

**Tackling the Contemporary Sacred:  
the Use Value of Bataille for Sociology “After Method”**

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The aim of this paper is to explore aspects of Bataille’s notion of the “sacred” from a sociological perspective. An inherently paradoxical task, since, as we know, Bataille is unparalleled as the thinker of “non-knowledge”, of “formlessness”, “the impossible” – everything that *exceeds* “discipline”, “science” and rationality. His writings – whether or not we impose on them denominations such as theory, critique or fiction – are infused with, driven by, and bear witness to an at times electrifying tension between “communication” and “meaning”. To the extent that we must from the start acknowledge the inevitable *failure* of any attempt to re-integrate these two terms, Bataille’s thought is, as he himself indicated many times, “abysmal”. Nevertheless, it is precisely this heightened tension between meaning and communication that, for me, continues to render the urgency and utility of Bataille’s work as a sociological *resource*. My deployment of the words “utility” and “resource” is intended to be provocative. We need of course to be vigilant to the extent to which Bataille’s thought seeks tirelessly to undermine

every notion of utility. In *La valeur d'usage de D.A.F. de Sade*<sup>1</sup>, Bataille appealed over the heads of his current “camarades” to a generation of individual readers, that, in all likelihood “n'existent pas encore” – because, he says, to receive his message they must be “comparativement décomposés, devenus amorphes et même expulsés avec violence hors de toute forme”<sup>2</sup>. The extent to which we might even now today meet these criteria remains debatable.

I will focus here on two review articles Bataille contributed to the post-war journal *Critique*. These articles illustrate Bataille's indebtedness to, and continued critical engagement with, the thought of Emile Durkheim, long regarded as one of the “founding fathers” of sociological thought. But beyond this they also clearly articulate Bataille's own position regarding of the sacred-profane distinction, and pose the problem of the inaccessibility of the sacred to scientific investigation. Following a discussion of these articles, I would like to try and animate certain connectivities and resonances between Bataille's provocations and sociological work on *Classification*. I will refer to the text by Durkheim and Mauss on which Bataille apparently drew directly, before turning to a much more recent study, *Sorting Things Out* by Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star<sup>3</sup>. An exploration of the activity of classification, in both science and everyday life, is pertinent, I would argue, towards establishing a sharper insight into the nature of the challenge Bataille's work continues to pose for us, in a world increasingly conceived as characterised by chaos and complexity. Finally, I will offer a couple of brief illustrations where the contemporary relevance of Bataille's elaboration of the dimensions of the sacred/profane distinction may be evident. My first example is drawn from recent political discourse regarding the “glorification of terror”; the second from my own special area of interest, mental health policy and practice. In each case Bataille's re-conceptualisation of the sacred-profane dynamic may be induced to operate as a sort of scalpel to cut through classificatory attempts to impose and maintain closed systems and to expose the irreducible *messiness*

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<sup>1</sup> G. Bataille, *Œuvres Complètes II*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, p. 54-69.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54-55

<sup>3</sup> *Sorting Things Out*, London, MIT Press, 1999.

complexity and “heterology” of the reality lying beneath. Might it still also be capable of being *mobilised* in an attempt to reach beyond understanding or method towards that sovereign summit of ecstatic communication Bataille so frequently invokes?

### **The *Critique* Articles**

The first *Critique* review, “Le sens moral de la sociologie”<sup>1</sup>, appeared in June 1946. Nominally concerned with a book by Jules Monnerot, *Les faits sociaux ne sont pas des choses*, it begins with a gloss on the pre-war trajectory of French intellectual life within which Bataille himself had played a decisive role: one involving a certain *shift in recognition* from the individual to the social as the source for affirmation and creativity. Inextricably implicated with Marxist critique of the existing social order, those caught up in this movement also drew inspiration from the sociological and ethnographic tradition associated with Durkheim and Mauss.

“L’intérêt pour les mythes”, Bataille writes, “et les diverses activités religieuses des peuples exotiques attira l’attention sur la précellence de la création collective sur l’individuelle, par là sur la sociologie et l’ethnographie”<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, Bataille notes, this orientation barely masked an inherent conflict – between “la fièvre poétique” of early surrealism, and what he calls the “le besoin de rigueur et l’honnêteté intellectuelle”<sup>3</sup> demanded by science.

