Happiness, Joy and Sovereignty

Alex Celis

Introduction

In his 1969 film *Porcile*, Pier Paolo Pasolini tells the story of a young cannibal wandering around Mount Etna in Sicily. He roams alone, but little by little he gathers others around him—cannibals like himself—forming a community that kills and feeds on those they encounter along the way. When word of this group reaches a nearby village, the townspeople organise themselves and head up the mountain to hunt them down. Once captured, the criminals are brought back to the village, forced to kiss the cross, and sentenced. The punishment: *il supplizio dei cani*. To carry out the sentence, the bandits are taken back to Etna, tied to stakes, and abandoned to the fate of a starving pack of wild dogs.

Just before being tied down, fully aware of the horrendous death awaiting him, the young cannibal utters these words: *"I have killed my father, I have eaten human flesh, and I tremble with joy"* [Original version: *"Io ho ucciso mio padre, ho mangiato carne umana e tremo di gioia"*].

Why? Why, after confessing such terrible acts and just before being left at the mercy of wild dogs, does the young cannibal tremble with joy?

My purpose today is to discuss the philosophy of Georges Bataille and his unique conception of happiness. The scene I have just described will serve us, I hope, as an extreme example to understand the way Bataille connects happiness, eroticism, and a profound sense of freedom—what he calls sovereignty.

Part One

I

In his 1949 essay *"Happiness, Eroticism, and Literature"*, Bataille claims: *"Life offers man voluptuousness [volupté] as an incomparable good."* And he adds: voluptuousness is *"the perfect image of happiness [bonheur]."* [1]

What does it mean to say that voluptuousness is something life *offers us*?

It could mean that sensual pleasure is a kind of *offering*. Something we receive, not depending on us but on a set of circumstances in which our will dissolves into that totality we call life. Yet, even if it's true that many things beyond our control play a role in our search for voluptuousness, it's no less accurate to say that, quite often, this search unfolds as a voluntary act—with greater or lesser success.

So, let's say that voluptuousness is the outcome of our own choices and actions. As if it were something we select, the way we choose items from a supermarket shelf. And yet, nothing could

[1] Georges Bataille, *Œuvres Complètes XI*, « Le bonheur, l'érotisme et la littérature », (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 434-460. In Italian, *volupté* could be translated as *voluttuosità.*

be further from reality than imagining someone giving themselves over to sensual pleasure while in full command of their faculties. Usually, it is passion that moves us.

If we accept both options, we might say that voluptuousness is, at the same time, something that *happens to us* (without our expecting it) and *something we pursue* (sometimes desperately). And this is precisely Bataille's perspective. By identifying the ambiguous character of voluptuousness, he describes it as a dance. *"A man enters the dance,"* he writes, *"because the dance makes him dance."* [2]. What this image suggests is that, in voluptuousness—that is, *in the realm of eroticism*—something attracts us, but at the same time something within us drives us toward it.

What matters here is that it is in this very ambiguity that the happiness Bataille speaks of takes place.

II

In the passage we are discussing, Bataille also maintains that *voluptuousness is the image of happiness*. He does not mean that they are identical. Instead, one represents the other.

To grasp the nature of this representation, think of analogue photography—the only kind Bataille knew. Using Roland Barthes's language in *Camera Lucida*, we could say that photographic paper is the *medium* that receives an imprint. In the case of a portrait, for instance, the imprint is the reflection of light projected from a person's body, captured on the photosensitive paper.

In the case of voluptuousness, the *medium* is our body. It is in the body that voluptuousness leaves its mark, in the form of gestures and expressions of pleasure. Here, of course, the mark is not one of light but of the energy released in the erotic experience, fleetingly shaping our body.

Barthes emphasised the well-known fidelity with which photography represents its objects, as well as the endurance of that representation. Properly preserved, a photograph can last for decades, outliving both photographer and model.

Bataille would agree that voluptuousness, like photography, is a faithful representation of happiness—he calls it a *perfect image*. But since it is only a *fleeting* representation of an equally fleeting experience, *it does not last*. In this sense, we might say that voluptuousness stands at the opposite pole of Henri Cartier-Bresson's *decisive moment,* basically because for Bataille, happiness is not something that can be *captured*.

III

But Bataille complicates things further. Just after saying that voluptuousness is the perfect image of happiness, he adds that *voluptuousness contains within it the sense of misfortune*. To the extent that *"we cannot be happy without entering into the perspective of anguish."* [3]

How, then, could misfortune and anguish be connected to the happiness Bataille associates with eroticism?

---

[2] Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (New York: First City Lights edition, 1962), p. 115.
[3] Georges Bataille, *Œuvres Complètes XI*, « Le bonheur, l'érotisme et la littérature », (Op, cit), pp. 434-460. The translation is ours.

