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Jeremy Biles. *Ecce monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. 249 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2778-5.

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Georges Bataille and His (Our) Monstrous Reality

The work of Georges Bataille has invariably inspired a variety of comments, which have clarified not only the thought of the author of *Madame Edwarda* (1941), but also various aspects of the modern and postmodern world. After the time of his veneration by the milieu of Tel Quel in the 1970s, there came a moment of ethical questioning of his writings (in the studies of Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy), of the analysis of his political position (by Francis Marmande, Jean-Michel Besnier, and Jean-Michel Heimonet), and of his mysticism (by Peter T. Connor and Andrew Hussey).[1] More recently, scholars, such as Sylvain Santi, have highlighted some aspects of his work that were previously neglected, and others, including Christophe Halsberghe, have emphasized his impact on the episteme of a whole modernity.[2] In addition, one needs to mention Denis Hollier's essays, which were of crucial importance, in particular for Bataille's reception in the United States.[3] The study of Jeremy Biles on the Bataillean monstrosity is situated at the crossing of these various approaches.

The author divides his work into five chapters, which are preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion. The book starts with the evocation of the *acÃ©phale* figure, a monster without a head, which was used as an emblem of a secret society and was also the name of a journal that Bataille founded. It leads Biles to introduce what he thinks is the main theme in Bataille's work, namely, the "conjunction of the monstrous and the sacred" (p. 3). The author specifies right away that Bataille was fascinated by the "left-hand" sacred, the "obscure and formless–not transcendent, pure, and beneficent, but dangerous, filthy, and morbid" (p. 3). This idea frames all reflections contained in this work, where Biles proceeds by a kind of "comparative analysis" of Bataille, juxtaposing him with his great predecessors and contemporaries. As he acknowledges in the introduction, Biles tries to "show how Bataille deploys writing, philosophy, and art to portray and produce monstrosity in himself and his audience, thereby inciting a sense of the sacred in the modern world" (p. 4).

In chapter 1, Biles starts with the famous photograph "Death by a Thousand Cuts" and its impact on Bataillean sensitivity. Next, he moves to a comparison of Bataille's thought to that of Hegel who Bataille knew

through Alexandre KojÃ¨ve's interpretative work. However, even if Bataille took up certain ideas of Hegel and KojÃ¨ve, he moved away from their intellectual position because he rejected the Hegelian categories of satisfaction and synthesis, and instead revealed his leaning toward the category of contradiction, or "maintenance of antinomies" (p. 24). According to Biles, these are the concepts of sacred and sacrifice, which made it possible for Bataille to have exceeded the Hegelian dialectic of the master and the slave.

Next, Biles turns to an analysis of complex connections between Bataille and Nietzsche. The author brilliantly shows that this relation was far from being a simple recovery and actualization. Instead, Bataille proceeded by "misinterpreting" Nietzsche; to Nietzsche's ascending vitality, he preferred the contrary movement of the fall. According to Biles, Bataille, thus, built a kind of "left-hand" Nietzsche, even of "sousnietzsche," which he opposed to the Nietzschean interpretations made by both fascism and existentialism (p. 59).

The subject of chapter 3 is Bataille's "extremist surrealism"; Biles attempts to clarify the background of the conflict between Bataille and AndrÃ© Breton. The author shows with perspicacity how surrealism tried to escape from reality and its contradictions, whereas for Bataille the artistic and existential essence consisted in the espousal of all that was abject, savage, and formless. This part of the book concludes with a reflection on the figure of the labyrinth in Bataille's writings. For Bataille, this figure constituted one of the manifestations of the "left-hand sacred," which pointed toward the approximation of death. It evoked the figure of Saint Lazarus who was very important for Bataille because Lazarus embodied the intermediate state between life and death.

This analysis opens a way for Biles to move to a chapter devoted to the relation between Bataille and Simone Weil. As is well-known, Weil was the prototype of the character of Lazare in Bataille's novel *Blue of Noon* (1957). Biles brings closer the two thinkers insofar as their attitudes toward Christianity led to a kind of *hyperchristianism*; seeing in Christ the "accursed share" and in the experiment of death–the heart of human existence. By that, Bataille once again revealed his opposition to surrealism, which removed *Thanatos* from its theories and practices.

In the final chapter, perhaps the most brilliant of all, Biles carries out the analysis of an apparently trivial detail, the figure of "hands" in Bataille and Hans Bellmer, to depict a complex image of the monstrous esthetics of the two artists. The reader also finds a summary of the history of the "hand" in Western philosophy, which has always privileged the right and productive hand, just as in a penetrating interpretation of Bellmer's doll. Lastly, Biles establishes a parallel between Bataille's eye and Bellmer's hand, the two leading to a confusion of seeing and tactility, or rather of blindness and mutilation.

All in all, among recent studies on Bataille, Biles's book is the one that perhaps approaches best Bataille's thought while proposing new interpretations of his work. Indeed, readers who are not familiar with Bataille's work will be rather well introduced to its main aspects. At the same time, specialized readers will find in Biles's book reformulations and reinterpretations that will likely become pivotal in Bataillean studies. However, the dual objective of the book to introduce Bataille to a new audience and to ambitiously engage with his existing readership also becomes a trap, and Biles has not been entirely successful in escaping it. Consequently, parts of the text that are devoted to the presentation, for example, of the bases of Hegel's, Nietzsche's, and Bataille's philosophy sometimes seem superfluous. It is also a shortcoming of this book that its author has not sufficiently utilized existing bibliography: references to studies by Gilles MaynÃ© or Lina Franco, as well as a major work by Georges Didi-Huberman could have further enriched this excellent work.[4]

Notes

[1]. Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988); Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Francis Marmande, *Georges Bataille politique* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1985); Jean-Michel Besnier, *La Politique de l'impossible* (Paris: La DÃ©couverte, 1989); Jean-Michel Heimonet, *Pourquoi Bataille? Trajets intellectuels et politiques d'une nÃ©gativitÃ© au chÃ´mage* (Paris: KimÃ©, 2000); Peter T. Connor, *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); and Andrew Hussey, *The Inner Scar: The Mysticism of Georges Bataille* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000).

[2]. Sylvain Santi, *Georges Bataille, Ã l'extrÃ©mitÃ© fuyante de la poÃ©sie* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007); and Christophe Halsberghe, *La Fascination du Commandeur: Le SacrÃ© et l'Ã©criture en France Ã partir du dÃ©bat-Bataille* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).

[3]. Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings*

of Georges Bataille, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

[4]. Gilles MaynÃ©, *Eroticism in Georges Bataille and Henry Miller* (Birmingham: Summa Publications, 1993); Lina Franco, *Georges Bataille, le corps fictionnel* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004); and Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe, ou, Le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris: Macula, 1995).

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