Even as he sets up this opposition between rational science and the affective lure of the sacred Bataille, however, characteristically proceeds to problematise it. He asserts that the heterogeneous meta-category of the sacred is unlike other sociological terminology in that it is not ultimately assimilable under scientific rubric or method. It is not “principalement déterminée du dehors (ainsi par un observation de l’ethnologue semblable à celle du biologiste guettant l’insecte) mais

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<sup>1</sup> *OC XI*, p. 56-69.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

de façon générale du dedans et du dehors, quand il s'agit de réactions que nous-mêmes vivons"<sup>1</sup>. In other words there is a “*slippage*” from the homogenous, objective classifiable world of science to the inassimilable and subversive element of the sacred in lived experience.

Bataille goes on to play on and extend Monnerot's distinction, itself derived from Tönnies, between two fundamental types of communities marked respectively by the concepts of “appartenance” (*Gemeinschaft*) and “société contractuelle” (*Gesellschaft*). Whilst the latter refers to the ubiquity of exchange, to the universal tendency of developed societies to reduce themselves to a homogeneity where “chaque chose et chaque être ont reçu leur mesure”<sup>2</sup>, the former, although originally founded by “ce qui est de nature sacrée”, inevitably corrodes or dissolves to mere fact. For instance, one is born French or one is born a Catholic, and in this sense has no choice in the matter. But this does not exhaust the possibility of community. To belonging of fact Bataille opposes the idea of a rejuvenated, effervescent and spontaneous “communauté seconde”. He uses the example of Nietzsche's notion of a community of “grands individus [...] chassés de toutes les patries, de tous les pays des pères et des aïeux”<sup>3</sup>, who transcend institutionalised boundaries and limits.

Bataille takes Monnerot to task for not following through the main implications of Durkheim's theory of religion. If society, he argues, is (i) something different than the sum of its parts and (ii) founded on an affective bond associated with religion and the sacred – then the entirety of the play of forces – repulsive as well as attractive – that constitute social unity must be taken into account. This is the difference between society as a whole and the crowd formed on the basis of inter-attraction alone. “Il se peut que la conscience de cette différence radicale [...] introduise dans l'histoire une possibilité neuve”<sup>4</sup>. Incidentally, I believe it is feasible to make a link here with certain aspects of complexity theory,

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

and notions of “order out of chaos”, unforeseen by Bataille, but since his time widely imported from the natural into the social sciences. Bataille implies that the consciousness of which he speaks is precisely what sociology, being, as he understands the term, a science, is unable to achieve, because it is continually obliged to deny or exclude the affective element underlying its own procedure.

This becomes clearer when we turn to the second article, “La guerre et la philosophie du sacré”<sup>1</sup>, a 1951 review of *L’homme et le sacré* by Bataille’s former collaborator in the Collège de Sociologie, Roger Caillois. Caillois’ work – as cited by Bataille – had emphasised that what is sacred is “ce à quoi chacun voue le meilleur de lui-même, ce qu’il vénère, ce à quoi il sacrifierait au besoin sa vie”<sup>2</sup>. In fact Bataille opens his review by deftly encapsulating the tension underlying the deployment of *sociological* method in an attempt to access such *value-laden* truths:

Ce que nous dénommons *sacré* ne peut être réservé aux sociologues et pourtant, dans notre monde civilisé, désormais, il est devenu discutable d’employer le mot, si nous ne renvoyons pas à la sociologie.<sup>3</sup>

Science, Bataille continues, proceeds by *abstraction* and *separation*, but the sacred is the exact opposite of any abstracted object; it refers rather to the total “monde de communication ou de contagion, où rien n’est séparé ou justement l’effort est nécessaire pour s’opposer à la fusion indéfinie”<sup>4</sup>. The sacred cannot be engaged with *at a distance*. Bataille illustrates this with the image of the corpse of a child on a dissecting table – for the scientist “c’est un objet anatomique, offert à l’observation savante”; for the child’s mother, “ce qui est en cause est la totalité de l’être”.

