Commentary

For our Commentary segment, JAC invites one of our readers to discuss a significant book or to explore an important topic in our field. In this issue, Geoffrey Sirc discusses the work of Georges Bataille.

Godless Composition, Tormented Writing

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The only strict and honest path. Making no finite demands. Conceding no limitation—regardless of the way chosen. Not even when striking out toward infinity. Demanding of an individual that this person be whatever he or she is, or will be. Knowing nothing except fascination. Never stopping at the apparent limit.

Georges Bataille

Is there a place in composition for Georges Bataille? Can we think of the following as composition?

As I had earlier become a tree... so I became a flame... The new chance experience answered to nothing which one could have evoked in advance. The upper part of my body—above the solar plexus—had disappeared, or at least no longer gave rise to sensations which could be isolated. Only my legs—which kept me standing upright, connected what I had become to the floor—kept a link to what I had been: the rest was an inflamed gushing forth, overpowering, even free of its own convulsion. A character of dance and of decomposing agility (as if made of the thousand idle futilities and of life's thousand moments of uncontrollable laughter) situated this flame “outside of me”. And as everything mingles in a dance, so there was nothing which didn’t go there to become consumed. (Inner 127)

Are there any useful rules or terms for writing in there? Does finding oneself overtaken by a time-stopping moment of heightened being and, then, overtaken by the certain frustration of having to (and failing to) capture that moment in writing offer something of interest to the composition teacher? Composition never seems to ask the question (to paraphrase Duchamp) whether one can make works which are not works of writing. Bataille, as
Barthes realized, took such a subversive need for his own, metamorphosing works and genres of writing into the non-genre of text. Hence, he could not be known by the “literary manual” mentality: “What constitutes the Text is, on the contrary (or precisely), its subversive force in respect of the old classifications. How do you classify a writer like Georges Bataille? Novelist, poet, essayist, economist, philosopher, mystic? The answer is so difficult that the literary manuals generally prefer to forget about Bataille who, in fact, wrote texts, perhaps continuously one single text” (157).

But what an awful thing I am about to write. Commenting on Bataille. Reduced to commenting, perhaps, by the very novelty of Bataille’s long continuous text. Bataille commentary: Making Bataille useful, he who loathed servility and use. Jean-Luc Nancy is right: “It is becoming urgent to stop commenting on Bataille (even though the commentary on his is still quite sparse)” (“Exscription” 59). Write an article about it in an academic journal, it will be read by someone guilty.

I realize I will fail at writing, but I want to try (because, as Allan Stoekl says, it’s “necessary work,” this interrogation and revision of Bataille’s thought—catching the spirit of radical negation at the heart of Bataille’s thinking, he admits that “given the apparent ‘end of history’ in which we find ourselves . . . we have nothing to turn to” [6]), in this case, in regards to the trilogy Bataille wrote during the war, the three volumes, written between 1939 and 1945, which make up his Somme Athéologique. His desire in the Somme was to open himself to life, as unmediated (“that which discourse never managed to attain” [Inner 59]), as undetermined as possible, “an experience laid bare, free of ties, even of an origin” (Inner 3). He wanted, that is, the mystical transports of religious experience without the religion, the ecstasy of mystical experience without the mysticism. He wanted life to take him somewhere, without him “lead[ing] it to some end point given in advance” (Inner 3). To determine his openness to inner experience, he proceeded according to non-knowledge, unknowing, “to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense” (Inner 3). Indeed, the experience came to him, in fragmented states of powerful feeling (as the one above). But, in terms of a dogma, nothing was revealed; his “project” in the Somme—teeth gritting all the way, given his hatred of project’s servility—was to write out (of) his glorious success of a failure in a language he resented yet could not stop rehearsing. As articulation of that powerful something of a nothing, the discursive rhythm (so much as a treatise on anti-discursivity can have one) alternates between a kind of heady philosophic exegesis and an acephalic poetic record, a non-knowledge tract of his inner states when the violent winds of life blew through him. The books provide one of the most touching records in literary history of a person striving to will himself further, both in life and writing. Denis Hollier, in his introduction to Guilty (fittingly entitled “A Tale of Unsatisfied Desire”), calls this writing “a major twentieth century speech event—a stifled and jagged voice is struggling in the labyrinth of
language" (vii). I'm struck when I read that line how well that describes my students, myself. Bataille's de- (and/or re-) determination of the moment of life and language—inflecting the night, the anguish, the laughter, the ecstasy, so the dark sun of transgression will illuminate the habitual day—supplies a tension, the possibility of subversion, for anyone who presumes to teach and practice another kind of writing, something other than "dogmatic servitude" (Inner 3). Exactly what is writing when it refuses to be "a dry verbal tradition to be executed on command" (Inner 6)? It might be similar to Bataille's, in the way he writes, plans, then—disgusted at the implications of project, "distrustfully hostile towards the idea of perfection (servitude itself, the 'must be')"—he unwrites, unplans (Inner 4). We have been comfortable in our field with a notion of writing as discovery, but just what might be discovered, and what would such a dis-covering writing look like, on "a voyage to the end of the possible" (Inner 7)? As field notes from beyond the field, all three books are what Hollier calls "an experimental document: a record of involvement, or of meditation and illumination practices" (vii).

