

A Poetic Enquiry: Barthes and Bataille's *Story of the Eye*

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Roland Barthes, the twentieth-century French specialist of poetics *par excellence*, wrote very little on poetry. Other than Barthes's interest in haiku discussed in his last series of lectures at the Collège de France in 1979,¹ it is necessary to go back to his first book, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), to find a text dedicated to the genre.² The chapter from that book entitled 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' thus takes on a particular importance in Barthes's *œuvre*.³ In this text, he defines 'poetic writing' by setting up an opposition between 'classical poetry' and 'modern poetry'. Classical poetry is, for Barthes, a mode of expression that is purely formal,

never evok[ing] any particular domain, any particular depth of feeling, any special coherence, or separate universe, but only an individual handling of a verbal technique, that of 'expressing oneself' according to rules more artistic, therefore more sociable than those of conversation, in other terms, the technique of projecting out an inner thought, springing fully armed from the Mind, a speech which is made more socially acceptable by virtue of the very conspicuousness of its conventions.⁴

Modern poetry, on the other hand, is said to

give [poetic] speech the status of a closed Nature, which covers both the function and the structure of language. Poetry is then no longer a Prose either ornamental or shorn of liberties. It is a quality *sui generis* and without antecedents. It is no longer an attribute, but a substance, and therefore it can very well renounce signs, since it carries

its own nature within itself, and does not need to signal its identity outwardly: poetic language and prosaic language are sufficiently separate to be able to dispense with the very signs of their difference.⁵

For Barthes, modern poetry is an autonomous type of discourse that uses the codes of both prose and poetry.

While Barthes bases his whole chapter on the distinction between these two types of poetry, he does not give any examples to illustrate his thoughts. The few names that he does cite only throw a partial light on the distinction, and, rather than clarifying, confuse things further. Barthes claims that the break between the modern and the classical begins with Rimbaud, not Baudelaire,⁶ after having been first initiated by Hugo.⁷ Char is deemed to be on the modern side 'in absolute terms' whereas Gide's *Fruits of the Earth* is regarded as classical.⁸ However, being identified as 'poetic prose', this should in fact be classified modern poetry according to the criteria set by Barthes.⁹

In order to find an example of a text explicitly classed as a poem by Barthes, it is necessary to turn to his 1963 article 'The Metaphor of the Eye' which looks at Georges Bataille's 1928 prose narrative *Story of the Eye*, a text that has, *a priori*, nothing to do with poetry. In this story two adolescents, the anonymous narrator and his female accomplice Simone, play erotic games that become increasingly violent and lead to the death of one of their friends, Marcelle. Having clandestinely slipped into Spain, they witness the gorging of the matador Granero in a Madrid bull fight, and subsequently murder a young priest in a Seville church. The priest's eye is then extracted and lodged in Simone's genitals. The story abruptly finishes after this episode with the protagonists disappearing off in Gibraltar.¹⁰ This part of the book is entitled 'Récit' [tale] and is made up of thirteen chapters. The second part is a short meta-narrative called 'Coincidences' in which the story's dream-like nature is linked to certain events in the life of the narrator, in whom it is easy to recognise a fictionalised version of Bataille.

Noting how Bataille's story 'bears no comparison with any ordinary piece of fiction', Barthes asks whether 'this type of composition should be called a "poem"'.¹¹ His answer is categorical: 'It is difficult to see how else to distinguish it from the novel [*on n'en voit pas d'autre à opposer au roman*], and the distinction needs to be made [*cette opposition est nécessaire*].'¹² The distinction, or *opposition*, is no longer a qualitativo-chronological one (classical/modern), but a generic one (novel/poem).

The binary reading does not stop there, however, as Barthes sets up a new opposition. If *Story of the Eye* is a poem, this is also because Bataille's story belongs to the 'improbable', in opposition to the novel, which stands, Barthes writes, on the side of the 'probable':¹³

A novel is something that might happen, *all things considered* [...]; a poem is something that could never happen under any circumstances – except, that is, in the shadowy or burning realm of fantasy, which by that very token it alone can indicate. The novel proceeds by chance combinations of real elements, the poem by precise and complete exploration of virtual elements.¹⁴

Barthes continues with a detailed formal analysis borrowing the tools recently developed by linguistics, which he uses to study the operation of the metaphorical and metonymic chains that he sees at work in Bataille's text. As Claude Coste has noted, the resultant reading, as virtuoso and illuminating as it may be, nevertheless tends to ignore the narrative:

By substituting the 'metaphor' for the 'story', in other words rhetoric for narration, Barthes underlines the transformation of an organ (the 'eye'), focussing his attention on the material world of objects, to the detriment of the characters and the things that happen to them. Without being totally discounted, the narrative is reduced to playing a functional role [...].¹⁵

It is the 'how', and not the 'what', of the narrative that interests Barthes. Yet, it still remains unclear what makes *Story of the Eye* a poem.¹⁶

Something that Barthes does not mention – either because he is not aware of Bataille's poetry, which is unlikely,¹⁷ or because he did not consider it to be of interest, which is more probable¹⁸ – is the fact that the author of this pornographic prose narrative was also an author of poems.¹⁹ Furthermore, Barthes does not refer to the numerous texts that Bataille devoted to poetry, even though, as Jacqueline Risset stresses, 'the question of poetry, that is, the questioning of poetry's essence, which [Bataille's] writing insistently poses, brings us to a central aspect, or rather typical gesture of his thought'.²⁰ If not as a poet, then as a critic of poetry Bataille could have been a useful point of reference for Barthes in his investigation into the genre.²¹

This is all the more of a missed opportunity given that the two writers share very similar views: where Barthes sees the poem in its links to the improbable, Bataille identifies poetry in relation to the impossible. In the notes for a preface to *The Impossible*, the new title Bataille gave in 1962 to the second edition of *Hatred of Poetry* (originally published in 1947), he writes: 'Sinking into philosophy, I attempt to say in the terms that are possible that which only poetry would have the power to express, that is, the language of the *impossible*'.²² Interestingly enough, it is in fact in *Story of the Eye* that this central notion in Bataille's thought appears for the first time.²³ The links between Barthes's improbable poem, Bataille's impossible poetry and *Story of the Eye* therefore need to be examined in order to: clarify the unstable status of this text; shed light on the enigmatic conception of poetry specific to each writer; and, probe where they come together on the topic. Such an investigation seems all the more important as, despite its obviousness, this has not been not explored by critics of either Barthes or Bataille's work.