Bataille goes on to elaborate the extent to which an acknowledgment of the ubiquitous and intimate *power* of the sacred necessarily undermines the abstractive effort of any science that attempts to *tackle* it. The sacred “ne peut être seulement ce dont il est question comme d’un objet, auquel je ne serais moins étranger qu’à ces lames de parquet, si indifférentes”. Rather,

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<sup>1</sup> *OC XII*, p. 47-64.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Le *sacré* [...] est donné comme un objet qui toujours importe au sujet intimement: l'objet et le sujet [...] sont toujours donnés comme se compénétrant, ou s'excluant (dans la résistance au grand danger de la compénétration), mais toujours, dans l'association ou l'opposition, se complétant. Et sans nul doute je ne puis me retirer personnellement, tirer mon épingle du jeu.<sup>1</sup>

The kind of disinterested, *objective* neutrality to which – for Bataille at least – science, including sociology, lays claim, itself serves, in his words, “altérer le sens de ce qu'elle révèle”. The potency of the sacred is neutralised. “Si, pour avoir objectivement défini le *sacré*, nous ne pouvons plus, désormais, passer de cette connaissance de dehors à l'expérience intime”<sup>2</sup>. In this way we sacrifice “la proie pour l'ombre”, experience for a form of nostalgia.

The intellectual trajectory followed by Caillois himself is exemplary of this process. *L'Homme et le sacré*, Bataille affirms, “c'est d'abord le travail d'un sociologue”<sup>3</sup> and is thus limited because its relation to objectivity. Insofar as his former collaborator “réserva [...] la part de la totalité”<sup>4</sup>, this derives from his past involvement in Surrealism and projects such as the *Collège*: indeed Bataille contrasts the sociological Caillois with the writer whom he dubs Caillois “*moraliste*”, the author of works such as *Babel* and *Le rocher de Sisyphe*.

I have tried to emphasise thus far not only that there is an essential and fundamental *incompatibility*, for Bataille, between the sacred as lived experience and the attempts of science to grasp that experience, but that also one of the most lasting contributions of his thought is to suggest that at the same time that the sacred *exceeds the limits of science it exposes those limits in so far as science has pretensions to be a rational or systematic endeavour*. Indeed the reverberation of this thought may be tracked throughout much of later French social theory. Two instances of this are the “thought of the outside” that so fascinated Michel Foucault, and the notion of “différance” in the work of Jacques Derrida. As Derrida states in

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

his seminal essay “From Restricted to General Economy”<sup>5</sup>: in relation to Bataille’s notions of “general expenditure” or “sovereignty”

“science” submits to a radical alteration without losing any of its proper norms, it is made to tremble.

### **Classification 1: Durkheim and Mauss**

For Emile Durkheim, in an often-cited passage near the beginning of *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*<sup>1</sup>, the sacred-profane division is the fundamental, universal and originary articulation of difference and distinction.

Durkheim writes:

Il n'existe pas dans l'histoire de la pensée humaine un autre exemple de deux catégories de choses aussi profondément différenciées, aussi radicalement opposés l'une à l'autre [...] le sacré et le profane ont toujours et partout été conçus par l'esprit humaine comme des genres séparés, comme deux mondes entre lesquels il n'y a rien de commun.<sup>2</sup>

Durkheim also emphasises that no individual entity is immovably *fixed* within one side of this division: it may pass from one “world” to the “other” and back again. The sacred-profane divide moreover is the basis of “religion”, “un système solidaire de croyances et de pratiques”<sup>3</sup> – the foundational and ultimate collective force, that which binds a community together and makes it greater than the sum of its parts.

Neither does Durkheim, in *Les Formes élémentaires*, neglect the notions of negativity, violence, contagion and transgression at the heart of religious practice. In speaking of the “effervescence” that characterised aboriginal ceremonial assemblies, he lays stress on their lack of restraint and on what he called “une violente surexcitation de toute la vie physique et mentale”<sup>4</sup>. Later he emphasises that religion demonstrates every possible aspect of real society, even the most vulgar or repugnant ones. Such elements in Durkheim’s study feed in, of course, to

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<sup>5</sup> *Writing and difference*, trans. A. Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978 p. 268.

