates the need for communicating with others and thereby founds the communal feeling of society⁷⁴.

Bataille associated communication with anguish. Plagued by terrible anxiety attacks and terrified by the possibility of becoming mad, Bataille hardly withstood the gratuity, the expenditure of his solitary suffering and unnecessary immolation. He sought to communicate it and thereby to give it meaning, as he explains in *On Nietzsche*: "If someday, I had the occasion to write with my blood my last words, I would write this: "All that I have lived, said, written, [...] I imagined it communicated. Without that, I could not have lived it"⁷⁵

If we accept this explanation of Bataille's need for communication, there remains the following question to address: Is Bataille's project nothing but a pathological experience which leads to the "grandiloquent nonsense" of Bataille's texts, as Gabriel Marcel thought?⁷⁶ As a "sad epigone of Nietzsche" (my translation; quoted in Hussey 2000, 38)⁷⁷ is Bataille's mysticism, as it was for Marcel and Sartre, an empty parody of experience? In order to answer this question, I propose to situate Bataille within the rich tradition that associates mysticism with laughter with the aim of finding therein an explanation that would save Bataille's thought from complete idiosyncrasy.

67 On anguish in Bataille's work, see Durançon's (1976). *Op. cit.*, first chapter, p. 17.

68 KIERKEGAARD, S (1980). *The Concept of Anxiety*. Trans. By R. Thomte and Albert B. Anderson. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.

69 HEIDEGGER, M (1996). *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany, NY, SUNY Press.

70 BATAILLE, B (2011). *Op. cit.*, p.103

71 A good place to begin understanding Bataille is the journalist Madeleine Chapsal's interview over a year before his death in the spring of 1961, published in 1984 with the title, *Envoyez la petite musique*. It seems to have been the only time Bataille was ever interviewed, and he gives clear answers about the some of the central themes in his work. Michel Richardson appended a translation of the interview to his book on Bataille (RICHARDSON, M (Ed.) (1998). *Op. cit.*, pp. 220-224).

72 Note to BATAILLE, G (1970). "Méthode de méditation", in: *Œuvres complètes* (1970). ed. cit., Vol. V, pp. 217-218.

73 BATAILLE, G (1988). *Op. cit.*, p.112.

74 SIMONDO, G (2005). *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*. Grenoble, Millon; TOURNEUX, O (2012). "L'angoisse chez Gilbert Simondon. Une expérience limite révélatrice qui interroge la place du corps vivant dans la société". *EHVI* [carnet de recherche], <http://ehvi.hypotheses.org/938> 2 août.

75 BATAILLE, B (1970). "Sur Nietzsche", in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., vol. VI, p. 31.

76 MARCEL, G (1945). "Le Refus du salut et l'exaltation de l'homme absurde". *Homo viator*, Paris, Aubier, pp. 259-279. Andrew Hussey explains that in "le refus du salut et l'exaltation de l'homme absurde" (1945), Gabriel Marcel sees L'Expérience intérieure as self-contradictory, because Bataille's radical nihilism concedes no summit, in a manner that recalls Sartre's reproach to Bataille of "bad faith" because he refuses to name God (HUSSEY, A (2000). *Op. cit.*, p. 38).

77 My translation; quoted in HUSSEY, A (2000). *Op. cit.*, p. 38

7. MYSTICISM AND LAUGHTER

It is a commonplace in studies of laughter and religion that laughter and mysticism goes hand in hand⁷⁸, that “laughter is the greatest spiritual phenomenon”⁷⁹, and that humor is one of the essences of mysticism⁸⁰. Mysticism has very powerful and stable pacts with ways of flight from suffering, such as creativity, love and humor⁸¹.

The pact with humor is surprising for the usual tactics of humor and mysticism are contradictory. The mystic is persuaded that he has to fly from the outer world because it is too painful, too misleading and too alien to his essential being, whereas the person with a sense of humor turns the outer world, including all the painful in it, into a source of pleasure:

He laughs at his torturers, at his hunger, his inanity, and his failures. Since he finds life, with all its sufferings, so pleasurable, he is sure of his power in his encounter with them, and he has no need of flying. He is strong, because humor allows him a sure but effective rebellion against all that is no object of his suffering, and he is also a realist, because humor requires the comparison of illusion with reality⁸².

Humor and mysticism appear to be opposed, yet there are not. In his study of mysticism quoted above, Ben-Ami Scharfstein gives as examples Taoism and Zen Buddhism. The Taoists Chuang Tze and Lao Tze recommend that mysticism be accompanied by a light laughter, that is, not to be too much of mystic. And, because Zen Buddhism’s ultimate aim is the identification of the ideal with the factual, Zen masters idealize laughing buddhas who have realized at the moment of satori that the factual is the ideal.