How then can an examination of *Story of the Eye* make sense of both Barthes and Bataille's respective understandings of a mode of writing that is by definition demiurgic (the etymology of 'poetry' – *poiein* – is 'make'), but which they both place under the sign of an incapacity (the improbable/the impossible)? In what follows, this seeming contradiction will be the basis upon which I explore both writers' positions on poetry. Beginning with Barthes' unexpected categorisation of Bataille's text as poetry in his 1963 article 'The Metaphor of the Eye', I will first ask in what ways *Story of the Eye* is a poem for Barthes. By placing Bataille's text alongside Barthes's criteria, I will then take up the question posed by Barthes in his 1953 chapter, 'Is there a poetic writing?', to explore the extent to which poetic writing operates in *Story of the Eye*. Finally, I will compare both thinkers' ideas on poetry by focusing on the categories of the improbable – that Barthes uses to identify the domain of the poem – and the impossible – used by Bataille to define poetry. Here, I will refer to another text by Barthes on Bataille, 'Outcomes of the Text', dating from 1973. Through this literary overview, the following analysis will also trace the general evolution of Barthes's thinking on poetry.

The Poem of the Eye

In what sense is *Story of the Eye* a poem? This is the inevitable question posed by Barthes's analysis. Whilst Barthes is a key reference in any critical discussion of Bataille's most famous narrative, the 'necessary' identification of this '[out of the] ordinary piece of fiction' as 'poem' remains unmentioned by critics who instead point to the virtuosity of Barthes's analysis, citing the link made between linguistic and erotic transgression, or focusing on the incomprehension to which Barthes confesses when reading Bataille.²⁴ The singular status of poem that Barthes attributes to *Story of the Eye* is, for instance, not mentioned by Coste in his piece on the place of Bataille in Barthes's *œuvre*.²⁵ Moreover, those studies aiming to rehabilitate Bataille's poetry, for the most part, concentrate on the poems that are identifiable as such, and on his texts theorising poetry. When cited by Santi, 'The Metaphor of the Eye' is used retrospectively to throw light on Bataille's poems.²⁶ Santi deploys the formal analysis proposed by Barthes without asking what this analysis has to do with poetics, nor discussing to what extent the text from which it emanates could itself be considered to be poetry.

Although Barthes starts his article by suggesting that *Story of the Eye* 'really is the story of an object' and 'by no means [...] the story of Simone, Marcelle, or the narrator', Barthes uses the whole of the second paragraph to explain how this story is, in fact, a poem.²⁷ This designation is then repeated five times in total throughout his text.²⁸ As can be seen, the 'improbable' nature of the narrative lends itself to identification as a poem sketching out 'the shadowy or burning realm of fantasy' by using 'a precise and complete exploration of virtual elements'.²⁹ This is the opposite of the novel, which 'proceeds by chance combinations of real elements'.³⁰ Barthes goes on to elucidate how this operative binary opposition covers 'the two major categories [...] that the science of linguistics has recently taught us to differentiate and name: arrangement and selection, the syntagma and the paradigm, metonymy and metaphor'.³¹ Whereas the novel works by organising elements syntagmatically following the model of metonymy – that is, contiguously – the poem, by contrast, favours the paradigm as it selects elements based on the metaphorical model – that is, by analogy. While the novel functions by unfurling the narrative's developments in a horizontal progression, the poem operates in a vertical movement through associative combinations.

Having established the distinction between, on the one hand, the novel as syntagmatic and metonymic and, on the other, the poem as paradigmatic and metaphorical, Barthes then considers the way in which the two metaphorical chains that make up the basis of Bataille's text are formed. The first of these chains is that of the eye and its spherical avatars (a bowl of milk, an egg, the moon, the sun, a bull's testicles), and the second that of tears and their liquid equivalents (milk, urine, sperm, blood, rain).

The next step of the analysis examines what the text does with this accumulation of analogous elements. An experimental poetic approach, such as that of concrete poetry, would for example present poetic assemblages devoid of syntax, such as lists or drawings made of words. But Bataille has written a story, albeit the story of an object, and he therefore introduces the metaphorical elements, deploying the paradigms of the eye and tears, through the use of syntax. This is what Barthes means when he writes:

As a reserve of virtual signs, a pure metaphor cannot alone constitute a discourse. If one *recounts* its terms, i.e. if one inserts them in a narrative that cements them together, their paradigmatic nature already begins to give ground to the dimension of all spoken language, which is inevitably syntagmatic extension.³²

At this stage of the analysis, Barthes makes the rare move of supplying a footnote (a form of meta-discourse unusual in his work) to define the terms 'syntagma' and 'paradigm'. It is all the more surprising that this terminological clarification comes very late in the argument while the two pairs syntagma/paradigm and metonymy/metaphor have been used from the very start of the discussion. He explains that 'syntagma means the plane of concatenation and combination of signs at the level of actual discourse (e.g., the *line* of words)', while 'paradigm means, for each sign of the syntagma, the fund of sister – but nevertheless dissimilar – signs from which it was selected'.³³ These definitions come from those formulated by Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), which Barthes mentions briefly in the previous paragraph, and, which were subsequently developed by Roman Jakobson in his *Essais de linguistique générale*, the first volume of which came out in French in May 1963 a few months before Barthes's 'The Metaphor of the Eye'.³⁴ In the only other footnote of his article, Barthes refers to Jakobson.³⁵

Returning to the poem *Story of the Eye*, the two metaphorical chains assembled in the text are, necessarily, governed by the rules of syntax. Using this unavoidable syntagmatic arrangement, Bataille, in Barthes's words, 'interchanges the two chains' and makes them 'share relationships of contiguity' by coupling '[a] term from the first [...] with a term from the second'.³⁶ There are two ways to proceed here: either the logical associations are respected (' "the eye weeps" ', ' "the broken eggs runs out" ', ' "light (the sun) pours down" '),³⁷ or the analogical terms in each metaphorical chain are freely selected. Bataille does the latter. Rather than forming the expected expressions 'break an egg' or 'put out an eye', Bataille writes 'break an eye' and 'put out an egg'.³⁸ As Barthes explains: 'the syntagma now becomes *crossed*, because the liaison it suggests takes from the two chains terms that are not complementary but distinct'.³⁹ In rhetoric, this is called a *chiasm*.

Yet, beyond the novelty of these chiasmatic images and their highly striking character, Barthes does not explain how this technique makes Bataille's text into a poem. In light of the conceptual framework used by Barthes, this could be considered as a way to activate the poetic function of language as defined by Jakobson – that is, the function which, 'promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects'. This brings out all that constitutes the code's own materiality in order to make an aesthetic object of it.⁴⁰ However, this function also operates in the novel as in any other type of writing, including the non-literary, and, in any case, Bataille's text plays on the links between signs and objects, not on their dichotomy. What is at work in Bataille's text is not, in fact, the poetic function of language but the functioning of poetry as conceived by Jakobson. That is, the projection of the paradigm (the elements in the metaphorical chains) onto the syntagma (the metonymic arrangement). Barthes describes this without naming it explicitly.

