

Spain and the Ritual of Transgression in Georges Bataille's *Histoire de l'Oeil*

ANNE C. McCONNELL

University of Colorado at Boulder

Georges Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil* explores the erotic desires and experiences of the narrator and his companion, Simone. At the age of sixteen, they discover a common fascination with "des choses sexuelles," as the narrator notices one day that Simone appears to feel a sort of erotic anguish akin to his own (89). Simone and the narrator develop a partnership as they test the various limits—sexual and otherwise—of their environment. Although Roland Barthes's influential reading of the text in his essay "La métaphore de l'oeil" discourages a thematic reading of Bataille's story in favor of a purely linguistic understanding of the erotic, I would like to bring our attention back to the representation of transgression in *Histoire de l'oeil*.¹ As critics of Barthes's essay have suggested, Barthes creates a hierarchy that places such great value on the linguistic that it fails to account for the way that Bataille stages his theory of transgression through the erotic

¹ In "La métaphore de l'oeil," Barthes shows that there are two metaphorical chains which run throughout *Histoire de l'oeil*—one involving spherical objects (the eye, an egg, the sun, bull testicles) and one involving liquids (tears, semen, urine, blood). Along these metaphorical chains, each object or liquid signifies the next and is signified by the object or liquid preceding it; no hierarchy in these chains exists because they operate in a circular manner, never truly designating a first or a last term (Barthes 240-241). Barthes continues by demonstrating the way that the two metaphorical chains sometimes cross in the text in a syntagmatic way, like *l'oeil pleure*. But Bataille complicates this crossing of the metaphorical chains by creating new, seemingly nonsensical sites for the interaction of the chains. For example, the narrator of *Histoire de l'oeil* describes Simone's interest in words, "Elle jouait gaiement sur les mots, disant tantôt *casser un oeil* ou *crever un oeuf*, tenant d'insoutenables raisonnements" (126). For Barthes, the erotic activity of the text signifies the free crossing of the metaphoric chains, as the characters explore various relationships between spherical objects and liquids. This nonsensical crossing of the metaphorical chains of the text transgresses common and rational uses of language. Barthes argues that *Histoire de l'oeil* operates at the surface level of the language and that the eroticism of the text works in function of the linguistic transgression.

encounters of his main characters.² When focusing upon the exploits of Simone and the narrator, it seems that the transgressive episodes in the novel open up a space for the proliferation of various signifiers that begin to take part in the kinds of linguistic games that Barthes reveals—or vice versa, if we choose to insist upon the language’s ability to provoke the erotic. Regardless, the linguistic and thematic modes of transgression emerge as inextricably linked, and perhaps even inseparable, or indistinguishable. The ludic, performative character of both the actions and words of Simone and the narrator point to a ritualized practice of rupturing the boundaries that order the functioning of language and behavior. It is precisely that sense of ritual that I would like to address. As the narrator and Simone flee to Spain in an effort to avoid an investigation over the death of their friend, Marcelle, their eroticism evolves into a highly ritualized practice that leads them to *see*, precisely by turning away. Bataille’s text associates Spain with the tradition of bullfighting, the searing rays of an inescapable sun, the sensuality of the winding streets, and the sacred objects of the Catholic Church. As the main characters experiment with this unfamiliar atmosphere, the performance of transgression—at the level of both the language and the representation—incites a continual return to the infinite moment of Marcelle, Granero, and Don Aminado’s sacrifice.

Throughout the first half of the text when Simone and the narrator remain at home in France, the looming presence of law-enforcing characters creates the sense that the teenagers’ scandalous activities simply confront societal values and ethical norms. In other words, one might interpret Simone and the narrator’s actions as extreme symptoms of a desire to rebel against socially accepted and imposed laws: the narrator steals a gun and

² See, for example, Michael Halley’s “...And a Truth for a Truth: Barthes on Bataille.” While Halley correctly notes that Barthes’s reading of *Histoire de l’oeil* silences the thematic importance of the text, he fails to develop how thematic and linguistic approaches might enrich and complicate one another.

runs away from his family, Simone takes advantage of a weak mother who prefers to turn a blind eye to the perverse interests of her daughter, and the two incite an orgy among friends that climaxes when angry parents burst onto the scene to retrieve their corrupted children. The narrator, rather than fleeing the chaos of the disrupted orgy, celebrates the moment.

