

FROTISM

DEATH & SENSUALITY

GEORGES BATAILLE

Translated by
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FOREWORD

The human spirit is prey to the most astounding impulses. Man goes constantly in fear of himself. His erotic urges terrify him. The saint turns from the voluptuary in alarm; she does not know that his unacknowledgeable passions and her own are really one.

The cohesion of the human spirit whose potentialities range from the ascetic to the voluptuous may nevertheless be sought.

The point of view I adopt is one that reveals the co-ordination of these potentialities. I do not seek to identify them with each other but I endeavour to find the point where they may converge beyond their mutual exclusiveness.

I do not think that man has much chance of throwing light on the things that terrify him before he has dominated them. Not that he should hope for a world in which there would be no cause for fear, where eroticism and death would be on the level of a mechanical process. But man can surmount the things that frighten him and face them squarely.

In doing so, he can be rid of the curious misunderstanding of his own nature that has characterised him until now. All I am doing, is to follow a path where others have trodden before me.

Long before the publication of the present work, eroticism had become a subject that a serious man could study without forfeiting his good name. For many years men have been discussing eroticism fearlessly and at length, so what I have to say in my turn is familiar enough. My sole intention has been to seek for cohesion amid the variety of given facts. I have tried to give a clear picture of a group of behaviour patterns.

By seeking to present a coherent whole I am working in contradiction to scientific method. Science studies one question by itself. It accumulates the results of specialised

research. I believe that eroticism has a significance for mankind that the scientific attitude cannot reach. Eroticism cannot be discussed unless man too is discussed in the process. In particular, it cannot be discussed independently of the history of religions.

Hence the chapters of this book do not all deal with the facts of sex directly. I have neglected other questions besides that will sometimes seem no less important than those I have discussed.

I have subordinated all else to the search for a standpoint that brings out the fundamental unity of the human spirit.

The present work consists of two parts. In the first I have made a systematic survey of the various interdependent aspects of human life as they appear from the standpoint of eroticism.

In the second I have brought together a number of independent studies where the same assertion is considered, namely, that the unity of the whole is indisputable. The aim is the same in both parts. The chapters of the first part and the various independent studies forming the second have been under way concurrently from the end of the war to the present time (1957). This method has one drawback, however; I have not been able to avoid repetition. More particularly in the first part I have sometimes reviewed from a different point of view themes dealt with in the second part. This procedure is excusable in that it reflects the general tone of the work, since each separate issue entails consideration of the whole question. One way of looking at this book is to regard it as a general view of human life seen from constantly changing standpoints.

With the presentation of this over-all picture as my starting point, nothing has intrigued me more than the idea of once more coming across the image that haunted my adolescence, the image of God. This is certainly not a return to the faith of my youth. But human passion has only one object in this forlorn world of ours. The paths we take towards it may vary. The object itself has a great variety of

aspects, but we can only make out their significance by seeing how closely they are knit at the deepest level.

Let me stress that in this work flights of Christian religious experience and bursts of erotic impulses are seen to be part and parcel of the same movement.

I should not have been able to write this book if I had had to work out the problems confronting me on my own. I should like to mention here that my own endeavours have been preceded by *Le Miroir de la Tauromachie* by Michel Leiris, in which eroticism is envisaged as an experience wedded to life itself; not as an object of scientific study, but more deeply, as an object of passion and poetic contemplation. This book is dedicated to Michel Leiris particularly because of this book of his, the *Miroir*, written just before the war. I wish to thank him besides for the help he gave me when I was ill and unable myself to seek out the photographs which accompany my text.

May I also say how touched I have been by the earnest and active support of a great many friends who undertook in the same way to find relevant documents for me. In this context I should like to mention Jacques-André Boissard, Henri Dussat, Théodore Fraenkel, Max-Pol Fouchet, Jacques Lacan, André Masson, Roger Parry, Patrick Waldberg and Blanche Wiehn. I do not know personally M. Falk, Robert Giraud nor the fine photographer Pierre Verger to whom I am also indebted for some of the documentation. I am sure that the very subject matter of this work and the feeling of urgency that the book attempts to meet are important reasons for their whole-hearted co-operation.