In 'Linguistics and Poetics', Jakobson underlines that '[t]he poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination'.⁴¹ One example that clearly illustrates this technique is the famous poem by Paul Éluard, 'The earth is blue like an orange'.⁴² Here, the paradigms of colour and of rotundity are mobilised simultaneously to describe the earth. The way in which the elements are chosen, as in *Story of the Eye*, is not linear but criss-crossed. Éluard also adds a degree of complexity by playing on the homonyms of colour and fruit. The technique thus produces formulations that are 'situated halfway between the banal and the absurd'.⁴³ This is also how Barthes

describes the unexpected expressions in Bataille's text where the paradigms of the eye and of tears are crossed over in the syntagma by way of contiguity. Ultimately, if *Story of the Eye* is a poem for Barthes, this is simply because he finds in it an illustration of the technique described by Jakobson in 'Linguistics and Poetics', from which he also draws much of his conceptual vocabulary.⁴⁴

With his analysis complete and by way of a conclusion to his article, Barthes finally asks whether the rhetorical technique that he has just set out 'can account for *all* eroticism'⁴⁵ – the linguistic manipulations serving as a catalyst for the erotic transgressions performed by the protagonists – or whether this is specific to Bataille. Comparing the rhetoric of *Story of the Eye* to that used in Sade's narratives, he suggests that the erotic rhetoric in Sade is 'essentially syntagmatic; given a certain number of erotic loci, Sade deduced *all* the figures [...] capable of bringing them into play [...] whose profusion is the beginning and end of the Sadian narrative'.⁴⁶ The eroticism in Sade is encyclopaedic and forms part of the classification project typical of the Enlightenment. By contrast, Bataille's erotic rhetoric is essentially paradigmatic covering 'the tremulous quality of a number of objects (a modern notion of which Sade knew nothing)'.⁴⁷ The distinction between classical and modern writing used by Barthes to define poetry in 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' reappears here. As a Jakobsonian poem, would *Story of the Eye* be an example of modern poetry according to the criteria established by Barthes in 1953 then? The following section of this essay examines this question.

A Modern Poem

By differentiating the classical and the modern in the erotic rhetoric used by Sade and Bataille, Barthes further distinguishes between writing and style: 'Sade's erotic language has no connotation other than that of his century, it is writing' whereas 'Bataille's has the connotation of the man's very being and is a style'. Here, Barthes recalls Buffon's old-fashioned adage: 'style is man'.⁴⁸ The distinction between writing and style is nonetheless added to those binary oppositions set out previously between classical and modern poetry, and between novel and poem. A fierce enemy of normative binaries, Barthes multiplies them actively here and,

in so doing, suggests that the style of the poem *Story of the Eye* is modern in spite of its Buffonian flair.

When looking at whether Bataille's text displays the characteristics of modern poetry as defined by Barthes, some of the first things to be noted are the similarities between the concepts and vocabulary used in 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' and 'The Metaphor of the Eye', starting with the status reserved for the Word, with a capital W. In 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', Barthes explains how in modern poetry the '[f]ixed connections [are] abolished' between word and meaning:

the word is left only with a vertical project, it is like a monolith, or a pillar which plunges into a totality of meanings, reflexes and recollections: it is a sign which stands. [...] Thus under each Word in modern poetry there lies a sort of existential geology, in which is gathered the total content of the Name, instead of a chosen content as in classical prose and poetry. The Word is no longer guided *in advance* by the general intention of a socialised discourse; the consumer of poetry, deprived of the guide of selective connections, encounters the Word frontally, and receives it as an absolute quantity, accompanied by all its possible associations. The Word, here, is encyclopaedic, it contains simultaneously all the acceptations from which a relational discourse might have required it to choose.⁴⁹

In this description of how the word works in modern poetry we can recognise the figure of the paradigm, whose role is so central in 'The Metaphor of the Eye'. First in the lexical field of verticality ('vertical project', 'pillar which plunges into a totality of meanings', a 'sign which stands'), then, in the mention of the selection process ('instead of a chosen content', 'deprived of the guide of selective connections', 'required it to choose'), and, finally, in the insistence on the reserve of available signs ('total content of the Name', 'absolute quantity, accompanied by all its possible associations', 'all the acceptations'). Modern poetry, as Barthes conceives it, is, as in *Story of the Eye*, essentially paradigmatic, whereas classical poetry works like prose and the novel by using syntagma ('instead of a chosen content as in classical prose and poetry').

Another point of convergence between Barthes's 1953 chapter and his 1963 article concerns the object. '[M]odern poetry is a poetry of

the object [*poésie objective*]', writes Barthes in 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?'.⁵⁰ Unlike Rimbaud, the first modern poet in Barthes's eyes, Barthes does not understand 'objective poetry' as the opposite of 'subjective poetry' but rather in the sense of poetry *of* the object.⁵¹ If modern poetry is indeed a poetry of the object, this is because

[i]n it, Nature becomes a fragmented space made of objects solitary and terrible [...]. The bursting upon us of the poetic word then institutes an absolute object; Nature becomes a succession of verticalities, of objects, suddenly standing erect, and filled with all their possibilities: one of these can only be a landmark in an unfulfilled, and thereby, terrible world. These unrelated objects – words adorned with all the violence of their irruption [...] – these poetic words exclude men: there is no humanism of modern poetry. This erect discourse is full of terror, that is to say, it relates man not to other men, but to the most inhuman images in Nature: heaven, hell, holiness, childhood, madness, pure matter, etc.⁵²

The resonances with Bataille's text and ideas are startling. In *Story of the Eye*, the word-object 'eye' is an object that is 'solitary and terrible' (the eye is dislodged from its eyeball several times),⁵³ 'adorned with all the violence of [its] irruption', and that links the characters with its collection of 'inhuman' situations – such as the rape and murder of the priest whose eye is pulled out and pushed into Simone's vulva from where it watches the narrator while crying tears of urine.⁵⁴ The lexical field of terror that Barthes mobilises here and elsewhere in his chapter in order to characterise modern poetry – 'terrible', 'all the violence of their irruption', 'full of terror', 'the most inhuman images' – also applies perfectly to Bataille's text.⁵⁵ The two writers concur as well on the point that there is 'no humanism of modern poetry'. Finally, lurking behind what Barthes calls 'the most inhuman images of Nature' through which this 'discourse full of terror' that is modern poetry 'relates man' to 'heaven, hell, holiness, childhood, madness, pure matter, etc.', major Bataillean notions are recognisable: the sacred, childhood, madness and base materialism. Yet, when asked in a 1971 interview about the writers, among whom Bataille, that he had excluded from his first book, *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes retorts that these 'exclusions' were in fact 'ignorance' and that he didn't know Bataille at the time.⁵⁶ He adds: 'You may indeed transform such ignorance into "exclusions" ; but you then

have to refer to my unconscious or my laziness, something which I leave to my future critics.’⁵⁷ This comment will not be discussed further here, except to point out that Barthes had himself evoked the possibility of Bataille’s intrusion into his thought.⁵⁸ What matters is that Barthes classifies *Story of the Eye* as a poem in his 1963 article not only because of the influence of Jakobson but also as a result of his own writing on poetry formulated ten years earlier. Barthes’ surprising reading of *Story of the Eye* therefore enables him to corroborate his own theory.

