

Simone's Cunt: An Exercise in Sovereignty

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This paper is ostensibly a reading of Bataille's *Story of the Eye*.¹ My main assertion is that the symbolism surrounding Simone's cunt involves the construction of an immanent continuity of things, which anticipates Bataille's later writing on eroticism, religion, and "general economy". These three aspects of Bataille's thought intersect in the rite, and spectacle, of sacrifice. In sacrifice, the victim—be it human or, say, goat—is a useful object that has been taken out of circulation, that is, out of utility. It is by virtue of this negation of use-value, and of the economic and epistemological structures that sustain it, that the object escapes the profane world and accedes to an immanent relation with the sacred. At the same time, of course, the festival of sacrifice is necessarily transgressive: only in the taboo's being broken are its boundaries first determined. As Bataille stresses: no taboo, no eroticism. Hence, sacrifice's immanence is fatally intertwined with its transgression: the sacrificial victim embodies not only the god, but the breaking of god's decrees. My argument, simply put, is that Simone's cunt is the sacrificial circle.

¹ Trans. Joachim Neugroschal, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2001.

However, as we shall see, this comes at a price. The immanent symbolism that characterises Simone's cunt falls on the one hand within a larger symbolic system of infertility and impotence; on the other, it finds itself in conflict within the epistemic crisis within the text posed by Simone's interiority. This double-bind, I shall argue, arises from an overbearing, and undermentioned, influence in Bataille's thought. I refer to the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

From a genetic point of view, I am assuming that the Kantian strains in Bataille's thought come via the Marquis de Sade. The first section of this paper will start from this premise. As far as I'm aware, Adorno and Horkheimer were the first to make the connection between the categorical imperative and Sadism; since then, others, most notably perhaps Lacan, have followed suit. In these instances, they make Kant a Sadist. I, on the other hand, want to make Sade a Kantian. Or rather, I want to point out a quintessentially Kantian structure to Sade's thought which Bataille inherits in some respects. The second section turns in more detail to *Story of the Eye*, and to the textual operations surrounding Simone's cunt, that is to say, the symbolism of infertility, the textual immanence. As I said before, Simone's cunt, in its immanence, promises resolution to a series of epistemological problems that her interiority sets for the narrator, and for the text more generally. The third and final section of this paper will look at these problems, and how they lead Simone's cunt to be wrested from her body.

In his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant gives the example of the "friend of man"¹, who acts benevolently out of sheer niceness. Here, the determining ground of the man's actions, goodwill, is a psychological, that is empirical state. What concerns Kant here is that if the friend of man is not feeling very friendly one day, there is no way of knowing whether he will act benevolently or not. If, by contrast, his action is grounded in duty, he will do so irrespective of mood. As so often in Kant, it comes down to a question of synthetic apriority. Which is to say that the maxim for the action must be such that it both *a priori* lead

¹ I. Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Allen W. Wood, London, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 10.

to the action, and that the action itself not be entirely “contained” within the maxim. Just as causality provides the synthetic *a priori* principle underwriting the empirical laws of nature, the moral injunction to duty underwrites the transcendental laws of freedom.

This is precisely the same logic as is found in de Sade’s injunction to crime, a logic which Bataille describes very well when he says: “Crimes committed in cold blood are greater than crimes carried out in the heat of the moment”.¹ For these crimes are grounded on crime itself, not on contingent feeling—hence again an *a priori* link between the determining ground of the maxim and its action. It is for this that so much Sadean sex becomes drudgery.