For Bataille, eroticism is essentially a waste of energy, of time. It is an irrational expenditure of resources for the sake of a futile experience that offers nothing beyond the instant in which it occurs. For that reason, happiness is removed from the logic of exchange, of goods and objects, and equally from any logic of ascent—from misery to happiness—or of enlightenment, as if happiness were the attainment of a fully realised existence.

Bataille distances happiness from all productive logic because work demands coherence, control, and results in exchange for future satisfaction, which reduces our existence to a means to an end. Eroticism, by contrast, is enjoyed in the present, without calculation, without use. It is pure expenditure, not an investment. Unlike work, which organises life according to rational, utilitarian principles, voluptuousness disrupts and subverts that order. Hence, it's violent, irrational, and rebellious. It's defiance of order, common sense, and law.

And yet, Bataille insists, we humans have tended to think of happiness in terms of acquisition, when in truth it belongs to the realm of *expenditure and risk.* [4]

IV

The corollary of all this is that Bataille's happiness can only be reached through acts of rebellion—when we transgress rules, when *we lose our heads*.

The image is not random. The figure of the headless body is one of Bataille's most potent symbols. In the first issue of the journal *Acéphale*, published in 1936, he defined the acephalic man as *"the figure of man become God, but a decapitated God. He no longer has a head; he no longer obeys."* [5] To lose one's head means to lose the centre of control and reason, which necessarily entails a challenge to authority and its rules.

And this is precisely what happens with the cannibal in Pasolini's film. For what are parricide and cannibalism if not transgressions of a rule, open challenges to authority?

Part Two

I

Eight years after publishing the essay *"Happiness, Eroticism, and Literature"*—that is, in 1957—Bataille released the book *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*. The editors of the English edition chose a title that can be understood as a kind of equation: eroticism = death + sensuality. This is something that does not appear in the original French edition, whose title is simply *L'érotisme,* and yet the equation remains accurate.

What this formula expresses is that eroticism results from a *copulative relation*—to put it in grammatical terms—between death and sensuality. Not opposition, but complementarity, accumulation, continuity. Which means that if, as Bataille explains, *"[t]he organs' plethora induces reactions alien to the normal run of human behavior" and the "rush of blood upsets the balance on which life is based"* [6], then something similar should happen when the *desire to kill* take hold of us [7].

---

[4] *Idem*. The translation is ours.
[5] The translation is ours. Original text : "Acéphale est la figure de l'homme devenu Dieu, mais un Dieu décapité. Il n'a plus de chef, il n'obéit plus » « Acéphale », n° 1, 24 juin 1936.
[6] Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (Op. cit.), p. 106.
[7] *Ibidem*, p. 47.

For Bataille, even if we live in a world organised by productive logic, focused on profit and guided by common sense, within each of us runs an *undercurrent of violence* [8]. This undercurrent manifests itself in the form of a single violent desire that can take on diverse forms of eroticism—from the most *ordinary* (though what is "ordinary" when we speak of eroticism?) to the most violent paraphilias, like the one named after the Marquis de Sade: *sadism*. For Bataille, Sade's work and life highlight a tormenting fact: *"the urge towards love, pushed to its limit, is an urge toward death."* [9]

In a 2010 interview with *Vice*, Issei Sagawa—the so-called Japanese cannibal, who also translated Bataille into Japanese—said: *"Georges Bataille believed that the kiss is the beginning of cannibalism, and I agree."* [10]. From the lovers' kiss to cannibalism, from the *petite mort*—as the French call orgasm—to actual death, there are only slippages, differences of degree in intensity.

II

Bataille grounds his conception of happiness on what he saw as a central fact: *the human being is the only creature conscious of death*. What matters for us is not how debatable this claim is—especially in light of recent research in animal and plant ethology—but rather what it means to be conscious of death. For Bataille, it does not mean possessing intellectual knowledge of death—for we do not know *what* death is—but a *sensitive knowledge*, revealed in the anguish provoked by death as an inexorable fact.

It is essential to clarify that for Bataille, death is not only literal, physical death. It is also the loss of limits that makes us reasonable beings, the descent into madness. It is the breakdown of the boundaries that define what we are in society, condemning us to a kind of social death. More broadly, death is the destruction of the limits that sustain life, whether in a real or symbolic sense. For Bataille, all forms of death are analogous, since they involve the same crisis of limits and their imminent collapse.

Precisely because we are aware of death, humans have imposed limits on themselves to keep violence under control. What are those limits? The education we receive as children, moral precepts, religious commandments, laws, as well as the definitions and relations that organise our world and ourselves—all these are meant to hold violence at bay, to make our earthly existence viable and safe. We might accept such conditions because the end justifies the means—but at what cost?

What Bataille perceived is that for every limit, there is a form of death. And Bataille liked to think about them all. Why? Because in each limit, he saw a form of control, an imposition, a definition of what *we must do and be*. Within this context, the importance of eroticism, which draws from the *violent undercurrent flowing* beneath us, is that it pushes us toward defiance, toward transgression—but at what cost?