Indeed, in both of his texts, Barthes muses over the ‘stations’ of the word – an unusual term to employ, but specific enough for us to consider its use. In ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’, he writes:

Classical language is always reducible to a persuasive continuum, it postulates the possibility of dialogue, it establishes a universe in which men are not alone, where words never have the terrible weight of things, where speech is always a meeting with the others. [...] We have seen that on the contrary modern poetry destroyed relationships in language and reduced discourse to Words as static things [*ramenait le discours à des stations de Mots*].⁵⁹

Similarly, in ‘The Metaphor of the Eye’, he writes, ‘So the Eye seems to be the matrix of a run of objects [*parcours d’objets*] that are like different “stations” of the ocular metaphor’.⁶⁰ The expressions ‘Stations of Words’, ‘run of objects’, and ‘different “stations” of the ocular metaphor’ all belong to the imaginary of the Passion of Christ.⁶¹

In its literal sense, the word ‘station’ means ‘a way of standing’, ‘being stood up, upright and stationary’. However, if used in the plural and given a noun to accompany it, as is the case here, the term refers quite specifically to the fourteen stops made by Jesus on the road to Calvary and to each of the fourteen paintings or sculptures which represent these stops. This meaning is further supported by the vocabulary of terror and violence used in Barthes’s two texts and in Bataille’s narrative. The sacrifice of the priest in Bataille’s text also lends weight to this reading.

The possessive noun expected with ‘stations’ is ‘of Christ’, though, not ‘of Words’. By adding the capital W in Word, Barthes knowingly plays on the association with God’s Word. What does this mean for our purposes? That modern poetry and the poem *Story of the Eye* sacrifice words? Bataille’s definition of poetry confers an affirmative answer to this question. In *Inner Experience*, he writes: ‘Of poetry, I will

now say that it is, I believe, the sacrifice in which words are victims'.⁶² Barthes is effectively saying the same thing when he suggests that the stations of the word achieve the Passion of language that is the modern poem. Halted at different points in the paradigm whose verticality keeps them 'stand[ing]' and 'upright' and thereby prevents them falling too much into the syntagma, a true Station of the Cross, the words in the modern poem and in *Story of the Eye* adopt postures that one by one undo the links that (to borrow the formulation used in 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?') tie them to 'the [social] contingencies' of the language of sociability.⁶³

This Passion of language, in which each 'station' of the word sacrifices its common meaning [*sens commun*], that is, both its standard meaning and the way it is used by the community in order to communicate, is what, according to Barthes, transforms writing into style. He finishes his 1953 chapter with the following affirmation:

But when the poetic language radically questions Nature by virtue of its very structure, without any recourse to the content of the discourse and without falling back on some ideology, there is no mode of writing left, there are only styles, thanks to which man turns his back on society and confronts the world of objects without going through any of the forms of History or of social life.⁶⁴

The circle is complete. If Bataille can be deemed to have a style rather than a way of writing [*une écriture*] like Sade, this is not simply due to the paradigm presented by his erotic rhetoric, but also because his use of words corresponds to the practice specific to modern poetry that Barthes describes and which bears the stamp of Bataille's thought, albeit unintentionally. How, then, are the complex links between each writer's conception of poetry to be understood? This is the final point that I would like to consider.

Improbable Poem and Impossible Poetry

For Barthes as for Bataille, poetry is a problematic genre. Stamped, for the former, with the double seal of convention (in its classical version) and of terror (in its modern form), poetry is, for the latter, a language of the impossible and an object of hatred.⁶⁵ For want of a clear conception

of poetry, both thinkers seem at least to agree on what poetry should, on the one hand, reject (conventions) and, on the other, demand (the ruin of language/the impossible).

This meeting of minds is all the more apparent when we look at one of Bataille's most important articles on poetry, 'From the Stone Age to Jacques Prévert', published in 1946 in the recently launched journal *Critique*. In this text, Bataille dismisses conventional poetry as of the time of 'our grand-mothers': 'Poetry once adhered to rules: at the same time it took from these rules both the origin and the consciousness of what it was generally understood to be. It was language expressed in verse.'⁶⁶ He then puts forward a conception of poetry as a cry which allows us to understand through seeing: 'It should be recognized that poetry is a cry which bestows *sight* – which reveals what we would not otherwise see: in fact, we must ceaselessly calculate and know – *understand* – with a mind to act.'⁶⁷ An example is given in a footnote: 'In the sense of the cry nothing is more fundamentally anti-poetic, nor more poetic in the funeral sense, than Lamartine's "The Lake" . The vulgarity of Kafka's stories, on the other hand, liberates a contemporary intensity of actuality.'⁶⁸ Stultified by conventions, Lamartine's poetry reveals the deadly pitfall to be avoided, whereas Kafka's narratives are cries that enable 'sight'. In an almost identical fashion, we find here the classical/modern opposition used by Barthes to distinguish 'a speech which is made more socially acceptable by virtue of the very conspicuousness of its conventions' from poetry as 'a substance [...] very well [able to] renounce signs, since it carries its own nature within itself, and does not need to signal its identity outwardly'.⁶⁹ As Bataille says of Prévert's case:

Jacques Prévert's poetry is, therefore, poetic, but not in the same way as a work by Boileau, which is so only by virtue of rhyme and cadence (it is true that it observes what the 'moderns' have retained of old conventions – certain typographical arrangements). It is poetry because, in itself, it harshly effects the ruin of poetry.⁷⁰

Again, Barthes did not demur when he affirmed seven years later that classical poetry is but 'the individual handling of a verbal technique', whereas 'modern poetry destroy[s] relationships in language'.⁷¹ Barthes was not only using the same categories as Bataille in his attempt to define poetry in 1953, he also shared the latter's very conception of poetry despite claiming not to have read Bataille. Once again, whether this

likeness is the result either of an unacknowledged influence or of an elective affinity, does not, ultimately, matter. Barthes explicitly voices Bataille's conception of poetry.