<sup>1</sup> E. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris, PUF, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

Bataille's obsessional exploration of horror and excess, the debased and the excremental.

I can only allude here in passing to the various ways in which Durkheim's hypothesis of the primacy of the sacred-profane dimension in social life, has been contested and disputed, not least by his nephew and disciple, Marcel Mauss. I also have no room to reflect on the changes in the ways the term "science" has been conceived, whether by scientists or others, since Durkheim's time or that matter that of Bataille. I have wanted merely to underscore the continued potency of this hypothesis as a register whereby the avowedly secular yet experientially *non-rational* dimensions of the social might be interrogated. Here a re-reading of an earlier essay, "De quelques formes primitives de classification", co-written by Durkheim and Mauss, and first published in 1903<sup>1</sup>, seems to me particularly helpful.

"De quelques formes primitives de classification" begins by postulating that the hierarchy of concepts at the basis of all logical and scientific thought is not a given, that the human mind developed from a state of indistinction, where "La conscience n'est alors qu'un flot continu de représentations qui se perdent les unes dans les autres"<sup>2</sup>. From out of this primordial indeterminacy "*la classification des choses reproduit cette classification des hommes*"<sup>3</sup>: thus all scientific knowledge in the widest sense of the term is ultimately derived from the basic structures of social relations. "Ce sont donc des états de l'âme collective qui ont donné naissance à ces groupements, et, de plus, ces états sont manifestement affectifs"<sup>4</sup>. They continue: "Car pour que des notions puissent ainsi se disposer systématiquement pour des raisons de sentiment, il faut qu'elles ne soient pas des idées pures, mais qu'elles

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<sup>1</sup> E. Durkheim et M. Mauss, « De quelques formes primitives de classification », *Œuvres de Marcel Mauss*, vol. 2, introduced by V. Karady, Paris, Minuit, 1969, p. 13-89.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17. It is worth noting in passing that this description is broadly analogous to the *end-point* of Bataille's exhortations in *L'expérience intérieure* and *Méthode de méditation*, to what he describes in the latter text (*OC V*, p. 191-228) as "l'impénétrable simplicité de *ce qui est*; et, le fond des mondes ouvert, ce que je vois et que je sais n'a plus de sens, plus de bornes" (p. 227).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.



soient elles-mêmes oeuvre de sentiment”<sup>1</sup>. The class or category is itself at root an affective and – in a broad sense – a *religious* notion.

The Conclusion of "De quelques formes primitives de classifications" goes even further. It emphasises that emotions in general, and collective emotions in particular, are something essentially fluid and inconsistent. Not only does this contrast to the notions of class and concept as fixed *determinations* of things, whose limits may be precisely marked; it also follows that the boundaries established by categories and concepts are always already undermined, permeated and ultimately erased by affectivity. Moreover, as Durkheim and Mauss remark, it is in the nature of collective emotion that it defies critical and rational examination, and any individual judgment is constrained by the “group”, that is, society. It is impossible for any one investigator to precisely track the changes that constantly occur within classifications and other scientific schema. We are returned – it seems to me – to the reading of Bataille by Derrida mentioned earlier. “‘Science’, we recall, “submits to a radical alteration [...] it is made to tremble” “Simply”, Derrida adds, “by being placed in relation to an absolute unknowledge”<sup>2</sup>.

## **Classification 2: Bowker and Star**

To move abruptly from the work of Durkheim and Mauss to the contemporary sociology of science is a risky play. It inevitably involves a reductive dismissal of the vicissitudes and mutations sociology has experienced in the interim. Nevertheless I would like to suggest that the re-introduction of the dynamic of the sacred, as elaborated by Durkheim and exploited by Bataille, might serve to animate, and at the same time transform, contemporary sociological approaches. Much in the same way as in the late 1930s Bataille and the other Collegians appropriated, re-animated and simultaneously subverted the work of Durkheim and Mauss.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 268.