But Bataille is not de Sade. De Sade aims for self-control, Bataille ecstasy (*ek-stasis*). Another way of putting this is that Bataille, unlike de Sade—and unlike Kant—is concerned precisely with that “feeling” that Kant and de Sade try to render irrelevant to action in the name of apriority—the proper subject of Bataille’s enquiry hence becomes *l’expérience intérieure*, that paradox which both galvanises and undermines much of Bataille’s thinking. It galvanises it by preparing the terrain for an enquiry into pure subjectivity, which in turn makes possible the thematisation of excess. Eroticism, religion, sovereignty, all search for continuous—that is, immanent—being. Yet this desire is precisely what theologies, anthropologies and so forth, leave out. Mauss’ explanations, Bataille believes, “do not say what brings men to kill their fellows religiously”². It is in analysing sacrifice *qua* spectacle, not *qua* structure, that we should discover this truth—and the spectacle conceived not formally, but experientially. Yet it undermines the thinking as well in exposing it to the minefield of philosophical solipsism. This brings about a need to negotiate between the excesses of heterology on the one hand and immanence on the other. Whence the conception of communication as contagion; whence the role of eroticism as aporia to any sublative dialectic.

But I digress. If Bataille diverges from de Sade with respect to the synthetic apriority of crime, they are at one on transgression itself. And this is where Kant

¹ G. Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood, London, Penguin, 2001, p. 173.

² *OC VII*, p. 264. My translation.

comes in. In one of Kant's wittiest passages (and Christ knows there aren't many), he asks us

Suppose that someone says his lust is irresistible when the desired object and opportunity are present. Ask him whether he would not control his passion if, in front of the house where he has this opportunity, a gallows were erected on which he would be hanged immediately after gratifying his lust. We do not have to guess very long what his answer would be.

Here, Kant wishes us to intuit, the man is applying means-end rationality. On the one hand, get laid, on the other, get hanged by the neck until dead. "But", Kant continues:

ask him whether he thinks it would be possible for him to overcome his love of life, however great it may be, if his sovereign threatened him with the same sudden death unless he made a false deposition against an honourable man whom the ruler wished to destroy under a plausible pretext. Whether he would or not he perhaps will not venture to say; but that it would be possible for him he would certainly admit without hesitation.¹

Kant's point regards the choice at work here: whether we choose to give false deposition or not, the thinking at work is irreducible to means-ends calculation. In this, we recognise the existence of a different conception of causality that we can follow. The moral law isn't this law of freedom, rather it is the way in which such freedom—sovereignty—is glimpsed, its *ratio cognoscendi*.

Now, there is an assumption underlying this argument that Bataille would find absurd. Kant assumes that all desire is intentional—that is, each desire corresponds to an object desired, and hence, fulfilling desire requires instrumental thinking. The point of interior experience is precisely that this experience constitutes its own object—as such, it has no object at all on the Kantian understanding of it. However, at the level of epistemic structure, the two are a perfect fit. Both see the understanding as subsumptive, and both see sovereignty as anti-instrumentalist. "[M]an's intelligence", says Bataille in "Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice", "his discursive thought, developed as functions of servile labour". For Bataille, this labour is not merely physical, but intellectual. He continues: "Only sacred, poetic words, limited to the level of impotent beauty, have retained the

¹ I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. M. Gregor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 30.

power to manifest full sovereignty”¹. Here I’d like to note two things. Firstly, that it is language—sacred, poetic words—that allows man to be sovereign. For Kant, we also express sovereignty through a particular linguistic form, the categorical imperative. Secondly, sovereignty coincides with impotence. This arises from asserting the incompatibility of determinism and freedom, even if that means embracing impotence. This impotence becomes, as it were, the condition for the possibility of freedom itself. The free man in Kant’s example above is unable to escape his fate (either the noose or betraying an honest man)—it is only by virtue of this inability that he can truly, and for the first time, be free.

Sovereignty, for Kant and Bataille alike, entails the rejection of instrumentalism, be it in moral and political utilitarianism or in subsumptive reason. It also entails living as though not subject to the laws of nature (impossibility as transcendental condition of the possible as such). But this does not bring in a nomological free-for-all, as both install a new system of rules in place of the old one. The narrator of *Story of the Eye*, when saying “I cared only for what is classified as ‘dirty’”, adds immediately that this is not “the usual debauchery”². Or we can look in his theory of eroticism, where Bataille discusses how the taboo is structured through a series of transgressions—the taboo being a legality asymptotic to laws of nature. Sexual transgression and moral duty are both based on the prior epistemological conflict between freedom and nature, and, to the extent that man is necessarily implicated in the laws of nature, between man and his own body.