Je ne cherchais nullement à fuir, à diminuer le scandale. J'allais tout au contraire ouvrir la porte: spectacle et joie inouïs! Qu'on imagine sans peine les exclamations, les cris, les menaces disproportionnées des parents entrant dans la chambre: la cour d'assise, le baignoire, l'échafaud étaient évoqués avec des cris incendiaires et des imprecations spasmodiques. Nos camarades eux-mêmes s'étaient mis à crier [...] Cette irruption des parents détruisit ce qui lui restait de raison. On dut avoir recours à la police. Tout le quartier fut témoin du scandale inouï. (100-101)

The narrator's comments suggest that he desires a scandalized audience for his sexually transgressive behavior, and furthermore, that the recognition of his actions as *criminal* merely adds to the pleasure. He fantasizes about the punishment and takes joy in the painful cries of the other shamed participants. At this point in the text, the narrator's sense of transgression appears to operate in relation to the limits and laws of society. The opposition of interdict and transgression that serves as a central idea throughout Bataille's *oeuvre* finds a preliminary means of expression in the law-breaking, scandalous behavior of Simone and the narrator. But we cannot stop here; Bataille's concept of transgression is hardly so simple.

Bataille does not reserve his understanding of transgression for a simple indifference to, or ignorance of, the law. In *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, he describes the *fête* as a communal practice of transgression where the participants continue to observe the presence of interdicts. Bataille writes:

[L]a fête marque le temps soudain de la levée des règles dont le poids était d'ordinaire supporté: la fête levait le couvercle de la marmite. Les interdits n'étaient pas tous suspendus, aucun ne l'était entièrement, mais ils l'étaient dans leur principe et dans certains de leurs effets. La fête était essentiellement le temps d'une licence relative. (*Lascaux* 40)

For Bataille, transgression coincides with ritual and arises out of anguish; while it passes the limit imposed by the interdict, it also affirms it because it depends upon the continued existence of this limit.³ Erotic activity serves as a central example in Bataille's work of a temporary lifting of the prohibitions and rules that order the useful functioning of the world. For Bataille, eroticism is a ritualized sexual practice that operates through transgression, always observing the limits it ruptures. Returning to *Histoire de l'oeil*, we may see a sort of erotic *fête* play out during the orgy that Simone and the narrator instigate in the first half of the text. But the drunkenness and ignorance of the participants and the interruption of the orgy by scandalized parents who retrieve their naughty children seem to render this scene juvenile, simple, or even profane. I do not mean to suggest that this moment in the text lacks significance, but, rather, it works to stage much more profound examples of ritualized transgression found in the second half of *Histoire de l'oeil*.

Bataille's novel pivots around Marcelle's suicide, and, I would suggest, posits this scene as a break between two distinct

³ In the essay "A Preface to Transgression," Michel Foucault captures Bataille's sense of transgression, writing, "Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire space in the line it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simply obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. But this relationship is considerably more complex: these elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties which are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them" (27).

parts of the text. The structure of the text itself presents a duality that mirrors the oppositional relation of interdict and transgression. Bataille plays with such oppositions only to reveal a complex relationship that undermines any binary understanding of the doubling that takes place; at the same time, he continually constructs relationships in pairs to affirm the sense that everything in the text exists in opposition to something else: law and crime, Simone and Marcelle, liquids and solid, round objects, France and Spain. Simone and the narrator are obsessed with Marcelle throughout *Histoire de l'oeil*, seemingly because she represents purity, unattainability, and corruptibility. Marcelle first appears in the novel only to be violated by Simone and the narrator:

[J]e vis paraître une ravissante jeune fille, Marcelle, la plus pure et la plus touchante de nos amis. Nous étions contractés dans nos attitudes au point de ne pouvoir bouger même un doigt, et ce fut soudain notre malheureuse amie qui s'effondra nous étant dégagés, nous nous jêtames sur ce corps abandonné. Simone troussa la jupe, arracha la culotte et me montra avec ivresse un nouveau cul aussi joli que le sien. (93)