A *Summa Athiologica* for composition means a writing without the God of Meaning, without the Commandment of Project. An insubstantial writing: "The difference between sacrifice (sacredness) and (theological) divine substance can be easily noted. Sacredness is the opposite of substance" (Guilty 34). Bataillean composition lacerates, wrecks, leads one to the edge of the abyss. God becomes the central *point de capiton* in a system which defines, mediates, only partially obscures: "I hold the apprehension of God . . . to be an obstacle in the movement which carries us to the more obscure apprehension of the unknown" (Inner 5). Composition substitutes the being and system of religion for the profound, inarticulate nothingness of the sacred. Any system, any philosophy of composition, must be dissolved, "and being dissolved into this new way of thinking, it finds itself to be no longer anything but the heir to a fabulous mystical theology, but missing a God and wiping the slate clean" (Inner 9). Composition's theology posits a salvation, a world of successful writing for us and our students, a methodology (whether formal or political) to lead us out of despair to that world. Bataille terms notions of salvation "the most odious of evasions" (Inner 12). Composition's spirituality exorcises chance; it comes to its salvation through an effort of will. Such method runs counter to an atheological mysticism attuned to randomness rather than ritual, living a life "measured only by the sun and rain, dismissing categories of language" (Guilty 58). We want to lead others (and be led ourselves) out of despair, but there is only despair, "an anguished desire, but a desire and no other desire . . . the absence of hope, of all enticement . . . the state of deserted expanses and—I can imagine—of the sun" (Inner 38). Every tale is a tale of unsatisfied desire: "the sole truth of man, glimpsed at last, is to be a supplication without response" (Inner 13). Composition assumes satisfaction, success, desires satisfaction. Its needs are clearly defined, and they only lack fulfillment. "An absence of need [is] more
unfortunate than the absence of satisfaction," Bataille wrote in his essay "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (223). Composition needs to wreck itself in order to expose its fundamental need for need. "True desire is a desire for desire, not satisfaction" is Hollier's gloss ("A Tale" xii), and Bataille brushes away any concern with trying to fill desire's emptiness: "To be honest, pleasure scarcely matters. It's received as an extra" (Guilty 160). To speak of success, when every experience is partly failed? All that matters is that you have been vulnerable, empty, open. In his thirst, his hunger, his idiotic groping for the ungraspable, he could be my student, my self: "in little time I felt myself emptied, trying to grasp once again in vain the ungraspable which had definitely just escaped; I felt then idiotic" (Inner 126). Inflected according to satisfaction rather than desire, composition turns excrescent. "Thirst without thirst needs too much to drink" (Guilty 34). Composition as I know it today subordinates the need for need in an artificial economy of the "real," a writing without torment, in which various effects must be pursued and satisfied in serious, meaningful effort: "People must have agreed among themselves (or among others) that this or that is advisable in view of this or that result, this or that gain. Without these crude artifices they wouldn't have committed themselves to the behavior that marks out decline (the infinite sadness, the ridiculous seriousness required by the effort!)" (On 35-36). What this ensures is the impossibility of true communication. Rather than success, we need to be imperfected: "you could not become the mirror of a heart-rending reality if you did not have to be broken" (Inner 96). Composition's insistence on salvation makes it a world-without-end. There is no death in composition, no void where existence is lost, undone. Composition needs its negation, needs its death. Its "illusion of sufficiency" needs its insufficiency (Inner 87). But the world of death, anguish, laceration, fragmentation, laughter, sacrifice, ecstasy—the world lit by the dark sun—is nowhere in composition. Bataille describes a dynamic that could be composition's, in its insistence on salvation and its denial of death: "in seeking the summit, we find anguish. But in fleeing anguish, we fall into the emptiest poverty (Inner 86).

Anguish is composition's neglected way of knowing, torment its wasted hermeneutic. Anything else not circumscribed by death is dead already, a dodge of existence. The terror must not be resolved or rationalized. It is the basis of communication, the principle of humanity, of sovereignty: "it breaks down the barriers of isolation.... And it is ... in this bringing together, where breath is suspended, that human existence reaches the decisive moment of its abandonment and its rupture in the darkness of the universe" (Inner 192). The realm of knowledge, the world of discourse, is an evasion. Despite its denial (a denial which implicates it in the grotesque simulations of the present day), there is nothing in composition, "that's not threatened by death, nothing that couldn't vanish tomorrow" (Guilty 61). All withers under the heat of the solar desert.
In order to provide the distance of present-day man from the "desert", of the man with the thousand cacaphonic idiocies (almost scientific, ideology, blissful joking, progress, touching sentimentality, belief in machines, in big words, and, to conclude, discordance and total ignorance of the unknown), I will say of the "desert" that it is the most complete abandonment of the concerns of the "present-day man", being the continuation of the "ancient man", which the enactment of festivals regulated. He is not a return to the past; he has undergone the corruption of the "present-day man" and nothing has more place within him that the devastation which it leaves—it gives to the "desert" its "desert-like" truth; the memory of Plato, of Christianity and above all—the most hideous—the memory of modern ideas, extend behind him like fields of ashes. (Inner 28)

The desert-dwellers have evaded the other world's evasions. They are outlanders, outlaws. Their transgressive crimes are laughter and sacrifice (Inner 98). Sacrifice, for example, acknowledges the negation, feeds it. Our sacrifice allows us to deliver a part of ourselves, metonymically, to the realm of destruction. Poetry, for example, becomes a sacrifice of words, wasted in the hope of capturing an excess that can't be represented. Composition's idea of successful writing, of salvation in writing, only makes sense in its restricted economy. Its systems are all action-oriented, goal directed: "I have imagined you, the reader, as a person who writes to make something happen... whatever your goals are, you are interested in discovering better ways to achieve them" (Flower 1). This writing is far removed from the general economy of poetry, where representational logics aren't so neat; it amounts to the degraded utilitarianism of, say, successfully ordering a hamburger in a fast-food restaurant. It posits a happy faith in writing, rather than a disbelief, a disgust, an elusion. My goals are to forget my goals, to avoid them; what I want to make happen is nothing. What I mean to make un-happen is almost everything. I am interested in discovering what writing can't capture. Or, finally, my goal is as simple as this: a train pulls into a station somewhere on the planet, and I'm leaning against the window. I want acknowledgement that there is no less meaning in that moment than in the whole of composition. I'd be ashamed of a composition that claimed truth in its "better ways," and saw none in my moment of inner experience there in the train station (Guilty 30). Composition is endlessly standards, formulae, ways, methods, techniques; it is almost always a "calculated" writing and so rarely poetry. It wants no part of what escapes its ways, of the supplement, the allegory, the remainder, the doomed part, the accident, the perversion, the error—which is poetry: "A calculated use of words, the negation of poetry, destroys chance and reduces things to what they are. Using words poetically involves a perversion akin to the hellish beauty of faces or bodies—which death reduces to nothing" (Guilty 78). Composition's economy is one of reciprocity, profit, and accounts. Success underwrites it ("nothing is more embarrassing, as far as I'm concerned, than success: [Guilty95]). Success in our pedagogies is underwritten; if you do x, y will happen: "If good writers and problem-solvers have a secret power, it is planning... The twenty minutes you spend planning can save you hours in writing" (Flower 58). It is a slave's consciousness:
Avaricious, anal, unable to "be done" with things, it was the slave who quietly stockpiled his disadvantages to secure compensation in a future heaven. He took secret payoffs for his petty sacrifices, surreptitiously profited from every pain. Unlike the noble consciousness—wasteful, extravagant, Zarathustra's "squanderer with a thousand hands"—the slave waited, counted, plotted the advantage in every setback, took the measure of every loss. (Comay 67)

What of the excess beyond calculation, Bataille wonders? What of discourse as non-sense, given as a gift, in the expectation of nothing? What of life commensurate only to nature (a starry night, a bird's song, a lightning flash)? Somewhere, at some point, a train pulls into a station, and it was not expected to almost have so many answers; somewhere a young student writes some lines on ice-T, not quite suit the scope of the assignment, and the reader of those lines is haunted.

Such a writing, not fitting into the exchange logic, becomes economically transgressive, "exposing the prevailing ideology of just exchange between equals as just the mask worn by the system to cover up the real inequities of the day" (Comay 67-68). Where is the lavishness of composition?