And so, let us ask—what about the body itself? Charles Péguy once said of Kant, wonderfully: he has pure hands, but he has no hands. Bataille and Kant share an epistemic squeamishness in the face of the human body as natural thing. Kant’s response to this squeamishness is to glimpse the noumenal; Bataille’s is to fetishize the object, but it is the same squeamishness.

¹ G. Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice”, *A Bataille Reader*, ed. by F. Botting and S. Wilson, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997, p. 291.

² *Story of the Eye*, *op.cit.*, p. 42.

In my introduction, I stated that Simone's cunt is the sacrificial circle. Now comes the time to make good that claim. When Don Aminado's eye has been cut from its socket and inserted up Simone's cunt, the narrator says: "I even felt as if my eyes were exiting my head, erectile with horror; in *Simone's* hairy vagina, I saw the pale blue eye of *Marcelle*, gazing at me through tears of urine"¹. This moment brings back to life the moment when Simone pisses on dead Marcelle's eyes, eyes that refused to close. In this sacrificial circle, a priest's eye becomes a young girl's. What is significant is that it is not that the narrator sees the priest's eye and then associates it with Marcelle's. Rather, it is Marcelle's eye he *sees*. The "tears of urine" mark the merging of these two liquids into one, and, of course, it is living eyes that can cry. Bataille's symbolism is the perfect example of one's having one's cake and eating it.

I have been saying it is Simone's cunt, but the word in question is "cul". This word normally means "arse", but Bataille has insisted otherwise from the first page, where he says that "cul" "is the loveliest of the words for vagina"². For the passage under discussion³ this means that, at one and the same time, Simone is being penetrated by the narrator and has the eye inserted up her. Both are penetrating her "cul". Yet we will later have it specified that the eye ends up "in *Simone's* hairy vagina". For a translator, there remain two possibilities.

1-that the eye is in the vagina (*cul*) and the narrator's cock up her arse (*cul*)

2-that both eye and cock penetrate her vagina (*cul*).

In fact, the Neugroschal translation decides that the eye is inserted up her arse, presumably to make space for the cock in her cunt. Yet the logistics involved here (especially to re-place Marcelle's eye "in Simone's hairy vagina") seem overly complicated. Indeed, such logistics are unlikely to have worried Bataille—he was many things—eroticist, novelist, philosopher, anthropologist—but gynaecologist he was not. For the time being let us note in that the indeterminacy and epistemic

¹ *Story of the Eye, op. cit.*, p. 67.

² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 66-67.

blockage correspond to the two essential moments of the Kantian sublime, and that here the semantic indeterminacy serves to develop the continuity of being that we already came across in the immanent symbolism of Simone's cunt. And let us not forget that the analytic of the sublime in nature holds a peculiar place within Kant's oeuvre, as the only time that he attempts a speculative analysis (which, in the terms of the architectonic, should really be a contradiction in terms). Moreover, this speculative moment becomes possible by virtue of the impossibility of determinate cognition, an impossibility that arises in the epistemic refusal of the sublime object to the human representational faculties. In these sacred, poetic words (or this particular sacred, poetic word), things lose their definition, and return to their lost immanence. It is neither vagina nor cunt nor arse that forms the sacrificial circle; it is the word "cul" itself.

It is significant that, in the passage cited, the immanence noted occurs not only in Simone's cunt, but also in the eyes of the narrator (the gaze that returns all these other dead-eyed gazes). As Bataille notes, sacrifice attains its power not merely through its symbolism, but in its status as *spectacle*. The spectators in the sacrifice do not simply see the slaughtered animal, they become it, and hence become the god. The division of the in-dividual is what defines the transgression. When the narrator meets Marcelle's and Don Aminando's eyes with his own, they become "erectile", they bulge just as his cock does at the same time. Drawn into the spectacle of immanence occurring in Simone's cunt, his eyes become a part of that immanence, indeed, make the immanence possible. This is, of course, not the only time that spectator and spectacle become one—Granero's death being a case in point. In such scenes, Bataille aims to resolve (or, better perhaps, *dissolve*) the contradictions that will lead him later in his life to *l'expérience intérieure*.