After raping Marcelle and engaging her unwillingly in an orgy, Simone and the narrator discover that their friend has been sent to a psychiatric hospital. More unattainable than ever, Marcelle now exists behind literal bars that block her off from the protagonists. They spend time masturbating at Marcelle's prison-like window, attempt to free her from the sanitarium, and eventually make their way into her room; this last exploit results in Marcelle's plunge into madness and her subsequent suicide. While the narrator claims that "Marcelle morte était moins éloignée de moi que vivante" he notes soon after:

Marcelle n'était pas réductible aux mesures des autres. Les impulsions contraires qui disposèrent de nous ce jour-là se neutralisaient, nous laissant aveugles. Elles nous situaient bien loin

dans un monde où les gestes sont sans portée, comme des voix dans un espace, qui n'est pas sonore. (138-139)

There is a certain closeness to Marcelle in her death, even though she remains infinitely far away. The narrator recognizes his profound blindness to Marcelle while he becomes irritated by her lifeless, staring eyes. Marcelle's cold body and frozen gaze turn Simone and the narrator away; her impenetrability imposes upon them a feeling of isolation that can only find solace precisely, and paradoxically, in her unresponsive gaze.⁴ And so the protagonists flee to Spain, attempting to avoid the investigation certain to follow Marcelle's death. This flight, this turning away from Marcelle, makes possible a return to Marcelle—to her evasive gaze that can only be accessed through ritualized transgression in an unfamiliar space.

As the narrator and Simone explore the possibilities of a new country and culture, Marcelle is largely forgotten in favor of the ecstasies made possible by Spanish ritual and tradition. Of course, Sir Edmond, Simone's new companion, remains obsessed by the thought of Marcelle's suicide and requests that Simone reenact the scene for him. And Simone, as well, appears changed to the narrator, who observes:

Simone, après le suicide de Marcelle, changea profondément. Elle ne fixait que le vague, on aurait cru qu'elle était d'un autre monde. Il semblait que tout l'ennuyât. Elle ne demeurait liée à cette vie que par des orgasmes rares, mais beaucoup plus violents qu'auparavant. Il ne

⁴ In "De l'âge de Pierre à Jacques Prévert," Bataille discusses the importance of *seeing*, an issue that continually arises throughout his fiction. He writes, "il faut donner aux mots le pouvoir qui *ouvre les yeux*" (19). Barthes' thesis about transgressive language in Bataille certainly responds to this idea, but the symbol of the eye in Bataille's oeuvre also becomes significant. See Foucault's "A Preface to Transgression" for an insightful discussion on the paradoxical symbol of the eye. In *Histoire de l'oeil*, the recurring image of Marcelle's eye, along with the narrator's ability to *see* her, clearly engages the theme of vision, which I try to invoke throughout this article.

différait pas moins des joies habituelles que le rire des sauvages, par exemple, ne diffère de celui des civilisés. (142)

After witnessing Marcelle's suicide, it seems as if Simone continues to chase after her on a sort of Orphic quest towards an unreachable goal. The physical rapture of sex brings her back to the world, but one has the sense that the violence of this experience reflects Simone's profound relationship with death. Yet, after these initial comments by the narrator, Marcelle recedes into the distance, becoming a ghostly memory of the past. Simone and the narrator immerse themselves in the new possibilities of the Spanish landscape, and we observe an evolved sense of transgression that operates in relation to this unfamiliar, ritualized space.

The three travelers—Simone, the narrator, and Sir Edmond—first spend time in Madrid. We learn that they abduct a prostitute in order to rape her in a pig sty and that Simone experiences violent fits when taking part in such activities. It is clear that something strange has come over Simone, but the narrator does not appear to comprehend the change in his friend. In Madrid, Simone is especially drawn to the spectacle of bullfighting. The narrator explains:

Trois moments des courses la captivaient: le premier, quand la bête débouche en bolide du toril ainsi qu'un gros rat; le second, quand ses cornes plongent jusqu'au crâne dans le flanc d'une jument; le troisième, quand l'absurde jument galope à travers l'arène, rue à contre temps et lâche entre ses jambes un paquet d'entrailles aux ignobles couleurs, blanc, rose et gris nacré. Quand la vessie crevant lâchait d'un coup sur le sable une flaque d'urine de jument, ses narines tremblaient. (143).