In *Sorting Things Out* Bowker and Star outline three key aspects of the work performed by classification systems within modernity. These aspects, which in practice often blur and overlap, may be summarised thus: (i) Over time, categories can be and are “made and kept invisible”<sup>1</sup>, *de-realised*, as well as brought into being, by classification systems. Classification schemes and infrastructures are inevitably bound up with practices of “selective forgetting”, whereby an essentially indeterminate past is continually reinvented. Certain aspects are privileged, others silenced. Thinking “outside” the scheme becomes problematic if not impossible. (ii) Classification systems and standards are part of a wider “built information environment”<sup>2</sup> and as such, relate and relay the ideology that gives rise to them. Classification and coding “software” may in this way be seen as “frozen organisational and policy discourse”, simultaneously reflecting and contributing to dominant paradigms of thought. (iii) Classification schemes profoundly reflect, and resonate with, moral, ethical and political agendas. Every category, Bowker and Star suggest, is *inescapably* “an ethical choice [...] and as such dangerous”<sup>3</sup>. They demonstrate this through case studies wherein what they call the “*torquing*” of classificatory and biographical trajectories subsists. The image evoked here is of the torque as a necklace, or choker, consisting of one or more interlacing strands. Individually or collectively, we become what we are classified as, and existence becomes a constant inter-negotiation between typology and raw experience.

If each of these three themes is juxtaposed with Bataille’s discussion of the sacred, we are able, it seems to me, to begin to flesh out in a striking way the relations between the restricted economy instituted by science and the heterogeneity that, for Bataille as for Durkheim and Mauss, ultimately informs it – and yet *escapes and evades* us the very moment we come, *via* science, to interrogate it. Firstly, the unceasingly constructive-destructive activity of classification, of scientific abstraction, daily performs the acts of separation that renders the sacred invisible and inaccessible – literally by calling the profane into

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<sup>1</sup> *Sorting Things Out*, London, MIT Press, 1999, p. 258.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

existence. Secondly, this aspect of scientific activity inevitably contributes to a *production*, to a structure or a work, more or less lasting, which stands at the very opposite pole to that prodigious expenditure [*dépense*], unworking or “potlatch without return” – invoked by Bataille in the name of the general economy. In other words we are reduced or impoverished by such classification. Thirdly, the individual is caught up in the homogeneity implied by the torque, unless, like the madman or the poet, or Bataille’s “third category” of elective, Nietzschean communitarian, s/he can throw off the shackles of an external and *a priori* classification implied by the conventional notion of a social bond.

## Applications

What is the import of all this for those of us who follow in the footsteps of Monnerot and Caillois in attempting the “périlleuse”<sup>1</sup> route of sociological investigation? Well, Bataille’s self-reflexivity in “La Guerre et la philosophie du sacré” is instructive:

parlant du *sacré*, je dois m’apercevoir, le faisant, que je suis encore du côté *profane*. Je voudrais en sortir, c’est vrai, je conteste le droit de parler du *sacré* comme les sociologues le font, exclusivement comme s’il était le premier venu des objets de science. Condamné à l’équivoque il me faut en sortir néanmoins.<sup>2</sup>

Having alerted us to this ambiguity, Bataille comes up against one of those *impasses* of thought that are characteristic of his writing: indeed an inevitable part of his thinking at and against the limit.

À ce moment, je saisis à quel point il m’est difficile de le faire. Si je parle en effet du *sacré* comme tel, autant que faire se peut, évitant de le déguiser, de le transformer d’abord en *profane*, je tombe sous le coup d’un interdit plus grave. Je ne puis l’ignorer. Mais j’en viens au moment de rompre.

This citation underlines what I meant when at the beginning of my talk I suggested that to read Bataille and to take him seriously invariably leads sooner rather than later to an abyss. The hollowness of any attempt towards objectivity yawns before us. Yet, within the rhetorical space in which he operates, Bataille always offers himself, and us, a partial holding place – a precarious bivouac, if you like, on the

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<sup>1</sup> *OC XII*, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> *OC XII*, p. 48.

edge of the pit. Just as he writes apropos of Caillois *qua* sociologist of the sacred that “le résultat [that is the text, *L’Homme et le Sacré*] est peut-être le meilleur que l’on aurait pu espérer”<sup>1</sup>, to confront face on the impossibility of capturing the essence of the sacred may offer ourselves the best – or at least, *least worst* – opportunity for reflexive description.