In order to see how their ideas on poetry might diverge, we must look elsewhere. As noted, poetry is for Bataille the language of the impossible, while the poem is for Barthes the space of the improbable. What is at stake, then, between these two terms that seem so close and are yet sufficiently distinct for Barthes to have seen fit to differentiate them? It is necessary to return to *Story of the Eye* to elucidate this point.

On the way back with Simone from their nocturnal search – the aim of which was to release their friend Marcelle, who had been locked in a nursing home following her breakdown caused by the orgy narrated in the preceding chapters – the narrator expresses his concerns: 'I was still extremely agitated. We had ten more kilometres to go, and in the state we were in, we obviously had to reach X by dawn. I could barely keep upright and despaired of ever reaching the end of this ride through the *impossible*.'⁷² In a footnote included in the Pléiade edition of Bataille's text, Gilles Ernst explains:

This is the first mention in his narrative *œuvre* of a term which Kojève's lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology* – attended by Bataille between 1934 and 1939 – had fully explored. In opposition to the real 'possible' of the self and of the world as revealed by the dialectic and defined here, in the following line [of *Story of the Eye*], as the 'real world, the one made up solely of dressed people', the 'impossible' is, as here already, that which goes beyond it, an ensemble of practices that are not 'dressed' (not covered over by reason), that the dialectic cannot explain and which are nevertheless as much part of the definition of the human phenomenon as the 'possible'.⁷³

The impossible, as Ernst explains further, is made up of 'wanderings, the second type of the real, it is non-dialectisable, a zone of danger dominated by the "pointless negativity" about which [Bataille writes in a letter to Kojève]'.⁷⁴ With the 'second type of the real' and the 'zone of danger', we are not far from 'the shadowy or burning realm of fantasy', that is the improbable place of the poem that Barthes situates at the opposite end of the novel's universe 'all mixed up with reality'.⁷⁵ The impossible and the improbable are thus two notions that meet on the terrain of poetry as conceived by Bataille and by Barthes.

Closely linked, the two notions meet as well in the writing of the poet and essayist Yves Bonnefoy, whose work can help shed light on the specific use Barthes and Bataille make of them. Bonnefoy's 1959 collection, *The Improbable*, made up of poems and essays on poetry, contains the following epigraph: 'I dedicate this book to the improbable, that is, to that which is. To a spirit of vigilance. To negative theologies. To a poetry that is desired, one of rains, of waiting and of wind. To a grand realism, which aggravates rather than resolves, which points to the obscure, which holds clarities to be dense clouds that are always able to be split open. Which cares about a haughty and workable clarity'.⁷⁶ For Bonnefoy, poetry is a practical engagement with the real ('that which is'), which goes as much towards Bataille's 'zones of danger' ('that which aggravates rather than resolves') as to Barthes's 'shadowy [...] realm' ('which it alone can indicate').⁷⁷ While Bonnefoy explores the improbable from his position as a poet, it is as a critic that he approaches the impossible. In his 1962 biography *Rimbaud*, the poet who, echoing Barthes and Bataille, he considers to be a lynchpin of modernity, Bonnefoy revisits the poetic figure who plumbed the depths of the real with words, and who pushed the experience so far as to confront 'the impossible'. Indeed, this is the title of one of the poems in Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*, which Bonnefoy analyses in the final chapter of his book, 'The Impossible and Freedom'.⁷⁸ Having exhausted the ways in which poetry uses language to explore life and having 'come up against the impossible, without resolving anything, and without any miracle falling from the sky', Rimbaud stops writing and chooses silence, in Bonnefoy's view, in order to get closer to the real.⁷⁹ Rimbaud's poetry bear witness to this encounter with the impossible. In his 1977 essay 'Encore Rimbaud', which appears in *Le Nuage rouge*, Bonnefoy noted: 'I am thinking of the last pages of *A Season in Hell*, where [Rimbaud] has checked that the impossible exists and yet decides that one can go beyond'.⁸⁰ Conceived in this way, Rimbaud's poetic practice moves in the same direction as Bataille's conception of poetry as a 'language of the impossible'.⁸¹

While Bataille, like Rimbaud, attempted to explore the impossible, Barthes by contrast stayed, like Bonnefoy, on the side of the improbable, which although close in meaning remains distinct from the former. While the two terms are related by their onomastic and their scope, they do not belong to the same 'realm'. In its literal sense, the impossible is that which cannot be nor happen; whose existence is discounted. Meanwhile the improbable refers to that which is not probable, and has little chance of happening. Rimbaud and Bataille's

impossible might then well be a radical version of Bonnefoy and Barthes's improbable. Or the other way round, as Jean-Michel Rabaté suggested in the discussion following his paper 'The Hatred of Poetry: Barthes/Bataille' given at the 'Barthes and Poetry' conference (University of Leeds, 2015).⁸² Indeed, the order of priority is important here, and I would suggest, with Rabaté, that the improbable for Barthes (and for Bonnefoy) is a watered-down version of the impossible in Bataille (and by extension in Rimbaud). Writing 'The Metaphor of the Eye', Barthes could indeed not have ignored this Bataillean notion that appears for the first time in *Story of the Eye* and played a central role in the writer's future thinking before becoming the new title for the 1962 republication of *Hatred of Poetry*. Missing out this term in 1963 in a discussion that mobilises the binary probable/improbable to affirm the poetic dimension of Bataille's first major text is therefore highly significant; and even more so as this was done in the pages of the special issue of *Critique* – the very journal created by Bataille – paying homage to him (following his death in July 1962).

Despite the fact that the impossible is not discussed in 'The Metaphor of the Eye', this notion haunts the margins of Barthes's efforts to distinguish the poem from the novel. As seen earlier, this generic distinction also intersects with the opposition of writing and style (set out in both 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' and 'The Metaphor of the Eye'), as well as with that of classical poetry and modern poetry (broached in 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' and taken up again in 'The Metaphor of the Eye'). The fact that Barthes multiplies the pairs of opposites with respect to poetry and to Bataille seems surprising coming from the very person who, since *Writing Degree Zero*, had precisely endeavoured to undo the binary oppositions that allow meaning to function in ideological discourse.⁸³ Furthermore, in another article he dedicated to Bataille in 1973, 'Outcomes of the Text', Barthes returns to the question of the paradigm that had so preoccupied him in 'The Metaphor of the Eye' by describing Bataille as a 'disrupter' of paradigms, that is, of binary oppositions. In the sub-section of this article titled 'Paradigm', Barthes writes:

Now in Bataille, value – which rules the entire discourse – rests on a special paradigm, one that is anomic, because ternary. There are, so to speak, three poles: *noble / ignoble / low*. [...] Bataille's heterology consists in this: there is a contradiction, a simple, canonical paradigm between the first two terms: *noble* and *ignoble* [...]; *but* the third term is

not regular: *low* is not the neutral term (neither noble nor ignoble) nor is it the mixed term (noble and ignoble). It is an independent term, concrete, eccentric, irreducible: the term of seduction *outside the* (structural) *law*.⁸⁴