We already know the price paid by the cannibal. Bataille paid his own, too. In Bataille's biography, written by Michel Surya, the author spares no detail in recounting Bataille's notorious excesses. His taste for parties, alcohol, brothels, and gambling caused him many torments, among them ill health and chronic financial insecurity. It was precisely in this *dance*, however, that Bataille found a happiness riddled with anguish and misfortune. And it was also

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 40.
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 42.
[10] "Vice Meets Issei Sagawa". It was published on November 18, 2010. Translated from the Spanish version: https://www.vice.com/es/article/whos-hungry-502-v3n1/

in his attempt to account for the erotic experience—that is, by taking eroticism and what it entails seriously—that he shaped one of the most radical bodies of thought of the last century.

III

In 1958, just one year after publishing *Eroticism*, Bataille gave his only television interview. There he stated:

> *"The man fascinated by eroticism is wholly in the situation of the child before his parents. He is afraid of what may happen to him and goes quite far to feel afraid […] he must feel fear. He must find himself again in that situation […] when he was constantly threatened with admonishment and even with being punished severely, in an unbearable, intolerable way."*

In adult life, authority certainly takes other forms. We find it in the State, in the forces of order that uphold the stability of the world of work and reason. And yet, despite these apparent differences, Bataille identifies the same structure in both childhood and adulthood. On one side, *feared authority*; on the other, *submissive beings*—but always carrying the potential for violence.

For Bataille, *"the sympathies and fears—and cowardice too, let us add—that determine the habitual conduct of men are diametrically opposed to the passions responsible for the sovereignty of the voluptuous."* [11]

The ordinary human response to death is cowardice. When possessed by fear, what stands before us is feared authority and, reflected in it, our submissive, servile, and frightened obedience. Under such conditions, we do not advance; we obey.

But when we are stirred and driven by that subterranean violence, we move beyond fear, and we disobey. It is the passion that makes us sovereign.

IV

For Bataille, what matters is not doing evil for its own sake; the value lies in the challenge that frees us from control, from limits, from the head. That is why, at its deepest level, *the pursuit of happiness reveals itself as the pursuit of a radical and terrifying form of freedom. A sovereign freedom.* And it is only by doing evil, by doing the forbidden in open defiance of authority—and beyond fear of punishment—that we attain sovereignty.

The sovereign is the one who has entered the dance, but also because the dance itself compelled him. Like happiness, sovereignty is not the result of a controlled action but something we *may or may not* find in the dance. In eroticism, there is always a risk: the risk of dancing and falling, the risk of playing and losing. The sovereign does not control the dance. This is why Bataille's sovereign is not a political figure seeking power and control. *"If power is something,"* he writes, *"sovereignty is nothing. If the powerful is someone, the sovereign is no one."* [12]

---

[11] Georges Bataille, *Œuvres Complètes XI*, « Le bonheur, l'érotisme et la littérature », (Op. cit.), pp. 434-460. The translation is ours.

[12] The translation is ours. « Si le pouvoir est quelque chose, la souveraineté n'est rien. Si le puissant est quelqu'un, le souverain n'est personne » Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes VIII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 40.

V

The cannibal in Pasolini's film could well represent the figure of the sovereign. He is the one who has entered the dance, without justification, without remorse. Among the group, he alone refuses to kiss the cross when brought to the village for judgment. And when he acknowledges his crimes, he is aware of both the laws he has transgressed and the consequences awaiting him. That is why he trembles and rejoices at once*: because in that joy lies the taste of sovereign freedom, mingled with the anguish of death.* In this sense, the cannibal embodies the maxim that Bataille carved in fire: *"eroticism is assenting to life even in death."* [13]

> *"Io ho ucciso mio padre, ho mangiato carne umana e tremo di gioia."*

These words capture what Bataille's eroticism can be under its most radical conditions. They illustrate, I believe, the great paradox contained in the equation *eroticism = death + sensuality*: *that in the very ground where life affirms itself and seeks to perpetuate itself, death reigns.*

Closing

Bataille never proposed a *new morality* to attain sovereignty or the most radical form of happiness. He never offered a path. How could it make sense that, after urging us to defy all prohibitions that restrict our existence, he should impose new prohibitions, new rules, new limits? What he did, instead, was to reveal to us that *undercurrent of violence* that belongs to us all, the one that can drive us to confront what we fear. But fear of what? In what form? This is something each of us knows—or will meet—in our own time, since the search is *intimate*. The only certainty is that happiness and sovereignty come only when we face that fear. Who could genuinely claim to be happy while knowing themselves to be a coward?

In a world structured by performance and utility, Bataille's proposal is provocative. Yet perhaps it is precisely in that discomfort that its critical power is revealed. What room remains today for a deep, useless happiness? For a sovereignty without calculation? And to what extent are we truly willing to confront the anguish that freedom demands?

[13] Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality,* (Op. cit.), p. 11.