Discourse, particularly, becomes composition's labyrinth. Bataille, according to Nancy, "ceaselessly eludes, not finishing his texts, still less the 'sum' or the 'system' of his thought, leaving even his sentences unfinished on occasion, or else relentlessly withdrawing by an eccentric, lopsided syntax what the progression of a line of thought was laying down as a logic or a topic" ("Exscription" 60). This contra-style marked Bataille's attempt "to free as much as is possible the expression of one's thought from a project, to include everything in a few sentences: anguish, decision and the right to the poetic perversion of words without which it would seem that one was subject to a domination" (Inner 28-29). Composition's faith in words is its faith in God. God is the "final word meaning that all words will fail further on" (Inner 36). Bataille's feelings about writing are permeated with painful ambiguity; his thoughts on his own writing suffused with failure. It seems somehow wrong to say these books are unfinished, that the Somme is incomplete; it seems to go against the nature of the informal. Yet Bataille keeps reflecting on the formal. In the Preface to Inner Experience, for example, he regrets: "My book finished, I see its destable sides, its inadequacy. Worse yet, I see in me the concern for adequacy which I have brought to it, which I still bring to it, and of which I hate at the same time its powerlessness and a measure of intention. . . Three quarters finished, I abandoned the work" (Inner xxxii-xxxiii). This verbal trace and its undoing, this sense and the non-sensing of sense, creates a text that is mise en abyme: "If nonsense is sense, the sense which is nonsense is lost, becomes nonsense once again (without possible end)" (Inner 52). We are caught in an entropic downward spiral about the ultimate usefulness, as a system of thought, of an anti-systematic on uselessness. The only way out is subversion, a fragmented openness to life and the sacred, a refusal to close a gesture on restricted intention, evading life. Writing is project, servile and disdained—and yet he writes, and we must write, in order to position
ourselves against servility and acknowledge our sovereignty. It is our torment, for which notions of success are wholly beside the point: "I fail no matter what I write, in this, that I should be linking the infinite—insane—richness of 'possibles' to the precision of meaning. To this fruitless task I am compelled—happily?" (Inner 193). It is feeding the negation in us, communicating the anguish, approaching death—to reach a point where we look back at the end of the world, look at each other, and laugh. This is not a writing that solves anything; it simply opens a rupture, cracks the mirror so it can reflect the heart-breaking reality of humanity. We sacrifice to feel our need to need, to reach a limit where words and reason cannot suffice. The sacred exists in decomposition; we kill our God to recapture a sense of the sacred. Such is the place of poetry, "the sacrifice in which words are victims" (Inner 135). Poetry is where we disturb the servile economy of meaning in language, where we defy language to mean. It is where we rupture the utility of representation. Familiar meanings in poetry are evoked only to die, the known meaning sacrificed in expectation of the unknown, but only if poetry has this tension, the subserviveness of radical negativity. Bataille's original title for The Impossible was The Hatred of Poetry, so named in order to evoke the need for exhaustion, the failure, the negation—poetry's hatred-effect or hatred power—to open up a marvelous that transgressed the simple beauty of poetry.

Where is there anything in composition but the limits of discursive projects? How can the chatter of light discourse, devoid of subversion, equal profound communication, the kind that "demands silence" (Inner 92)? In Comay's reading of Bataille, the narrative of enlightenment and modernity, which Bataille found horrific, is a story of "the progressive technologization of experience... maximizing its efficiency, reinvesting all its surpluses to feed the expanding means of production, capturing all existence within the circle of instrumentality and exchange" (69). It's the story of contemporary composition, contemporary academics, which is for the most part closed to other ideas, other worlds: "The idea that there's no necessity in the world of objects, that ecstasy might be adequate to the world (and not God or objects to a mathematical necessity)" (On 106). Such an idea, doomed of course, nevertheless occurs to Bataille, "lifting me off the ground" (On 106). It's the writer as Zarathustra. Human existence defined as "the life of 'unmotivated' celebration, celebration in all meanings of the word: laughter, dancing, orgy, the rejection of subordination, and sacrifice that scornfully puts aside any consideration of ends, property, and morality... [Zarathustra, who] never abandoned the watchword of not having any end, not serving a cause, because, as he knew, causes pluck off the wings we fly with" (On xxxii). Composition frustrates flight, grounds us, in its world of disciplined projects; the "real world" students write to is never the world beyond, the world of limitless thought. "Writing's always only a game played with ungraspable reality. And given the impossibility of enclosing the world with propositions, I wouldn't..."
even want to try. I wanted rapturousness for the living" (Guilty 47). Composi-
tion never stops trying; it's always about rules, conditions for that game, for
the grasping. What sort of reality is that, then, that it deals with? Just which
world is so easily grasped? “If I give my life to life itself to be lived and ruined
... I open my eyes on a world in which I have no meaning unless I'm wounded,
torn apart, and sacrificed” (Guilty 45).

Those of us who have written against composition have done so in part,
perhaps, at the way a true sense of community—that difficult dance between
being-in-itself and being-in-common (Bataille's ipse and I)—is ill-managed
in our field. The cracked weirdness of being-in-itself is too often forgotten
for the truths (or what is felt, wrongly, to be the communicativeness) of being
in-common. As Nancy says in the preface to his study of our era's grave
interruption of the idea of community, a theory of communication becomes
trivial in its rush to generalizable conventions, instead of maintaining a focus
on the individual, fragmented communicants revealing their nakedness. We
learn how we communicate

only if we dismiss all “theories of communication,” which begin by positing the necessity
or the desire for a consensus, a continuity and a transfer of messages. It is not a question
of establishing rules for communication, it is a question of understanding before all else
that in “communication” what takes place is an exposition: finite existence exposed to
finite existence, co-appearing before it and with it. (Nancy xl)

Communication, for Bataille, implies an openness, a wounding, something
sacrificed: “Communication” cannot proceed from one full and intact indi-
vidual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in
themselves is risked, placed at the limit of death and nothingness; the moral
summit is the moment of risk taking. It is a being suspended in the beyond
of oneself, at the limit of nothingness. (On 19). No crime, no transgression,
no risk, means no possibility of the opening, of the exposure to the contagion
of the glorious fever of consciousness. The writing, then, becomes a record
of that sin, a “burning trajectory[ly]” (On 26), enabling a similar risk in the
reader. The new world is the one we enter naked; “woe betide those who
won't be here to see the coming for the time for casting off old clothes and
going naked in the new world: a world where what has never been seen before
remains the sole condition of possibility!” (On 165). What Bataille is
nostalgic for is that incommensurate paradise that isn't here yet, which
maybe was always lost. But whatever moment of glory is to come comes from
rupture, the point of the irreducible. That laceration, that wound, that
opening must be there: to be naked inside, to be guilty of being a self. Of
course I have students—many each quarter—who just want to know the tricks
to writing, how to psyche it out. Who want the grades and the jobs. I don't
want to deny them that; I, after all, have a job. But there remains the way I
choke on that system, the way we all do, ultimately. There is a profound
dissatisfaction many of us feel at having to enable that system. The answer,
for me, lies not in the installation of a political content, another system, to
counter that system. It is, rather, in providing that wound, that opening—a space for a formal tension that somehow balances, matches, neutralizes the system. It's showing students the doing, sure—some have paid for this—but then allowing the undoing to have its say. So, for example, I will teach Mick Joneja to write an expository essay, a research-based paper on our ostensible subject of hip-hop. But I will also allow Mick’s exposition to me:

A weird thing happened to me on the way over here. While I was walking over to Walter [Library] I saw a short black man walking. He all of a sudden jumped up. I laughed quietly but he still heard me. He looked back and I was walking over the area he was on when he jumped. I looked down and there was a huge beetle—about 2 1/2" in diameter (honestly!). I slowed down, looked at it, and said softly, “What the Fuck?” He heard me say something and said in response “What the fuck was ‘dat?!” I said it looked like some kinda’ bug on ‘roids. He laughed and said “Dat scared the shit otta me!” I laughed. Then as we walked, one in front of the other, we saw these huge tents that are in front of the Library. He said, “What the fuck are those for?” I said I didn’t know. Then he said, “I think I’ll crash there ta’night.” I then lost all feeling of being relaxed and felt like you do when you pass a bum on the street, and you try to act like you don’t notice them. I picked up my pace like it was an automatic reaction and changed my path in the other direction. Once I was well out of distance I realized how cold I was. I met a bum (who I thought was not a bum), and ignored him once I realized what he was. I had five bucks in my pocket which I could’ve lived without. I think of this as being ironic. I came to the library to E-mail you about rap. I think that this is exactly what America does when they hear the stories being told in rap—they ignore it, and cover up their uneasy feeling of the truth with something else. In my instance, I covered up my uneasy feeling with other thoughts for awhile so I could ignore the truth. In the instance of rap, America also ignores the truth, but they use extreme criticism instead. I felt bad, but the worst part about the fact was that before I knew the guy was a bum, I felt comfortable, and enjoyed talking to him.

By writing his own miniature version of Guilty, his own record of an inner experience, Mick pursues the logic of communication as rupture, “the opening of the self to terror shared” (Michelson 1112). His message to me comes from (seemingly) nowhere; but of course it comes from somewhere. For I have also exposed myself throughout the course; I’ve confessed my insights, my joys, my fears, my passions about the music. So I must also show them this writing-as-se-toucher; I want to prod gently into small openings, and be prodded ... soothed, stimulated, thrilled, bothered, tormented.

You have to find the place of sacrifice, the wound. A being can only be touched where it yields. . . . The more perfect, the more isolated or confined to ourselves we are. But the wound of incompleteness opens me up. . . . What’s requisite for communication is a defect or “fault.” Communication enters like death through a chink in the armor. What’s required is an overlapping of two lacerations, mine, yours. (Guilty 26-27, 30).

Mick realizes that rap music, too, is a communicative rupture, an “uneasy feeling” opened up in our culture. Uneasy feelings are the basis of communication, not discursive commonalities. A community forms (to steal from Alphonso Lingis) of those who have nothing in common—a hideous bug, maybe, or half-formed thoughts on music (but everything, really, subsumed
by waves of desire in the midst of anguish). Somewhere on the planet, as a train pulls into a station, a young man reflects on a bum (who he thought was not a bum), and it makes him think about rap music; I lean my head against the window of my computer screen, consumed.

One comes to composition as Lingis comes to the third-world city of Chichicastenango, Honduras, which one reaches by journeying through Copán, site of some of the most beautiful of the Mayan ruins. The peasant-market economy of the city is a scene haunted by the presence of that absent Mayan sacred. It is a sacred which, if it survives fitfully in the shadows of the Honduran sun, is wholly absent from Lingis's America:

The sacred hovered inconceivably in the charred hull of the once-Catholic temple, in the broken idol in its circle of rough stones in the hill outside the town, in the grime of sacrificial stones and torn and bloodied chicken feathers, in the stunted bodies of Indians hunted down in these rocky heights by soldiers from the capital transported by helicopter. No, the sacred is this decomposition.

The sacred is what repels our advance. The taboos and proscriptions that demarcate it do not constitute its force of withdrawal. It is not the salvific but the inapprehendable, the unconceptualizable, the inassimiable, the irrecuperable. (7)

What Lingis feels in his journeys in Honduras is a sense of two worlds, a primitive-sacred still extant, nimbus-like, in the modern-degraded one. This double-world or doubled-nature syndrome is the Bataillean view: "I'd belong to a somewhat changed species of humanity, one that has to overcome itself. This species would combine action and questioning (work and laughter).... I'm not writing for this world" (Guilty 110, 113). I must provide in my classes, for students like Mick, an awareness of the two worlds, a curriculum of heterodoxy. Nietzsche's goal, for Bataille, was "not knowledge but, without separating its operations, life.... Nietzsche was only a burning solitary man, without relief from too much strength, with a rare balance between intelligence and unreasoned life" (Inner 26-27). That rare tension, that power of subversion, has to be preserved in a writing class or it is an ignoble failure. There can be no profundity in teaching what amounts to mere contemplation; there must be moments of rupture, of unreasoned life. We seek to stabilize, exorcise those moments in our classrooms, seeing them as solecisms, having no part in formal, reasoned success. Composition's religion of salvation wants to end misery, not communicate it. It lacks an impulse, a communication of excessive pain, that can "ruin in [it] that which is opposed to ruin" (Inner 120). Its religion is a hatred of chance. It never seeks to discover another language, merely to further dominate the utilitarian one. Bataille's curriculum is the Elements of Stylelessness: "Fiasco, collapse, despair are, in my eyes, light laying bare, glory" (Inner 55). His pedagogy? "[S]ly cruelty, impudent coarseness, trickery, good sense (above all insipid), veiled interest, an old maid's gullibility, laughter on every occasion, these are the first words of my new 'wisdom'" (Inner 198). His is an erotic course, demanding ruinous outlays of students, requiring them to bring indigence
(Guilty 22). The comments students' papers would receive: “Chaos is the condition of this [writing] and it's boundless in every sense. I love the idea that [its] moods and licentiousness are pointless” (Guilty 28). The texts of Bataille’s Somme are fragmented records of half-failed experiences (“in my effort to find access once again to this emptiness, I exhausted myself in vain” [Inner 125]). The God he becomes is the “God... ruined in the negation of itself” (Inner 128). Authority in writing is simply a symptom of the dogmatic servitude of discursive thought: “inner experience has neither goal, nor authority, which justify it (53). . . . If I had the authority at my disposal, everything within me would be servitude. . . . Here a deceptive inconsistency is unveiled, inescapably sovereign” (Inner 55). Composition's measured style is debased, slavish; to give students a space to develop as sensitive people, able to communicate, we need more: “It is the extreme limit, mad tragedy, not the seriousness of the statistical, which children need in order to play and to become afraid” (Inner 44). Knowledge works, composition works; but poetry, laughter, and ecstasy don’t (Inner 111). They don't complete anything; they only open up spaces of desire. Suppression of unreasoned life has obvious implications for student/human development and serves to highlight the true goals underlying our pedagogy. A while back, while talking to a number of people within and without the academy about writing as they practiced it, I heard from one man, an insurance executive, a haunted account of a hollow discursive history. About the writing in his field, he said, “It’s been so limited. There have been few letters [in which] I have been impassioned about something. . . . Ours tend to be very clinical.” He explained to me the legal, economic reasons for the “homogenized, sanitized” condition of his company’s discourse. The company makes available form letters and memos “the attorneys have looked at and cleaned up.” Calculation defines discourse here:

The letters are pretty cold, lifeless. They sound machine-produced, and yet there’s a reluctance to do anything outside of that because of the ease, the expense. . . . I can create a letter, take the time to do that, produce it, send it out, and it would probably cost me one dollar per letter. Minimum. . . . The company could send it out for seventeen cents. With a pre-approved letter, they reduce the cost. They know what is going out; they have a certain amount of control over that.