The way that the narrator describes this scene evokes the ritualized practices of the Spanish bullfight; he separates the event into distinct steps and details that create a sense of anticipation in the spectator who always knows what will happen next. Strangely, at

this moment in the text, he is referring simply to the interaction of the bull and the mare, which would suggest that this particular part of the spectacle results from bestial instinct rather than staged ritual.⁵ Yet, at least from the perspective of the narrator and Simone, the actions of the animals follow a certain pattern. The bull emerges from the bullpen, it sinks its horns into the mare, and the mare gallops away as her insides fall from her body. The narrator's description is clearly sexual, but it also presents this interaction of bull and mare as an artistic performance—one that enraptures Simone precisely because of the sacrificial ritual that extracts her from any sort of rational, useful understanding of the world. The mare is sacrificed for Simone, so that her gaze may try impossibly to perceive the invisible passage from life into death.

The intensity rises with the introduction of the toreador into the arena. While the toreador's interaction with the bull also follows a ritualized pattern, much of the excitement stems from the possibility that the expected pattern will be broken. The narrator fantasizes about the desire to, “voir l'un des monstrueux coups de corne qu'un taureau précipité sans cesse avec colère frappe aveuglement dans le vide des étoffes de couleur, jeter en l'air le torero” (143-144). This desire results in the narrator and Simone's continued attendance at the corrida, where they eventually witness the brutal death of the young matador, Granero. The narrator notes the importance of the atmosphere, making frequent comments about the Spanish sun and the seemingly liquid rays that emanate from it. He explains:

Tout a lieu sous le ciel torride d'Espagne, nullement coloré et dur comme on l'imagine, mais solaire et d'une luminosité éclatante—molle et trouble—irréelle parfois, tant l'éclat de la lumière et l'intensité de la chaleur évoquent la liberté des sens, exactement l'humidité molle de la chair. (146)

⁵ We may note also that Bataille sees transgression as a return to our bestial nature, but, paradoxically, depends upon the awareness of the system of interdicts that govern society and suppress this animalistic state. See *Lascaux* (36-41).

There is something about the penetrating Spanish sun, the cultural ritual of bullfighting, the community of spectators who secretly hopes for the goring of a matador, and the patterned performance of sacrifice that sets the stage for Granero's death. The narrator brings special attention to this setting and even suggests that it is intimately connected with the events that take place.

After Granero slays the first bull he faces, Sir Edmond retrieves the testicles of the bull for Simone. According to legend, the matadors sometimes removed the testicles of a slain bull in order to eat them, announcing a certain mastery over the defeated animal. This tradition fascinates Simone, and when confronted with the testicles that Sir Edmond brings, she becomes nearly paralyzed in ecstasy and terror.

Simone s'était agenouillée devant l'assiette, qui lui donnait un embarras sans précédent. Sachant ce qu'elle voulait, ne sachant comment faire, elle parut exaspérée. Je pris l'assiette, voulant qu'elle s'assît. Elle la retira de mes mains, la remit sur la dalle.

Sir Edmond et moi craignons d'attirer l'attention. La course languissait. Me penchant à l'oreille de Simone, je lui demandai ce qu'elle voulait:

—Idiot, répondit-elle, je veux m'asseoir nue sur l'assiette.

—Impossible, dis-je, assieds-toi.