Sacrifice only brings continuity of being through the animal's death, and we can't forget that the eye in Simone's cunt is a dead eye, tears or no tears. That sex and death are so intertwined in *Story of the Eye* is hardly surprising. On the strikingly few occasions that Simone and the narrator actually have penetrative intercourse, death is always present, either in the literal company of Marcelle's

body, Don Aminado, the slaughtered bull and so forth, or—and more striking—through the symbolism of infertility that accompanies their various sex acts, penetrative or otherwise.

Reproduction, Bataille holds, makes death possible. Sovereignty, on the other hand, is the refusal to live according to the laws of nature. It is unsurprising, then, that sovereign eroticism will be non-reproductive, infertile eroticism. As we saw, sovereignty is impotent, infertility enters language as its principle. Take the young lovers' first sexual encounter, for example. Standing opposite each other, in a state of unbearable arousal, their first instinct isn't to make love—or fuck, or whatever. Rather, they stand, watching one another, wanking, “Without even touching one another”¹. Once again, the philosopher opts for the contemplative life. In the second, Simone mounts the narrator—but to wank off on his belly, not to fuck. This fake-sex symbolism is pushed further when the narrator says: “I thrust my finger, lubricated with my young come, into her cunt”². The finger takes the place of the cock not only in penetrating Simone, but also as the repository of his sperm. The next act—he tries to piss into her cunt—is once more a performed simulacrum of fertilization. Urine will, as we saw with Marcelle's weeping, become a significant bodily fluid. Here, it metamorphoses into sperm, another hint at its own infertility.

This first encounter is provoked by Simone's sitting in a saucer of cat's milk, the first of many dairy products to grace the story. That dairy products are so central to Bataille's erotic encounters is unsurprising: eggs are unfertilised chicken ova, milk is used for rearing calves. Taking them out of consumption and into an alternative, erotic economy constitutes a very Bataillean sovereignty. Again fertility is key, so that when Simone breaks raw eggs in her cunt and watches the runny yolk drip down her thighs, it does so in stark contrast to her own ovum, yet another infertile simulacrum of Simone's fertility.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Now, this symbolism of infertility, I would like to suggest, is not merely about Simone's cunt. Rather, it tells of the relation between Simone and the text as a whole. In his *Theory of Religion*, Bataille argues that "When the animal offered enters into the circle where the priest will immolate it, it passes out of the world of things to a world that is immanent to man, *intimate*, known as is woman in sexual consummation"¹. But how *intimate* is Simone to the men around her—Bataille included? In what way *is* she *known*—in and out of sexual consummation?

To see this, let us turn to the novel's *dénouement*, in the "church of Don Juan"². Here, as elsewhere, we only know about her interiority what the narrator interprets, and yet come to know the insufficiency of the very structure of the narrator's interpretations. This epistemic movement is inaugurated when, as Simone laughs uncontrollably, Sir Edmond cries "Can't you explain?" They assume the object of her mirth is something in the church, and so "look [...] in vain for the comical sight that the girl had been *unable to explain*". Here the interpretation is utterly wrong in all respects. There is no *sight* that is comical, nor was the girl *unable* to explain. The interpretation didn't even know what to interpret. All that Simone will say in response to their questioning is: "you'll understand". Simone often tells the narrator "you'll understand" when he's at a loss, as though to draw out the enigma. For example, when, in the bullring, Simone won't sit down because she wants to sit on the balls on the plate (yet another infertile simulacrum), but can't because of all the people watching, she tells this to the narrator by saying: "don't you understand that I want to sit on the plate?"³ The narrator says that "I stared at her to let her know that I understood"—but, at the same time, gives the reader no indication that he does. That he should need to stress that he does, in fact, suggests the very opposite.

Back to the confessional scene. After Simone says "you'll understand", the narrator continues: "That was why I patiently waited for the key to the puzzle". In French, the "key" to the puzzle is *le mot de l'enigme*. But it is precisely words that

¹ G. Bataille, *Théorie de la religion*, OC VII, *op. cit.*, p. 59 (my translation).