This executive, when asked what he would change about writing in his field, spoke again out of the absence of desire: “I would allow for more flexibility, more passion. I wouldn’t be quite so uptight about being a little bit off-center . . . they've taken it to the opposite extreme. Now it's a very uninteresting piece of communication that probably doesn’t achieve much just because it's dull.” Are we obliged to stand against this evisceration of contemporary writing? Can we provide a tension of unwissenheit? We see moments of torment and mad tragedy so rarely in composition, and then they’re almost immediately subsumed by project; we find in composition what Bataille
found in Heidegger, all being and no nothingness. I can recall a few mortal, lavish moments, mere flickers (since the authors soon abandon those moments for traditional, reasoned analyses), but, even still, lasting in the potential they offer a basis for teaching communication. Jasper Neel, for example, describes the process of writing a book for tenure and promotion:

I did not have a clue what I was doing. My wife often tells a story of coming home to find me sitting on the attic steps in my underwear, head in hands, unshaven face (I didn't wear a beard at the time), in complete despair. I was trying to write what would become in a few years *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*. She asked me what I was doing, and I replied that I had no idea. (n. pag.)

Or Hurlburt & Blitz's glorious unreasoned folly of choosing to wallow in the verbal waste of their institutions: "the intra-university documents that overflow our mailboxes. . . . We both have piles—cartons, by now—of documents (we save all our university mail) in our homes and offices" (62, 75). Without the tension of Bataille's radical negativity, without an awareness of the fragmented, the detestable, the flow, without marvelous laughter to undo the serious project, there can be no dance, no electricity, no current of intense communication. Bataille wanted the *Somme* to be like Nietzsche's desire for *The Gay Science*: "Almost no phrase wherein profundity and playfulness do not tenderly hold hands" (*Inner xxxi*). The fairer sun of day shines almost exclusively over the seeming stability of our texts. But the darker sun of night illumines, too, bringing "consciousness of the paucity of stability, even of the profound lack of all true stability, liberat[ing] the enchantment of laughter" (*Inner 95*). The laughter between people, this "contagion of energy" (*Inner 94*), blends homo- and heterogeneity in tumultuous waves, the entire dynamic irreducible but composed of differences, like separate waves in a roaring sea.

Baudrillard also sees this fundamental insistence on the one true world in religious terms: "The belief in truth is part of the elementary forms of religious life. It is a weakness of understanding, of common-sense. At the same time, it is the last stronghold for the supporters of morality, for the apostles of the legality of the real and the rational, according to whom the reality principle cannot be questioned" (n. pag.). Such a simple faith in determinate reality, at the expense of passionate, imaginative possibility is archaic, quaint, ultimately indefensible: "In reality, the notion of a real world existing among all other possible worlds is unimaginable. It is unthinkable, except perhaps as a dangerous superstition. We must stay away from that, just as critical thought once stayed away (in the name of the real!) from religious superstition. . . . Similarly, radical thought is at the violent crossing point of sense and non-sense, of truth and non-truth, of the continuation of the world and the continuation of nothingness" (n. pag.). A fusion of these (at least) two worlds, their alignment, is Bataille's non-project, the need that guides his summit-orientation; not so much abandoning rationality, but
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alloying it with the mystic: "the issue confronting us isn't the disappearance of lucid and cynical—or strong—natures. It's simply the uniting of these natures with the totality of being, at the limits of understanding and experiencing possibility" (On 102). With all of these many worlds—valid, possible, unreal—composition stops with the real. Beyond the (limited) world of the real is the void, the abyss, the wound, death (not to mention the summit). Composition stops with the truth of the objective—say, the Mona Lisa. But what about the world beyond the Mona Lisa? Or the other world of the Mona Lisa? The world that occurs once the Mona Lisa is negated? The world in which the Mona Lisa has a mustache painted on it, the world in which we discover the new linguistic truth (L.H.O.O.Q) of her hot ass? Yes, that world is a focus in my class. Somehow, the dark sun will illuminate us. My guilt? But what of the guilt of those who conceal the mustache?

What Bataille wants—the laceration, the communication of loss, the ecstasy, the desire for nakedness, the breath of torment—is almost unbearable (but utterly necessary) heightening of inner experience: "the idea that misery like this, a (mute) suffering like this, might be a last breath of what we are, remains in me like a secret, a secret collusion with the ungraspable, unintelligible nature of things. Pleasurable squealing, baby-like laughter, premature exhaustion, I'm made of all this and it delivers me naked and cold to the blows of fate. But from the bottom of my heart I want to be naked" (Guilty 34). This is perhaps impossible in university writing instruction, which insists on words, completion, project. But it's there, in what lies beyond the instructional context (or within it). Bataille reflects on another real world, arrived at through transgression. From his perspective, communication is thought of not in terms of what's gained, but of what's lost. It has nothing to do with the material, social curriculum of composition: "The need to go astray, to be destroyed is an extremely private, distant, passionate, turbulent truth, and has nothing to do with what we call substance" (Guilty 34). The material is there for the sacrifice. The train pulling into the station, the context of particularity, is there to transgress, to leave, to go beyond, in search of the mundane sacred. This excessive beyond which composition limits, this impossibility; the breathing of it, the doomed attempt to forge it: this anti-project of a project which can only end in failure (as life can only end in death) is what (useful usefulness) provides the only meaningful tension for some of us in writing instruction. So we build a writing course around something as partial, as nothing as the awareness that "somewhere on the planet a train is pulling into a station" (Guilty 34) or something just as empty, yet powerfully present; embraceable yet intangible: "What I eagerly embrace. Or gain, what I don't embrace—the impossible and marvelous" (Guilty 40). "Be the victim of the impossible," he urges us to request our lovers (Guilty 40). Our students? Ourselves? Composition's theology, focusing on its God, misses a glimpse of the essence of worlds, knowing only "the possibility of immutable stagnation" (Guilty 35). On this other side, in this other real
world, a new pedagogy operates, a pedagogy of heterogeneity, which lies beyond articulation: "The time is coming to halt the flight of speech inside the mind and, in that emptiness, steep it with the kind of calm that results in images and words which when they occur appear strange and unattractive" (Guilty 36). Composition feels its religion of the word is enough, and ignores the unutterable sacred; a Bataillean pedagogy insists on a mystical experience at odds with discursivity. On moves beyond Christianity: "A few Christians have broken from the language world and come to the ecstatic one. In their case, an aptitude has to be supposed which made mystical experience inevitable in spite of Christianity's essential reliance on speech" (Guilty 37). Mysticism must be atheological, self-forged: "Confronting God, the mystic took on the attitude of a subject. If you confront existence, you have the attitude of a sovereign" (Guilty 41). In a transgressive morality, the profuse affirmation of one's outré sensuality requires greater virtue than the renunciation of pleasure (On 99). Composition, then, plays out the same modernist dynamic of limiting reality theologically, "the expulsion of the mundane sacred and its replacement by an other worldly deity" (Comay 69).