In the last section of her article “Religion, Laughter and the Ludicrous”—titled “Mysterium Tremendum and Ridiculum”—Ingviold Gilhus⁸³ asks whether there is a connection between the transcending function of mystical and ludicrous experiences. “The experience of the ludicrous is always triggered off by external stimuli,” she explains, “but in the moment of laughter there is a feeling of having direct access to the world and not being filtered through the ideological filter”⁸⁴. Mary Douglas has aptly suggested that the joker “should be classed as a kind of minor mystic”⁸⁵. It is no accident that mysticism often exists in company with a rich substream of humor, jokes and laughter. In religious movements which lay stress on personal and direct experience, the joker and the fool often appear. Among the Sufis of Islam there are the so called wise-fools (*oqala-ye majnum*) with Mulla Nasreddin as their most famous representative⁸⁶. The masters of the tradition of Zen Buddhism appear as complete fools. One of them, Harada Sogaku, pointed out to his audience: “My admonition, then: Be a great fool! You know don’t you, that there was a master who was himself just that (Ryokwan)? Now, a petty fool is nothing but a wording,

78 GILHUS, IS (1991). “Religion, Laughter and the Ludicrous”. *Religion*. 21, pp. 272-273.

79 SHUNYO, Ma P (1991). *My Diamond days with Osho: The New Diamond Sutra*. Suffolk, UK, Full Circle, p. 124, in: GILHUS, IS (1997). *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion*. London, Routledge, p. 130.

80 SCHARFSTEIN, BA (1972). *The Mystical Experience*. Tel-Aviv, Am Oved, pp. 180-183.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 181; my translation.

83 GILHUS, IS (1991). *Op. cit.*

84 *Ibid.*, pp. 272-273.

85 DOUGLAS, M (1975). *Jokes. Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 108.

86 See: MASSURD FARZAN, K (1973). *A Collection of Sufi Humor*. New York, NY, E. P. Dutton & Co; SHAD, I (1977). *The Sufis*. London, Octagon Press, pp. 56-97.

but a Great Fool is a Buddha. Sakyamuni and Amitabha are themselves Great Fools, are they not?⁸⁷ In the Orthodox Church there were Fools for Christ's sake (*salos* in Greek, *jurodivjy* in Russian), who were considered as holy, exactly because they acted eccentrically and across the accepted morality and law, and very often with a comical result⁸⁸.

In many traditions religious reality is considered as ultimately inexpressible. In general, mystics have a great need to express the mystical experience, but the wish to describe their direct experience of this reality is contrary to their own explicit feeling of its impossibility. The jokers and the fools have a similar knowledge that categories and genres do not represent the total reality; its expression in the culture always has alternatives. Their knowledge, on the contrary, is an implicit knowledge, and it is not made explicit. The ludicrous is expressed through the joke or the comical situation, it does not exert any pressure on its protagonists to be *described*. Its source is not a profound experience similar to the profound experience of the mystic. The direction of the two types of experience, the ludicrous and the mystical, or the fools and the mystics, is always opposite. The direction of the mystic's experience tends to point away from the carnal man, while the fool tends to bring him to the foreground. Nevertheless, "because of their common characteristic—that is, a knowledge of the relativity of all ideologies, religious or otherwise—the mystic and the clown often appear together"⁸⁹.

Within the non-Western traditions, Bataille's thought has been compared to Shamanism⁹⁰ and to Tantrism⁹¹, and to the views of the 20th century guru on laughter, Osho. Yet in an appendix to *On Nietzsche* titled "inner experience and Zen"⁹², he equates his "method of laughter" as described in *Inner Experience*, "the ecstatic experience of the meaning of nonmeaning again becoming the nonmeaning of meaning and then again...with no possible outcome..." with Zen methods: "Taking a closer look at Zen methods, you will find that they imply this movement. *Satori* is sought via concrete nonmeaning substituted for the sensed reality, as revelatory of deeper reality. This is the method of laughter..."⁹³. Moreover, he points that "in Zen *satori* is addressed only through comic subtleties, since it is the pure immanence of the return to self..."⁹⁴.

Bataille also points to the difference between his method and Zen: he does not "imagine attaining *satori* without first being overwhelmed by suffering"⁹⁵. It is this aspect of Bataille's thought on laughter, I suggest, the sacrificial pain involved in laughter, that seems to make his mysticism of laughter unique.

