

Foreword

The importance of the sacred in the works of Georges Bataille is becoming increasingly prominent in the critical discourse. In the sixties, critics primarily emphasized the "impossible", death, transgression, abjection, and mystique in Bataille's writings. Yet, since the nineties, the influence of sociology, anthropology and history of religions has drawn increasing attention.

In 1979, Denis Hollier published the first transcription of the conferences of the Collège de sociologie, with detailed commentary and scholarly references. Later, Jean-Michel Heimonet published *Politiques de l'écriture*¹ where he shows the way in which Bataille's thinking on the nature of political revolt lead him to develop the field of "sacred sociology". D. Lecoq and J.-L. Lory gave the opportunity to ethnographers and anthropologists of presenting the strong influence of their disciplines on the author in *Ecrits d'ailleurs*². Finally, *L'autre et le sacré*³, published in 1995, presented Bataille in the context of the surrealists' fascination for ethnography and primitive art.

However, if these publications managed to shed more light on the importance of the "sacred" – as it was defined by Durkheim, and Mauss – in Bataille's reflexion, there still remained a number of obscurities and ambiguities

¹ *Politiques de l'écriture, Bataille, Derrida, Le sens du sacré dans la pensée française du surréalisme à nos jours*, Paris, J.-M. Place, 1990.

² *Ecrits d'ailleurs, Georges Bataille et les ethnologues*, ed. by D. Lecoq, et J.-L. Lory, Paris, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1987.

³ *L'autre et le sacré, surréalisme, cinéma, ethnologie*, ed. C. W. Thompson, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1995.

that required investigation. Although these studies explained how Bataille used ethnography in order to create a non-academic discipline, “sacred sociology” – a phenomenology of altered states of consciousness and their influence on human groups that he later called “heterology”, science of the “wholly other”, according to Rudolf Otto’s definition – no one had so far dealt with the wider consequences of his use of human sciences.

This is why, in April 2006, a number of academics from a variety of disciplines were invited to discuss the issue in a comparative perspective for the first time. Coming from departments of literature, sociology or history of arts, from the University of London or from that of Cambridge, these young academics all consider Bataille as one of the pioneering thinkers of what is often designated in Anglo-Saxon universities as “post-modern philosophy.” In France, Georges Bataille is overshadowed by more famous authors such as André Breton and other surrealists, which explains why he is not known by the wide audience. As he is a marginal, unclassified writer, critics who appreciate Georges Bataille still have to repeat that we need to rediscover his work.¹ However, the Anglo-Saxons have been paying a much warmer homage to the French writer for the last few years². Bataille is trendy. Therefore, the discussion was not only aimed at bringing various disciplines together but also at giving the opportunity to French and Anglo-Saxon scholars to cross their viewpoints and methods of reading.

Ian James (French Literature, Cambridge, UK) and David Nowell Smith (French Literature, Cambridge, UK) have tackled the issue from a philosophical angle. In his paper, Ian James shows the divide between two essential ways (“possible” or “impossible”) of reading Bataille's philosophy, which can explain why Bataille has suffered a rejection from the professional philosophers such as

¹ M. Surya, foreword to *Lignes*, no. 17, May 2005, Paris, Lignes & Manifestes, 2005.

² The most recent publications put forward the research of academics who are, in majority, not from France. In addition, in Summer 2006, the Hayward Gallery hosted the impressive exhibition "Undercover Surrealism" that, along with an international conference, demonstrates the intellectual and artistic richness of "Documents", one of the reviews created by Bataille that lasted from 1929 to 1930. Exhibition curated by Dawn Ades, Simon Baker, and Fiona Bradley, London, Hayward gallery publishing, 2006.

Habermas. David Nowell Smith examines how *Histoire de l'œil* (*Story of the Eye*) draws a symbolic circle of immanent sovereignty in order to give a possible representation to the sacred. This “exercise on sovereignty” is paralleled with what Kant called a “categorical imperative”.

Rina Arya (Art History, Glasgow, UK), and Juliette Feyel (Comparative Literature, Paris X, France) discussed the impact of the paradoxical notion of the sacred on Bataille's aesthetics. Rina Arya compares the works of Georges Bataille with those of Francis Bacon in order to explain how the two men exemplify post-modernist religious sensitivity. The term “a-theology” gives account for a craving for an experience of the sacred that is not satisfied or completed by the encounter with God. Juliette Feyel argues that Bataille used his understanding of anthropology in order to compete with Andre Breton's surrealist revolution; he created a type of aesthetics aiming at making the reader experience the sacred.

Finally, Paul Stronge (Sociology, London, UK) and Ross Anthony (Social Anthropology, London, UK) investigate to what extent reading Bataille is still as necessary today as it was in the past. Paul Stronge shows how Bataille's notion of the sacred improved the human sciences by dismissing an excessively positivist system of classification, and how in his own work the sacred enabled him to point at certain types of discrimination in the present sociological context. Ross Anthony contradicts several discourses of the late seventies which identified the behaviours and ethics of ultra-liberal heroes with what Bataille described as the search for the sacred through spectacular expenditure. Using Brett Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* (1991), he argues that contemporary capitalistic consumerism is radically at odds with Bataille's interpretation of the sacred.