This is also precisely the role played by the impossible, an ‘eccentric’ term par excellence that deviates from the rational and logical path (that really does *seduce*), that is non-dialectisable, and that leads towards ‘the second type of the real, a zone of danger in which dominates “pointless negativity”’.⁸⁵ This is what Bataille also calls ‘non-knowledge’.⁸⁶ Not content with declining all the possibilities of word and object, the paradigm in Bataille also demands the very figure of their impossibility. As a truly scandalous term, the impossible puts a spanner in the works of the probable/improbable paradigm, which it haunts by its absence.⁸⁷ Nor is it a neutral term (the impossible is neither probable nor improbable) or a mixed term (the probable and the improbable are both part of the possible, not the impossible). This is how poetry as a language of the impossible, as set out by Bataille, plays its part in the degree zero of writing sought by Barthes. Yet Bataille’s work demonstrates this with far more success than Barthes’s own poetic conception that multiplies binary oppositions.

In conclusion, it is now possible to understand why Barthes names *Story of the Eye* a poem. Barthes’s detailed analysis of the linguistic experimentation operational within the story and the (unacknowledged) link he establishes with the poetic structure that had recently been described by Jakobson makes up the first part of his reasoning. As has been shown, Barthes’s 1963 reading also echoes Bataille’s own conception of poetry, which sacrifices words in order to ruin language and thereby affirms the impossible. This affinity is already noticeable in ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’ despite Barthes’s alleged ignorance of Bataille at the time he wrote his first book. Read along the criteria set out by Barthes to define poetic writing, Bataille’s story also appeared as an example of modern poetry. In this sense, Bataille is for Barthes a direct (stylistic) heir to Rimbaud, the first poet to initiate the destruction of language so typical of poetic modernity according to Barthes. While Rimbaud and Bataille resolutely embraced the ensuing impossible, Barthes, however, displays a certain disapproval of modernity and prefers to continue to believe in the power of language.⁸⁸ Confronted with its destruction, he implements as a result a series of structuring binary

oppositions, and sides, like Bonnefoy, with the improbable. Yet, comparing the impossible and the improbable helped to highlight further the links between the Bataillean conception of poetry and Barthes's ideas. It is possible to see, first, how the conception of poetry developed by Barthes in 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' (1953) echoes the structure and issues set out by Bataille in 'From the Stone Age to Jacques Prévert' (1946) and, second, how this conception is retrospectively corroborated by the analysis developed in 'The Metaphor of the Eye' (1963). Read through the prism of Barthes's 1973 essay 'Outcomes of the Text', Bataille's impossible poetic language appears to be, ultimately, a successful example of writing at degree zero. Throughout this poetic journey, Bataille helps Barthes to elaborate and support his own thought. While poetry is able, for Bataille, to do a lot, including the impossible, it remains however, for Barthes, limited by the double principle of duality (classical/modern, writing/style, novel/poem, probable/improbable) and incapacity (poetry is either a pure formal code, a destruction of language, or a discourse that is improbable). It is thanks to the discovery of the haiku and of oriental thought later on his career that Barthes was eventually able to overcome these limitations to finally see poetry, and the void it rests upon, as a constructive opportunity.

Notes

¹ [Translations from the works of Roland Barthes are taken from the published versions; all other translations are my own – translator’s note.] See Roland Barthes, ‘The Haiku’, session of 6 January 1979, and ‘The Desire for Haiku’, session of 13 January 1979, in *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 23-28 and pp. 29-36.

² As Antoine Compagnon notes, Barthes never mentions poetry after *Writing Degree Zero*. This includes his 1965 reading of Philippe Sollers’s novel *Drame* in ‘Drama, Poem, Novel’, in which there is no discussion of poetry. See Antoine Compagnon, *Les Antimodernes de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 436.

³ Roland Barthes, ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’ in *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), pp. 47-58.

⁴ Barthes, ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’, p. 48.

⁵ Barthes, ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’, pp. 48-49.

⁶ Barthes, ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’, pp.48-49.

⁷ Barthes writes (‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’, p. 52): ‘Now the distortion to which Hugo tried to subject the alexandrine, which is of all meters the most inter-relational, already contains the whole future of modern poetry, since what is attempted is to eliminate the intention to establish relationships and to produce instead an explosion of words.’

⁸ My translation, as this is missed out in the extant English translation. See Roland Barthes, ‘Y a-t-il une écriture poétique ?’, in *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols. (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. V, p 201.

⁹ ‘There is no objection to speaking of a poetic mode of writing concerning the classical writers and their epigones, or even concerning poetic prose in the manner of Gide’s *Fruits of the Earth*, in which Poetry is in fact a certain linguistic ethos.’ Barthes, ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’, p. 57.

¹⁰ Lord Auch (a.k.a. Georges Bataille), *Story of the Eye*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschal (London: Penguin, 2001).

¹¹ Roland Barthes, ‘The Metaphor of the Eye’, in Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. J. A. Underwood, pp. 119-27 (p. 120). [Translator’s note: in the original French, this is a question with a question mark, but this phrase is reformulated in Underwood’s translation.] This article originally appeared in a special number of the journal *Critique* (nos. 195-96, August-September 1963) published in tribute to Bataille, the founder of the journal, following his death in July 1962.

¹² Barthes, ‘The Metaphor of the Eye’, p. 120. This opposition does not appear necessary to Michel Leiris who describes *Story of the Eye* as a ‘poem in the form

of a novel whose tenacious power to entrance has a lot to do with the unvarying osmosis at work in it between the incongruously lyrical “I” (the brew of abattoir waste, filth and blue sky) and the coldly autobiographical “I” (the attempt to draw on a few known reference points so as to bring a little order into this apocalypse) [...]’. Michel Leiris, ‘In the Time of Lord Auch’, in Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, *Correspondence*, trans. by Liz Heron (London: Seagull Books, 2008), pp. 22-37 (p. 35).

¹³ Barthes, ‘The Metaphor of the Eye’, p. 120. Unless stated otherwise, the italics and inverted commas used are in the original.

¹⁴ Barthes, ‘The Metaphor of the Eye’, p. 120.

¹⁵ Translated from Claude Coste, ‘Le Bataille de Barthes’, in *Sexe et texte. Autour de Georges Bataille*, ed. by Jean-François Louette and Françoise Rouffiat (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2007), pp. 151-77 (pp. 156-57).

¹⁶ The unanimous silence on this from critics – who otherwise comment widely on the formal game analysed by Barthes without linking it to the poetic quality that he attributes to Bataille’s text – is telling.