The most striking aspect of this scene involves the concern that the three characters show for propriety. Decency and proper manners hardly appear even to cross the minds of Simone or the narrator at any point proceeding this moment at the bullfight. Yet both, when presented with Simone's desire to sit on the plate of testicles, acknowledge the serious offense that such an act would represent. This scene clearly recalls the initial erotic scene in *Histoire de l'oeil* where Simone sits in a plate of milk while the narrator masturbates; it also recalls the sexual games that the two play with eggs. The difference here, at the corrida, concerns two distinct

issues: first, the metaphorical chains of liquids and spherical objects cross one another (as Barthes locates as the premise of the transgression in novel); second, the erotic desire situates itself in a community of people participating as an audience to ritual sacrifice under the disorienting rays of the Spanish sun. Within this setting, the overwhelming sense of the interdicts that govern appropriate behavior during the ritual profoundly affect Simone and the narrator. They recognize and respect the structure of the ritual, and this agonizing awareness will eventually set the stage for the transgressive behavior that clearly surpasses any activities that have preceded this moment.

Although the narrator describes the ensuing fights as tiring and slow in the heat of the oppressive sun, Simone maintains a certain vigilance and even appears to foresee the goring of Granero. At the exact moment that the bull thrusts his horns into Granero, Simone inserts one of the bull testicles from her cherished plate inside of her. The sense of prohibition that kept her from fulfilling this desire at an earlier time enhances the intensity of the transgression. In addition, the coinciding of Simone's transgression and Granero's sacrifice produces a moment of great significance.

Deux globes de même grandeur et consistance s'étaient animés de mouvements contraires et simultanés. Un testicule blanc de taureau avait pénétré la chair "rose et noire" de Simone; un oeil était sorti de la tête du jeune homme. Cette coïncidence liée en même temps qu'à la mort à une sorte de liquéfaction urinaire du ciel, un moment, me rendit Marcelle. Il me sembla, dans cet insaisissable instant, la toucher. (151)

In this passage, we may first note the interaction of the two metaphorical chains when considering the various liquids and spherical objects that engage one another. Moreover, this particular atmosphere allows for a proliferation of the terms in the chains and the way that they interact. The narrator describes the wetness of the

sky that appears to void its heat in streams of urine, just at the moment when Simone inserts the testicle into her flesh and Granero's bloody eye shoots from his head with the seeming force of an ejaculation. Clearly, the complexity on both a linguistic and a representational level reaches new heights. Furthermore, the narrator mentions Marcelle at this moment even though, at a literal level, she has nothing to do with what takes place at the corrida. Yet, she is intimately connected to this instant of sacrificial death; Granero's extracted eye seems to contain the gaze of Marcelle. And the narrator, who remained so distant from Marcelle in her unattainability, feels that he can touch her, and perhaps even see her in the dead eye of the sacrificed matador. Somehow the narrator has gained a certain access to Marcelle; after deliberately fleeing her and the consequences of her death, he returns to her infinite gaze through the ritualized death of Granero.

After the experience at the bullfight, Simone, the narrator, and Sir Edmond leave Madrid and head towards Seville. It seems that nothing could reach the climax of witnessing Granero's death, but the narrator describes Seville in a way that suggests that the atmosphere remains intensely erotic, and far from mundane.

Nous trouvâmes dans le sud une lumière, une chaleur plus déliquescente, encore, qu'à Madrid. Un excès de fleurs dans les rues finissait d'énerver les sens.

Simone allait nue, sous une robe légère, blanche, laissant voir à travers la soie la ceinture et même, en certaines positions, la fourrure. Les choses concouraient dans cette ville à faire d'elle un brûlant délice. Souvent, par les rues, je vis à son passage une queue tendre la culotte. (152)

Clearly, the narrator focuses on Simone and her transparent dress, but one has the sense that she appears this way in the context of her environment. The narrator explains that walking the streets of Seville strikes him as a continual process of making love, as his heightened senses and the excesses of the environment keep him

perpetually aroused. This contrasts the setting of the first half of *Histoire de l'oeil* where Simone and the narrator are forced to create erotic activities in an apparently boring and unengaging world. The Spanish cities offer new possibilities and seem innately to possess an overwhelming sensuality that arises from this unfamiliar culture. Even though the protagonists have left the ritual of the bullfight, the simple activity of wandering through the streets of Seville maintains the sense of eroticism not found in the banality and mundaneness of daily life.