This means, of course, a bodied rhetoric. One frequently hears talk of embodied rhetorics now, as compositionists speak of "sites" of discourse, implying a situatedness. In composition, our dominant corporeal metonyms have historically been hand, eye, brain. Do they constitute a rhetoric of the body? Certainly not given the proportions of composition's mix: mostly brain, the neural realms of cognition and linguistics; then some eye, the limited retinal economy of representation; what hand there is only grasps and holds, never strokes or rubs. Can't we be more lavish? I rarely encounter in composition an aching head or a bloody tooth-socket; I've almost given up on haunting beauty or the waves onust after a few glasses of wine. There is no letting go. Rhetoric, for me, includes "the hard, luminous nudity of buttocks, the unquestionable truth of cliffs in a trough of sea and sky" (Guilty 21). Is there a rhetoric worth living that is not in large part erotic? Not one that goes to the end of the possible, surely; not one that strives for inner experience: "the extreme limit is accessible through excess, not through want:" (Inner 21). Composition, as I read it, is ascetic, not excessive. Or is it sexual, (re)productive; not erotic, transgressive. There is a flash of breast, a slight hardness, here and there, though. Kathleen Dixon, and the erotic that bubbles up during her conferences with a student: "He appeared in the doorway: tall, fair-skinned (of Polish-American descent), closely-cropped brown hair, well-scrubbed and neat in a way that seemed careless of sexual appeal. . . . [W]e stood before the possibility of an erotic male-female connection" (258, 263). It seems safer for composition to pretend those messy remainders aren't even there, or are somehow not a part of writing. The only way to read protocol research on composing is through the spectral presence of desire; when the subjects of official composition talk about what controls their composing, I can only sit back in disbelief, "Really? You never
once thought about fucking? Hmmm, you must be different than my students and I . . .” Foucault: “Since Sade [sexuality] has persistently been linked to the most profound decisions of our language” (31). Composition wants an easy, restricted, closed economy, and it will never get it. Its disembodied simulacrum is described by an arch moralism. “Thought and morality can only be impoverishment if there’s no glorification of the nakedness of an attractive whore intoxicated from having a male organ in her. Turning away from her glory is averting your eyes from the sun” (Guilty 68). The dull, bitter joke on composition is that in prohibiting the carnated, the shame, it becomes itself shame-less, not to mention limited and pointless in its notion of truth: “the hairy parts under your dress have as much truth as your mouth. These parts secretly open on filth. Without them, and without the shame associated with using them, the truth your eyes command would be stingy and ungiving” (Guilty 147). When the will of composition’s (teacher-/student-) subject arrives at its discourse-driven quest for Successful Writing (its Go(o)d), it wonders why that’s not enough. The goal of success, of nothing better, will be reached and found wanting, the scene permeated by an

aware[ness] that there still is place for something which is not itself, which is beyond the Good and imposes itself without being wanted; when the will which had wanted nothing but the good, which had wanted everything to be Good, notices that there is a residue before which it remains helpless, a residue which has total power over it since, at this extreme point, will becomes so vulnerable that it can only yield, although it is aware that it was precisely this which, in wanting, it did not want. Such is transgression.

(Hollier “Dualist Materialism” 130)

Composition “sees” with an almost disembodied, duly representational retinality (“my eyes continue to subjugate me through a commonplace link to the things which surround me, in the middle of which my steps forward are limited by the habitual necessities of life” Inner 77-78); as such, it’s best read in the sweet day of contemplation, not under the sick sun of rupture—for that, one would need the pineal eye, erupting out of the skull with an agonized cry of orgasm (mocking reason), in order to gaze full force, irrationally, on the blazing excess of the sun, so that “the head, instead of locking up life as money is locked in a safe, spends it without counting, for, at the end of this erotic metamorphosis, the head has received the electric power of points” (Visions 82).

Composition’s notion of “productive” writing, in the way it has abandoned ideas of the university as a site of spiritual, intellectual inquiry and fallen under the sweep of this new trade-school idea of disciplinarity, rarely includes any notion of the body, which is the basis of the sacred. By installing a curriculum of writing that supports the contemporary project of technological advancement, complete with the same tired taboos of modernity, we profane ourselves, our bodies, and our world:

What we call construction and creation is the uprooting of living things, the massacre of millions of paradisal ecosystems, the mindless trampling of minute creatures whose
hearts throb with life. We level mountains to pave them with temples whose gods become forgotten, and markets settling into rotting husks and plastic bags. The beat of our life is relentless drives to discharge our feces in things left behind, our passions, charged with revulsion and awe, are excremental. Our blood shed, breast milk, menstrual blood, vaginal discharges, semen, are what is sacred in us, surrounded from time immemorial with taboos and proscriptions. Bodies festering, ruins crumbling into a past that cannot be reinstated, ideas and ideals that are enshrined in a canon where they no longer light the virgin fires of first insight in our brains, extend the zone of sacred across the mouldering hull of our planet. (Lingis 7)

The sacrifice composition has chosen (for there must be sacrifice; there is always too much energy, it must be wasted) is a perverse, profane sacrifice; our liturgy is a sad, heartless rite. How can I want life, then, and feel anything but disgust for a curriculum of writing-as-servility? I am urged by a respected name in my field, out of a restricted-economic concern for how we “manage our linguistic resources,” to forget poetry and advance the goal of helping students “enter the conversation of the academy and begin to contribute to the making of knowledge” (Lindemann 314, 313). How can I take this seriously when I have seen the awful path that knowledge has led us down? What other words can escape my lips?