¹⁷ For example, in his 1966 essay *Criticism and Truth*, Barthes cites *Inner Experience* which Bataille first published in 1943 and which includes several of his poems; see Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons (New York, SUNY Press, 1988), and Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (London, Athlone Press, 1987), p. 24. By the 1960s, Barthes was, like most of French intelligentsia, well acquainted with Bataille and his *œuvre*.

¹⁸ Despite critics’ recent attempts to rehabilitate Bataille’s poetry, it remains of less importance than the rest of his *œuvre*. See Jacqueline Risset, ‘Haine de la poésie’, in *Georges Bataille après tout*, ed. by Denis Hollier (Paris: Belin, 1995), pp. 147-60 (pp. 152-53); Sylvain Santi, *Georges Bataille, à l’extrémité fuyante de la poésie* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007); Marie-Christine Lala, *Georges Bataille, poète du réel* (Oxford, Peter Lang, 2010).

¹⁹ For an account of how Bataille’s poems were published, see Risset, ‘Haine de la poésie’, pp. 152-53. Bataille’s poetry has also been collected in English; see *The Collected Poems of Georges Bataille*, trans. by Mark Spitzer (Chester Springs: Dufour Editions, 1998).

²⁰ Risset, ‘Haine de la poésie’, p. 147.

²¹ It should however be noted that, in his 1971 article ‘From Work to Text’, Barthes dismisses Bataille’s ability to contribute to his understanding of poetry and the poetic. He writes: ‘How to classify Georges Bataille? Is this writer a novelist, a poet, an essayist, an economist, a philosopher, a mystic? The answer is so uncertain that handbooks of literature generally prefer to leave Bataille out; as a matter of fact, Bataille has written texts, or even, perhaps, always one and the same text’. Roland Barthes, ‘From Work to Text’, in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 56-64 (p. 58). Rather than simplifying Barthes’s position towards Bataille and the nature of his texts

(*Story of the Eye* included), this statement rather reveals the challenge they represent for him.

²² Georges Bataille, 'Autour de *L'Impossible*', in *Romans et récits*, ed. by Jean-François Louette (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 570 [Translator's note: my translation as these notes are not included in *The Impossible*, trans. by Robert Hurley (San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1991).]

²³ The narrator calls his adventures a 'ride through the impossible'. Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, p. 29. In 'Autour d'*Histoire de l'œil*', Gilles Ernst offers a detailed commentary of this sentence that I will discuss later on in this essay. See Bataille, *Romans et récits*, pp. 1033-1034 (p. 1034).

²⁴ Barthes writes: 'Bataille, after all, affects me little: what have I to do with laughter, devotion, poetry, violence? What have I to say about the "sacred", about the "impossible"? Yet no sooner do I make all this (alien) language coincide with that disturbance in myself which I call *fear* than Bataille conquers me all over again: then everything he *inscribes describes* me: it sticks.' Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994), p. 144. If 'it sticks' between Barthes and Bataille, it is also precisely because of their adherence to the two subjects of the impossible and of poetry, as we will see.

²⁵ Coste, 'Le Bataille de Barthes'.

²⁶ Santi, *Georges Bataille, à l'extrémité fuyante de la poésie*, pp. 85-87.

²⁷ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 119.

²⁸ See Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', pp. 119-20, 121, and 122.

²⁹ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 120.

³⁰ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 120.

³¹ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 120.

³² Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 123.

³³ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 127, note 2.

³⁴ Barthes notices that in *Story of the Eye* 'the paradigm begins nowhere' and he underlines that '[t]his indeterminacy of the metaphorical order, usually overlooked by the psychology of archetypes, in fact merely reproduces the random character of associative fields, as established so forcefully by Saussure: there is no giving pre-eminence to any of the terms of declension.' Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', pp. 122-123. This is the last reference that Barthes makes to Saussure in his essay.

³⁵ 'I refer here to the antithesis established by Jakobson between metaphor as a figure of similarity and metonymy as a figure of contiguity.' Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 127, note 3.

³⁶ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 124.

³⁷ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 124.

³⁸ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 124.

³⁹ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 124. Barthes also notes (p. 124) how the image produced by this operation does not amount to free association, and

is therefore different from surrealist images: 'Bataille's image, however, is much more concerted. It is not a mad image, nor even a free image, because the coincidence of its terms is not aleatory and the syntagma is limited by a constraint: that of choice, which means that the terms of the image can be taken only from two finite series.'

⁴⁰ [Translator's note: Roman Jakobson's *Essais de linguistique générale* is not translated as a volume into English, but the final essay of this 1963 collection from which this quotation comes, 'Linguistics and Poetics', is included as the 'Closing Statement' in *Style in Language*, ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press / London: John Wiley & Sons, 1960), pp. 350-77 (p. 356).]

⁴¹ Jakobson, 'Closing Statement', p. 358 (emphasis in the original).

⁴² Paul Éluard, 'La terre est bleue comme une orange', in *L'Amour la poésie* (1929). Éluard's poem dates from 1929 and is therefore contemporaneous with *Story of the Eye* (1928). Unlike what Barthes asserts, surrealist images are not necessarily 'mad' or 'free' as they are in Breton or Reverdy then, they are also able to show the same 'concerted' effort as those in Bataille. See 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 124.

⁴³ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 125.

⁴⁴ Such as 'chain', 'selection', 'combination', 'arrangement', 'contiguity', etc.

⁴⁵ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 126.

⁴⁶ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 126.

⁴⁷ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 126.

⁴⁸ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', pp. 126-27. This is the current version of 'style is man himself' as formulated by Georges-Louis Leclerc (Comte) de Buffon in his *Discourse on Style* – part translation in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. by Isaac Kramnick (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 319-21 – and given as his acceptance speech at the Académie Française, Paris, 25 August 1753.

⁴⁹ Barthes, 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', pp. 53-54.

⁵⁰ Barthes, 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', p. 56.

⁵¹ See the letter to Georges Izambard from 13 May 1871 in which Rimbaud writes to his teacher: 'Basically, you only see subjective poetry in your principle: your obstinacy to go back to the university rack, – forgive me! – proves it! But you will always end up like a self-satisfied person who did nothing, having never wanted to do anything. Not to mention that your subjective poetry will always be terribly insipid. One day, I hope, – many others hope the same thing – that I shall see the objective poetry in your principle, I shall see it more sincerely than you would!'. Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works and Selected Letters*, trans. by Wallace Fowlie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 88-89. It is in this same letter that Rimbaud formulates both his famous 'It is wrong to say: I think. One ought to say: I am thought' and 'I is someone else', two key formulations in his objective conception of poetry.

⁵² Barthes, 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', p. 56.

⁵³ The matador Granero has his right eye put out by the bull's horn that pierces his skull (*Story of the Eye*, p. 54) and the eye of Don Aminado, the young priest murdered in the Seville church, is enucleated in order to become a sex toy (pp. 66-67).