But can laughter as we know it fulfill the role Bataille assigns to it? Ingviold Gilhus suggests that destruction and regeneration are intimately linked in laughter:

To abandon oneself to laughter means the temporary unmaking of one's traditional self and the letting loose of a violence that sweeps the outlived away, make the body blaze and

87 HYERS, MC (1974). *Zen and the Comic Spirit*. Philadelphia, PA, Westminster Press, p. 44.

88 FEDOTOV, GP (1966). *The Russian Religious Mind*. 2 vols. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, pp. 316-343; SYRKIN, A (1982). "On the Behavior of the "Fools for Christ's Sake". *History od Religions*, 22/2, pp. 150-171; see: DAVIS, JM (2011). "The Fool and the Path to Spiritual Insight", in: GEYBELS, H & HERCK, W van (Eds) (2011). *Humour and Religion: Challenges and Ambiguity*. London, Continuum, pp. 218-247.

89 GILHUS, IS (1991). *Op. cit.*, p. 273.

90 RICHARDSON, M (1994). *Op. cit.*, pp. 112-114.

91 FOLJAMBE, A (2008). *An Intimate Destruction: Tantric Buddhism, Desire and the Body in Surrealism and Georges Bataille*. A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities.

92 BATAILLE, B (1970). "Sur Nietzsche", in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., pp. 177-178.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

94 *Ibidem*.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

makes the world vibrate with life. But **in the dark depths of laughter, life-giving and destructive values meet and intermingle, and ultimately these depths are impenetrable for human thought**⁹⁶.

I have found these two aspects of laughter helpful in illuminating Nietzsche's manifold use of laughter, first, as a destructive force in the critical part of his philosophy, and later, as a regenerative force in his positive philosophy. But Bataille uses these two aspects at once because for him "divine ecstasy and extreme horror is the same: the identity of perfect contraries"⁹⁷. Indeed, as Catherine Cusset explains, Bataille's writings attempt to express the "coincidence of life and death...the abject and the divine, ugliness and beauty, horror and sanctity, disgust and veneration"⁹⁸. In the same vein, Peter Connor sees the coincidence of opposites as the key to Bataille's thought and Michael Richardson considers paradoxicality a reason to deem Bataille a trickster⁹⁹. As I have shown elsewhere, laughter is a means for holding together opposites¹⁰⁰.

Bataille differs from Zen Buddhism in one more important aspect. Laughter for him is the sole means and the sole content of the mystical experience. Though laughing techniques are used in one form of Zen Buddhism as a way to quicken satori, they are preceded and followed by years of long daily hours of meditation within the walls of a monastery. Bataille's meditation techniques do not attempt to emulate that; he concentrates on augmenting the horror of anxiety through pictures of torture in order to attempt to let the meaninglessness of the impalement flow into a laughterless laughter that is ecstatic¹⁰¹. Thus, laughter is not the after-effect of a mystical experience for Bataille as it is for the laughing Buddhas; rather, Bataille uses laughter as the sole means for his project; and, as mystical experience for Bataille is nothing but the experience of one's limits, there is no thing to communicate with beyond the mystical experience, and it is thus laughter itself which provides the content of the mystical experience. Rather than a laughing mysticism, Bataille experienced and conceptualized a mysticism of laughter. The religious experience is nothing but the laughing itself, and it is there, I suggest, that lies Bataille's uniqueness both in his view of laughter and his conception of the divine¹⁰².

96 GILHUS, IS (1997). *Op. cit.*, 149; emphasis added.

97 BATAILLE, B (1970). "Impossible", in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit., Vol. III, p. 101.

98 CUSSET, C (1995). "Technique de l'impossible", in: HOLLIER, D (Ed), (1995). *Georges Bataille après tout*. Paris, Editions Berlin, pp. 171-189, my translation.

99 CONNOR, PT (2000). *Op. cit.*, p. 45; RICHARDSON, M (Ed.) (1998). *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

100 For laughter's capacity of holding together opposites, see the third chapter of Amir 2014.

101 BATAILLE, G (1970). "Méthode de méditation", in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. cit.; BRUN, J (1963). "Les techniques d'illumination chez Georges Bataille". *Critique*. Vol., 195/196, pp. 706-20

102 For a fuller presentation of Bataille's philosophy, see Amir: *Nietzsche's Laughing French Followers: Bataille, Deleuze, Rosset* (work in process). An earlier version of this article was presented in June 2012 at the International Congress on *Humor Studies* in Krakow, Poland. I am grateful for the participants' comments, and especially for Mark Weeks' further efforts to improve on it.



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