All profound life is heavy with the impossible. Intention, project together destroy.... Existence has since begun again, banal, and based on the appearance of a knowledge. I wanted to escape it, to say to myself: this knowledge is false. I know nothing, absolutely nothing. But I know: “nonknowledge communicates ecstasy.” (Inner 58)

Our curriculum, in its stubborn insistence on the modern sacrificial choice of technology, discards the body’s sacred, aligning itself with war over festival. The Somme is a record of life during wartime, an era that should be all-consuming, and which should rhyme well with Bataille’s notion of what comprises humanity (“supplication, war, anguish, madness” [Inner 37]). But the war for Bataille, as recorded in his journals, rarely equals (except in his horror at bodily torment) the one in his own head. War-time expenditure of energy becomes a hollow, repulsive use of excess when compared with other sorts of primitive eruptions. Bataille is so strangely (humanly) a part of and apart from scenes: a resistance truck picks up collaborationist prisoners; Bataille writes about it as if it were a movie or a tableau he’s viewing en route to his real (inner) life (On 163-164). As much as he wants immanence with the French workers (On 157), he can’t help the transcendent urges. So the war against Germany, this spectacularly violent dépense, amounts to a tragic, soul-deadening torture-scene; another modern waste of the possible.

Very much, Bataille evokes Bill Coles. One could imagine a student of Coles, trying to break on through in writing, consumed by such self-changing passion: “With whatever passion and cruel lucidity I can bring to bear, inside of me I wanted life to be naked. I’ve been working on this book since the war broke out and everything else is emptiness as far as I’m concerned” (Guilty 39-40). Coles would understand that, would understand a Godless composition,
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because he knows of the "world where the meaning of writing is not a given ... a world such as we're living in, where nothing can be taken for granted in our classrooms about what it means to write a sentence in English" ("Literacy" 250). Coles knows that one person's sense of a literate tradition, as "vital inheritance ... legacy ... a kind of trust fund of the spirit," is simply another person's "deadweight accumulation of a thousand thousand rag and bone shops of as many foul hearts" ("Literacy" 250). Coles can understand such naked passion, a desire for a seeming impossible, making a fragmented ruin of the formal, in the hopes of reaching an inner experience: "The paper is obscure then, an example, perhaps, of disparate experience insufficiently amalgamated, of a new whole unsuccessfully formed" ("Commentary" 327).

Coles realizes exactly how writing communicates: a sense of pain and circulating blood underlying words, designed to weave us together, to touch each other, to heighten each other. It is excess in search of a vague, unsatisfied desire: "I am pushed by this paper, have been for years, to the edge of irresponsibility, to becoming as a reader what I never figured I'd have to become as a reader of student writing—not better, but more alive" ("Commentary" 328). The search for the summit, the heterogeneous view, ruptures Coles' course into a non-sense ("the sense of nonsense" is the title of one of his early articles), so he ends up approaching a pedagogy of the impossible: "a way of teaching what cannot be taught, a course to make possible what no course can do" ("Teaching" 111). The contradiction that surrounds Coles' pedagogy surrounds Bataille as well: "I no longer even seek to understand," Bataille wrote in 1939, "for I can do so only in reaching for something almost inaccessible and only rarely possible" ("Ascent" 105). So on one hand, Bataille advocates no project, on the other he takes on the ultimate project of delineating the world's general economy; here he is disgusted by work, there he is "desperately working"; here he is disillusioned with reason and advocating unknowing, there he is "making interconnected outlines of knowledge" (On 109). But it makes a non-sense—the project/work/knowledge world would be nothing if not for the negation, the death-tension. It's torment as heuristic. "Confusion as a method ... My life (or rather my lack of one) is my method. Less and less do I question to know ... And I question in order to live. I live out my quest" (On 110). I think that self-canceling a logic suffuses the best that has been written in composition studies. For what can a general economy of composition, having to cover so many instances, be but always unwriting itself?

Many have remarked on the seeming contradictions in Bataille's thought and language. For Hollier, it's not so much a contradiction as the result of the Manichean dualism of Bataille. To even approach the awakening of inner experience is to realize the monistic slumber of rational thought: "everything ... slumbers under the light of the Same" (Hollier, "Dualist Materialism" 126). The awakening implies a discontinuity with the world, a now-ceasing to identify with the world. Identifying with the world narcotizes, intoxicates,
allowing us to mask suffering. The break with this world is a withdrawal:

But if we are without a narcotic, an unbreathable void reveals itself. I wanted to be everything, so that falling into this void, I might summon my courage and say to myself: “I am ashamed of having wanted to be everything, for now I see it was to sleep.” From that moment begins a singular experience. The mind moves in a strange world where anguish and ecstasy coexist. (Inner xxxii)

Awakened thought, then, must be not-same, divided, heterogeneous, dualist; moving beyond even the sameness of the Good (or the simple opposition of Good/Evil), such thought needs “insomnia-producing objects—such as eroticism, death, and thought itself” (Hollier 126) to maintain its awakened state. And so Bataille (like Baudrillard) yields to seduction, not reason. The oppositions Bataille found endlessly fascinating (transcendence vs. immanence, the sacred vs. the mundane, production vs. waste, erotic vs. sexual, sovereign vs. servile, etc.) are rejected by rational composition as “killer dichotomies.” For Hollier, Bataille’s is more an attitude of thought than a system. It is dualism’s realization that there are two worlds, not in an easy logic of contradiction, but in a tension of profound alteration (the world we live in, notes Bataille, is not the world we die in). The one world does not cancel the other so much as irrupt into its identity, alter its totality: “It is no longer sufficient to open one’s eyes and greet the day; it is necessary to open them unto the night, to the point of opening up the day to the night and the night to the other night” (Hollier 126). Composition studies, as they are mostly written, are interested in clarifying the day, further articulating the day, bettering the day, never rupturing the day. Bataille’s dualism introduces a new basic problem to writing: how can you capture two worlds, two totalities, with one language? How can one write of the world we die in with the language of the world we live in? It is impossible, and so language itself is wrecked, useless. The torment is furthered. We speak of vision and insight in our classrooms and our texts, but it is strictly a retinal sight delineating objects in the rational world of day, the world we live in. Composition chooses to improve retinal sight rather than turn the eyes inward (Foucault, on Bataille’s eye, 44-52) to see the summit at the top of the night. The world that transgresses composition is the world of night, the night which is Zarathustra’s other sun. As Boldt says in the introduction to her translation of Inner Experience: “It is NIGHT, but a night which ‘is’ not—a night which can only be apprehended by a vision which has been decentred, rendered ‘ex-orbitant’ by the emptying of its contents into the abyss of non-knowledge” (Inner xviii-xix).