As I was preparing this paper for presentation, the latest Terrorism Bill was proceeding somewhat stormily through the British Parliament. In an effort to deliver on a manifesto commitment, the UK government tenaciously persisted in its intention to make it a criminal offence, in the words of the draft legislation, to publish a statement that “glorifies the commission or preparation” of terrorist acts. Now I do not wish here to contribute directly towards the extensive and impassioned debate the legislation has aroused. My point is straightforward and briefly put. The very deployment of the vocabulary of “glorifying” and “glorification” evokes the register of the sacred as deployed by Bataille and Durkheim, and reminds us of its inherent *undecidability*.

The introduction of the “glorification clause” amplifies and intensifies the fact that what is attempted at being grasped by an act of classification – in this case by a legal codification – is a mode of thought or being, a “totality of being” as Bataille might have it, that inevitably *exceeds* and ultimately *evades* all classification. In any precise, rational or scientific sense, the act or intention of glorification is *unknowable*: this alone would seem to justify the contention those critics of the clause who maintain it is unworkable. On the other hand, when Tony Blair declared in Parliament that “it [glorification] is a word that members of the public readily know and understand and that juries would understand”, he was, in another way, but still strictly speaking, intuitively correct. It occurs to me that this is one area of contemporary life where Bataille’s notion of the rupture between sacred and profane might usefully be called into play.

In the field of mental health care, my own particular area of interest, various more or less programmatic classificatory systems, nosologies and diagnostic

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54-55.

schema have multiplied and proliferated over centuries. They continue to shape complex, highly contested, and often noxious processes resulting in the production of a multiplicity of objective and subjective pathologies. Here too, the notion of the sacred-profane distinction and Bataille's evocation of the sacred as "le monde de communication ou du contagion" [see above] profoundly disturbs and undercuts any attempt at maintaining a systemic objective approach.

For instance, "colonies for the mad" scattered around Europe are well documented, where what might be called a precursory model of community care was in place for decades and – in the case of the town of Geel in Belgium – for centuries before the widespread introduction of policies of deinstitutionalisation. Persons viewed as suffering from chronic mental disorder, and otherwise liable to be shut up in an asylum, were literally farmed out to foster-families, who in return, for a State allowance, gave them board and lodging as more or less permanent "boarders" or "guests". An interesting finding of those who have researched these communities<sup>2</sup> was the striking persistence of beliefs and practices associating madness with pollution and contagion. For example, even in the 1970s, in the French colony at Ainay-le-Château, hosts routinely and rigorously maintained the practice of avoiding any use of the eating and washing utensils used by guests. These were washed and stored separately – with obsessive, meticulous, and, we might readily add, "religious" care and attention. In both Ainay-le-Château and Geel any hint of sexual liaison between hosts and boarders was regarded as perilous in the extreme and potentially catastrophic. Perhaps this should not surprise us. To the present day in the UK as elsewhere, the persistence, however disguised, of narratives of contamination and contagion with regard to the essential "otherness" of madness continues to be discernible in media and other popular representations.

My current research focuses on the recourse made by mental health *professionals* to a wide range of ontologies – including folk ontologies – of mental illness. I have not meant to imply that *they* necessarily consciously or directly

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, D. Jodelet, *Madness and Social Representations*, trans. T. Pownall, University of Notre Dame Press, Berkeley, 1991; E. Roosens, *Mental Patients in Town Life*, trans. H. Shapiro, Sage, Beverley Hills, 1979.

adhere to the archaic notions of contagion or virulence to which I have just alluded. What I do want to emphasise however is that here again Bataille's work offers a frame whereby the affective and – thus ultimately *sacred* – grounding of rational or quasi-rational behaviour and beliefs might be exposed to view.

In this paper, following Bataille, I have attempted to suggest that our attempts to effectively confront, describe, or securely grasp the sacred dimension, are, to the extent that *we ourselves* remain inextricably and inevitably within the profane register, fatally doomed to incompleteness, to impossibility; as Bataille remarks, to a form of rupture. Because when we ourselves attempt to explain the inexplicable, we dangle over the abyss, simultaneously attracted and repelled. On the brink of, yet not submitting to, an ecstatic and useless collapse, where explanatory power takes second place to “communication”, and “method” to fascinated participation.