² *Story of the Eye*, *op. cit.*, p. 55 ff.

³ *Ibid.* p. 52.

have been problematised. The continual address to the reader of phrases like “you can imagine”, “evidently” and “of course”—in French, *bien entendu*, which has a further connotation of agreement and understanding you don’t get in translation—acts as an insistence on text and reader understanding one another intuitively. The narrator tells us at the beginning of the novel “I realized that [Simone’s] feelings at seeing me were the same as mine at seeing her, but found it difficult to talk about it”. And to invoke intuitive understanding here is effectively to give up on language.

Whilst he may understand how Simone feels at the beginning, by the end she has become quite radically other, addressing her companions almost exclusively in imperatives and closed statements. This radical otherness reaches a head in the following dialogue:

“Do you see the eye?” she asked me.

“Well?”

“It’s an egg”, she concluded in all simplicity.

“All right”, I urged her, extremely disturbed, “what are you getting at?”¹

She “concludes”, and does so “in all simplicity”, and yet there is nothing simple, nothing conclusive even, about this conclusion—not even a hint of the thinking that leads to this conclusion. Indeed, to say it is a conclusion at all, that is, to assume that there has been a determinate thought process, is already an interpretation of her behaviour whose validity is at best questionable. Whence the despairing tone of “what are you getting at?” and Simone’s sheer refusal to proffer any kind of answer.

This passage echoes another, in which Simone describes how the eye is egg-shaped, and then plays with the assonance of eye and egg (*les yeux, les œufs*). Here the narrator says that “her arguments became more and more unreasonable”². Once again, the implicit normativity of what is “reasonable” is key. Compare this to Sir Edmond’s account of transubstantiation, where the wine isn’t Christ’s blood but his sperm, to which the narrator remarks: “The lucidity of this logic was so convincing that Simone and I required no further explanation”³.

¹ *Ibid.* p. 65-66.

² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 61-62.

This is how Simone is known outside of sexual consummation. The onus on eroticism, and on communication as contagion, is deployed as a means of reconciling this heterology (to invoke another of Bataille's terms). But this too is exposed as insufficient. As the narrator sits next to Simone, awaiting her next "conclusion" outside the confessional, he says: "all I could do was caress her neck, the line of her hair, or her shoulder with my cock"⁴. This caressing, then, is an attempt to breach the epistemic gap between them at this moment. "And this", he continues, "put her so much on edge that she told me to tuck my penis away immediately or she would rub it until I came". Now, this "on edge" looks, on first blush, as though she's aroused. Yet, it could also be taken to mean that she is irritated: indeed, the original French "énergée" plays quite specifically on this polysemy. When the narrator tries to guess her psychological state, his choice of words leaves the interpretation pointedly indeterminate. It is not for nothing that the last sex acts described between the narrator and Simone have him rape her. Strange dualism: he is fucking not her, but her cunt; Simone herself remains ungraspable.

Simone, then, presents an epistemic challenge, not only to the narrator, but to the text itself. Furthermore, she provokes a profound crisis in Bataille's metaphysics (for Bataille is, after all, a metaphysician—whence his uncanny power), that is, she opens up the galvanising contradiction latent in the notion that Bataille will, ten years later, articulate as "interior experience". At once, the embrace of methodological solipsism and the most radically ekstastic heterology—leaving the other non-thematised, never transforming it into what Levinas identifies in dialectics as "the Other of the Same". Bataille's position is to attempt to overcome this otherness, rather, through the contagion, and it is in this respect that eroticism attains its philosophical significance. But in *Story of the Eye*, this contagion occurs not as immanence but as failure, as lack. Simone, as other, is dismembered into a series of fetishised body parts. This, I have argued, is made possible from the beginning by Bataille's Kantian conception of sovereignty. The immanence she offers, then, through her cunt, is only made possible by its being

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

ruptured from her body. Simone's cunt may be the sacrificial circle, but it is Simone herself who gets sacrificed.