The Somme Athéologique. Is it essential for composition? Is it necessary (possible?) to believe in composition without the God of Meaning? Composition without Project? A composition opposed to writing? One starting only from a concern with the sacred? I only wonder how we can continue to write without Bataille? “[I]n everything I write there’s the mark of death, of
coming closer and closer to it (the only thing that gives my writing its coherence)” (Guilty 53). If I don’t acknowledge the death, the tension, how profound can my pedagogy, my writing be? The curriculum of sheer substance in writing is a limited one. “The world of words is laughable. Threats, violence, and the blandishments of power are part of silence. Deep complicity can’t be expressed in words” (Guilty 40). If I don’t have that tension, I’m ruined as a teacher of writing. Composition under Bataille is composition striving for the summit. It is composition risking everything, sacrificing everything. The summit (unattainable) is pursued through the banal (now charged) facts of existence. Such stuff of the everyday is prohibited from most composition in favor of the specialized, the idealized, the summit purposefully sought: “But the summit eludes any attempt to think about it. It’s what is. Never what should be” (On 91). Composition takes its search for the discursive summit seriously, indeed—ensuring they will never approach the summit. Its seriousness limits risk, as “risk is first of all a refusal to take anything seriously. . . . It’s a shame to limit something essentially unlimited” (On 91). For the gamble, the chancetaking, might never bring one to the summit, but it envelopes one in a glorious fever of consciousness. Composition leaves nothing up to chance, it tries desperately to analyze audience and ensure intention. Such “individual assertion, compared to risk or chance, seems empty and inopportune” (On 91). Bataille’s reader is not analyzed or profiled in advance, simply urged on to risk self-laceration, to roll the dice, exposing oneself to the fever. The writing forges, then, a community between reader and writer (“My life with Nietzsche as a companion is a community” [On 9]):

And if by chance you see a chance beside me, take it!
It’s your chance, not mine.
No more than I, can you grasp this chance.
You’ll know nothing about it, though you take a chance on it.
In fact who sees it without gambling?

You, whoever you are, reading me—take your own chance.
As I do, with all deliberation. Just as, at the moment of writing, I gamble with you.
This chance isn’t yours or mine. It belongs to all humanity, to human light.
And has it ever before possessed such brilliance as the night now confers on it? (On 90)

That we can’t teach risk (“the panicked fear of chance and risk, the fear of human possibility” On 95), that we can only teach “individual assertion,” reveals the impossibility of Bataille’s pedagogy, as well as the dull waste of the world in which our writing functions. “Each of us involved in killing the humanness inside us. To live life and demand it, and to make life echo resoundingly, thwarts our own interests” (On 95). But what these three works show so laughably, so marvelously, is that there is other writing in this world, there are those who would gamble on the chance. Those impaled by the vaguely discerned goal, the dazzling radiance. And what do we do? Those of
us standing on a point beyond the limits of traditional writing, education, consumed by loss and torment? What happens to us? "As soon as you lose what you love, you're told—work! Submit to this or that reality, live for it (or live for the interest you have in such reality)! But if reality seems empty—what then?" (On 109). We may not be able to teach risk, but it can be present in our courses. We can dare each other, be open to chance. We can sacrifice something; there can be moments of decomposition.

Whatever of the summit can be approached is not approached through language. Such is the torment of the compositionist who has lost faith in the writing and the knowing. The insufficiency of language becomes only too painfully realized. This lack is masked by composition; the excess, when admitted, is rationalized away as error or ambiguity. Writing-as-contractual-exchange describes no death, no torment. What anxiety there is in most composition classes often is one that pits races or genders or classes against each other; it's never an anxiety of the generalized cheapening of life. Composition works (or can) for those in the sleep of reason, intoxicated by the curricular project of writing. Bataille opens the Somme with the torment of those who escape the restricted economy: "But what happens to us when, disintoxicated, we learn what we are? Lost among babblers in a night in which we can only hate the appearance of light which comes from babbling. The self-acknowledged suffering of the disintoxicated is the subject of this book" (Inner xxxii). Composition would never think to sacrifice discourse, never think of eluding or losing our language. Instead, we sacrifice students and desire; an eternal return of the Aztecs recurs each day in our classes, where writing moves across rather than against the curriculum. Student possibility is sacrificed, as Aztec slaves were, in order to restore the sense of a sacred profaned by our curriculums' servility. Do we worry that few write of the sacred in composition? Do we worry that by showing students a writing they can make use of in life that we (and they) make an abuse of writing? Not to mention of their lives, the world. Do we ever worry about such abuse? Why do we not torment ourselves to write an endless text of the abuse value of our writing? The sacrifice is there, to be sure—so much sacrifice, of students, teachers, language; contemporary composition is a scene of little besides sacrifice. But it's almost as if the sacrifice is a scene inside us, a scene in the dark inner part of our being, a scene for which we would have to reverse our eyeballs, gazing inward, bringing a flash of illumination into the anguish. While students and teachers work on the unquestioned curricular projects, the reverse-vision sees sacrifice; while classroom writing pursues the discursive strategies of reason, the other scene sees an excess of wasted poetry; while the discourse speaks of morals and the known, the transgressive vision interrogates ceaselessly, tormentedly the limitless unknown where evil is simply an ethical, necessary crime.

I have to live Bataille as a teacher of writing, for I want to expose glory in my classes. As he says of Nietzsche: "I want to be very clear on this: not a
word of Nietzsche's work can be understood without *experiencing* that dazzling dissolution into totality, without living it out" (*On* xxxi-xxxii). Nancy terms his writing about Bataille *exscription*, which seems right—written out into life, written out of life. "I have to live rather than continue to know" (*On* 95). I read much of composition, and I wonder: do they know of nights tainted with chest-rattling seizures of fear and desire, or those spent running out in the freezing cold, in the woods, becoming a dead point among the oaks, in a moment of torment and clarity? I wonder why we don't write more of our anguished nights in composition. "The night we're entering isn't simply the dark night of John of the Cross, isn't just the empty universe bereft of a helpful God—it's the night of real hunger, of the cold we feel in our rooms, of something that seems glaringly obvious in police stations" (*On* 101). Would not such honesty, such transgression of apparent limits, in terms of both the form and content of writing, get us closer to truth in writing? Would it not *advance* composition? Bataille speaks to the *ipse* in me, the wild and unknowable (not the rational, servile I), the poetic existence that seeks others. The *cuttage* or *cuttation* (to use Duchamp's term) of his desire opens up holes large enough to fall into. I take his dare, his wager—laughing with nervous relief. I fall right into him, land in his desert. There I stand, poised between ruin and rupture, ready to try to teach the unteachable.

"That which I write: an appeal! the most insane, the best destined for the deaf. I address a prayer to my fellow beings (at least to some of them): vanity of this cry of the desert man! You are such that if you perceived yourselves as I do, you could no longer be so. For (here I fall to the ground) have pity on me! I have seen what you are." (*Inner* 49)

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**Works Cited**


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**Special Issue: TETYC**

*Teaching English in the Two-Year College* is planning a special issue for October 1996 on Technology and the two-year college. Manuscripts are sought on all facets of the subject from successful use of new technologies in the classroom to problems of funding and access. Inquiries about possible subjects should be addressed to the guest editor, Todd Taylor, Department of English, University of South Florida, 4202 East Fowler Ave., CPR 107, Tampa, FL 33620-5550; phone (813) 974-0782; fax (813) 974-2270; e-mail: taylor@chuma.cas.usf.edu. Authors should consult a recent issue of *TETYC* for manuscript requirements. Completed manuscripts should be mailed by March 1, 1996 to: *TETYC*, P.O. Box 250, Brewton, AL 36427.