⁵⁴ Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, p. 67.

⁵⁵ Elsewhere in this issue of *Barthes Studies*, Claude Coste shows, following Antoine Compagnon, that the equation established by Barthes between modern poetry and terror can be read alongside the defence of rhetoric formulated in 1941 by Jean Paulhan in *The Flowers of Tarbes or, Terror in Literature*, trans. by Michael Syrotinski (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006). See Coste in this volume and Compagnon, *Les Antimodernes*, pp. 430-31. We must remember however that, despite their common attachment to rhetoric, Barthes and Paulhan held a very different conception of literature (see Compagnon, *Les Antimodernes*, pp. 425-31) and that there is no guarantee that Barthes had read *The Flowers of Tarbes* (Compagnon, *Les Antimodernes*, p. 430). The terror of which Barthes speaks sounds more like that mentioned by Maurice Blanchot in his 1948 article 'Literature and the Right to Death', published in *Critique*, the journal founded in 1946 by Bataille and to which Barthes was a regular contributor. See Maurice Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death', in *The Work of Fire*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 300-44.

⁵⁶ 'Would you like to justify the "exclusions" made by *Writing Degree Zero* (for example, Artaud, Bataille, Ponge...)?'. See Roland Barthes, 'Responses. Interview with *Tel Quel*', in *The Tel Quel Reader*, ed. by Patrick French and Roland-François Lack (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 249-267 (p. 253).

⁵⁷ Barthes, 'Responses', pp. 253-54.

⁵⁸ Whether or not we consider that Barthes 'ignored' Bataille intentionally, the very fact that they use similar categories in relation to poetry reveals in both cases the congruence of their views.

⁵⁹ Barthes, 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', p. 55. [Translator's note: the original French says 'ramenait le discours à des *stations* de mots', which is lost in the English translation: 'reduced discourse to words as static things'.]

⁶⁰ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 121.

⁶¹ In the introduction to *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes speaks of a 'Passion of writing'. Retracing the evolution of what he calls the 'phenomenon of concretion' (p. 10) which literature started at the beginning of the nineteenth century, he writes: 'From an initial non-existence in which thought, by a happy miracle, seemed to stand out against the backcloth of words, writing thus passed through all the stages of a progressive solidification; it was first the object of a gaze, then of creative action, and finally of murder, and has reached in our time a last metamorphosis, absence: in those neutral modes of writing, called here 'the degree zero of writing', we can easily discern a negative momentum,

and an inability to maintain within it time's flow, as if Literature, having tended for a hundred years to transmute its surface into form with no antecedents, could no longer find purity anywhere else but in the absence of all signs, finally proposing the realization of this Orphean dream: a writer without Literature. Colourless writing like Camus's, Blanchot's or Cayrol's for example, or conversational writing like Queneau's, represents the last episode of a *Passion of writing*, which recounts stage by stage the disintegration of bourgeois consciousness.' Roland Barthes, 'Introduction', in *Writing Degree Zero*, pp. 10-11 (my emphasis).

⁶² Bataille, *Inner Experience* p. 135.

⁶³ Barthes, 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', p. 55.

⁶⁴ Barthes, 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', pp. 57-58.

⁶⁵ See Bataille, *The Impossible*, 'Preface to the Second Edition', pp. 9-10.

⁶⁶ Georges Bataille, 'From the Stone Age to Jacques Prévert', in *Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, trans. by Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 137-54 (p. 137).

⁶⁷ Bataille, 'From the Stone Age to Jacques Prévert', p. 147.

⁶⁸ Bataille, 'From the Stone Age to Jacques Prévert', p. 134, note 5.

⁶⁹ Barthes, 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', p. 48, p. 49.

⁷⁰ Bataille, 'From the Stone Age to Jacques Prévert', p. 152.

⁷¹ Barthes, 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', pp. 48 and 55.

⁷² Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, p. 29 (my emphasis).

⁷³ Ernst, 'Autour d'*Histoire de l'œil*', p. 1034.

⁷⁴ Ernst, 'Notice de *L'Impossible*', in Bataille, *Romans et récits*, pp. 1211-32 (p. 1218).

⁷⁵ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 120.

⁷⁶ Yves Bonnefoy, *L'Improbable et autres essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 9.

⁷⁷ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 120.

⁷⁸ 'The Impossible', prose poem of 1873 in which Rimbaud evokes the foolishness of his childhood, the Orient, fundamental and eternal wisdom, as well as science; see Arthur Rimbaud, 'The Impossible', in *A Season in Hell / Illuminations*, trans. by Enid Rhodes Peschel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 92-97.

⁷⁹ Yves Bonnefoy, *Rimbaud* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), p. 174.

⁸⁰ Yves Bonnefoy, *Le Nuage rouge. Essais sur la poétique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1977), pp. 213-19 (p. 217).

⁸¹ Bataille had of course read Rimbaud whose work he quotes and comments in 'Autour de *L'Impossible*' where he sets out his wish to 'Reprendre l'analyse à partir de Rimbaud' [Restart the analysis from Rimbaud] (Bataille, *Romans et récits*, p. 580). See also *Inner Experience* where Bataille defends the necessity of continuing to say the impossible instead of letting oneself be swallowed up by it (pp. 207-208). In his preface to Bataille's collected poetry, Bernard Noël writes: 'The exemplary poet in his eyes is Rimbaud: this is the case because he chose

silence'; see Bernard Noël, 'Préface', in Georges Bataille, *L'Archangélique et autres poèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), pp. 7-19 (pp. 14-15).

⁸² For the published version of Rabaté's paper, see this volume of *Barthes Studies*.

⁸³ The title of Barthes's first book refers to the linguistic theory according to which a signifying opposition can be 'neutralised' by a third term called the 'neutral term or zero element'. See Roland Barthes, 'Writing and Silence', in *Writing Degree Zero*, p. 82. Barthes uses this theory metaphorically to demonstrate how to undermine assignments deployed by society's ideological codes. This theory took on an increasingly important role in his *œuvre*, developing into his work on the Neutral. See Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, trans. by Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

⁸⁴ Roland Barthes, 'Outcomes of the Text', in *The Rustle of Language*, pp. 238-49 (pp. 245-46).

⁸⁵ Ernst, 'Notice de *L'Impossible*', p. 1218.

⁸⁶ On non-knowledge, see Robert Sasso, *Georges Bataille: le système du non-savoir. Une ontologie du jeu* (Paris: Minuit, 1978).

⁸⁷ See Barthes, 'Outcomes of the Text', pp. 246-47.

⁸⁸ See Compagnon, 'Roland Barthes en saint Polycarpe', in *Les Antimodernes*, pp. 404-40.

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