The final scene with Don Aminado in the church contains the final, and most profound, return to Marcelle. Similar to the way that Simone and the narrator feel during the ritual of the bullfight, they initially respect certain prohibitions while in the setting of the church. For example, Simone appears to recognize the inappropriateness of her urine-soaked dress when entering a church, and she also refuses the narrator when he offers his penis to her outside of the confessional. Of course, these rather small concessions might seem insignificant, but they demonstrate a certain awareness of the limits. As the scene unfolds, Simone and the narrator proceed to violate Don Aminado and abuse several instruments of Catholic ritual: the ciborium, the chalice, and the host, for example. The church parallels the bullfight precisely in its association with ritualized performance, cultural tradition, and the importance of sacrifice. Yet, Simone and the narrator take their experience one step further in this case; rather than simply witnessing the death of the sacrificial victim as they did Granero, they become active participants in the sacrifice. The description of Don Aminado's violation and murder contains more explicit detail and development than any of the other scenes of eroticism in *Histoire de l'oeil*. As Sir Edmond gives orders, the narrator tightens his grip on the priest's throat, and Simone reaches her climax at the last breath of her victim. Upon Don Aminado's death, Simone and the narrator's attention turns to his glazed-over

eye. Simone requests that Sir Edmond remove the eye so that she can play with it. The narrator observes:

Mes yeux, me semblait-il, étaient érectiles à force d'horreur; je vis, dans la vulve velue de *Simone*, l'oeil bleu pale de *Marcelle* me regarder en pleurant des larmes d'urine. Des trainées de foutre dans le poil fumant achevaient de donner à cette vision un caractère de tristesse douloureuse. Je maintenais les cuisses de Simone ouvertes: l'urine brûlante ruisselait sous l'oeil sur la cuisse la plus basse. (168)

The narrator describes his eyes as “erect” as he perceives Marcelle’s eye crying tears of urine. At this point in the text, the terms of the two metaphorical chains interact so freely that any logical understanding of what is taking place becomes pointless. We can simply recognize the almost chaotic merging of liquids and objects that achieve new relationships and signification by rupturing any sense of order. This would seem to represent the climax of what Barthes identifies as the transgression of the text, and I agree with such a conclusion. But I also believe that the return of Marcelle’s eye points to much more than a substitution of one object for another—of Marcelle’s eye from Don Aminado’s. The intensity of the ritualized transgression that takes place on several levels—linguistic, religious, and otherwise—opens up a space from which Marcelle’s gaze emanates. The narrator perceives Marcelle as she recedes from him in her moment of death, and the sacrifice of Don Aminado allows for a return to this infinite moment. Marcelle emerges as a shade from the depths of an inaccessible space, veiled by the eye of a tortured priest.

Figuring Bataille’s staging of transgression in *Histoire de l’oeil* from a single perspective neglects the complexity of a richly layered text. One of the most interesting structuring techniques Bataille uses involves the formation of oppositions that play off one another and ultimately reveal a paradoxical interdependence. We can see this at the level of language and representation, interdict and transgression, and the two “halves” of the book that

surround Marcelle's suicide. Concerning this last opposition, one notes the space that opens up in the ritualistic and unfamiliar environment of Spain. This simple geographical structuring sets up a crossing over from the mundane and oppressive environment of France to the rituals of bullfighting and Catholicism—the latter providing a setting for the complex unfolding of transgression and the return to the invisible and unseeing eye of Marcelle.

WORKS CITED

- Barthes, Roland. "La métaphore de l'oeil." *Essais critiques*. Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1964.
- Bataille, Georges. "De l'âge de Pierre à Jacques Prévert." *Oeuvres Complètes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1988.
- . *L'érotisme*. Paris: Minuit, 1957.
- . "Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art." *Oeuvres Complètes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1988.
- . *Madame Edwarda, Le mort, Histoire de l'oeil*. Paris: Editions 10/18, 1973.
- Foucault, Michel. "A Preface to Transgression." *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson. Malden: Blackwell, 1998.
- Halley, Michael. "...And a Truth for a Truth: Barthes on Batailles." *On Bataille*. Ed. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons. Albany: SUNY Press, 1995.