I have not yet mentioned the name of my oldest friend Alfred Métraux, but I must acknowledge my great debt to him in general as I thank him for his help on this particular occasion. Not only did he introduce me to the field of anthropology and history of religions in the years that followed the first world war, but I have derived infinite assurance from his uncontested authority in my treatment of the fundamental issues of taboo and transgression.

INTRODUCTION

Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death. Strictly speaking, this is not a definition, but I think the formula gives the meaning of eroticism better than any other. If a precise definition were called for, the starting-point would certainly have to be sexual reproductive activity, of which eroticism is a special form. Sexual reproductive activity is common to sexual animals and men, but only men appear to have turned their sexual activity into erotic activity. Eroticism, unlike simple sexual activity, is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal: reproduction and the desire for children. From this elementary definition let us now return to the formula I proposed in the first place: eroticism is assenting to life even in death. Indeed, although erotic activity is in the first place an exuberance of life, the object of this psychological quest, independent as I say of any concern to reproduce life, is not alien to death. Herein lies so great a paradox, that without further ado I shall try to give some semblance of justification to my affirmation with the following two quotations:

"Secrecy is, alas, only too easy," remarks de Sade, *"and there is not a libertine some little way gone in vice, who does not know what a hold murder has on the senses . . ."*

And it was the same writer who made the following statement, which is even more remarkable:

"There is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image."

I spoke of a semblance of justification. De Sade's notion, indeed, might stem from an aberration. In any case, even if it is true that the tendency it refers to is not uncommon in human nature, this is a matter of aberrant sensuality. However, there does remain a connection between death and sexual excitement. The sight or thought of murder can give

rise to a desire for sexual enjoyment, to the neurotic at any rate. We cannot just pretend that a state of neurösis is the cause of this connection. I personally believe that there is a truth revealed in de Sade's paradox. This truth extends far beyond the confines of vice; I believe that it may even be the basis of our images of life and death. I believe, in fact, that we cannot reflect on existence without reference to this truth. As often as not, it seems to be assumed that man has his being independently of his passions. I affirm, on the other hand, that we must never imagine existence except in terms of these passions.

Now I must apologise for using a philosophical consideration as a starting-point for my argument.

Generally speaking, philosophy is at fault in being divorced from life. But let me reassure you at once. The consideration I am introducing is linked with life in the most intimate way: it refers to sexual activity considered now in the light of reproduction. I said that reproduction was opposed to eroticism, but while it is true that eroticism is defined by the mutual independence of erotic pleasure and reproduction as an end, the fundamental meaning of reproduction is none the less the key to eroticism.

Reproduction implies the existence of *discontinuous* beings.

Beings which reproduce themselves are distinct from one another, and those reproduced are likewise distinct from each other, just as they are distinct from their parents. Each being is distinct from all others. His birth, his death, the events of his life may have an interest for others, but he alone is directly concerned in them. He is born alone. He dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity.

This gulf exists, for instance, between you, listening to me, and me, speaking to you. We are attempting to communicate, but no communication between us can abolish our fundamental difference. If you die, it is not my death. You and I are *discontinuous* beings.

But I cannot refer to this gulf which separates us without

feeling that this is not the whole truth of the matter. It is a deep gulf, and I do not see how it can be done away with. None the less, we can experience its dizziness together. It can hypnotise us. This gulf is death in one sense, and death is vertiginous, death is hypnotising.

It is my intention to suggest that for us, discontinuous beings that we are, death means continuity of being. Reproduction leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play their continuity; that is to say, it is intimately linked with death. I shall endeavour to show, by discussing reproduction and death, that death is to be identified with continuity, and both of these concepts are equally fascinating. This fascination is the dominant element in eroticism.

I am about to deal with a basic disturbance, with something that turns the established order topsy-turvy. The facts I shall take as a starting-point, will at first seem neutral, objective, scientific and apparently indistinguishable from other facts which no doubt do concern us, but remotely, and without bringing to bear any factors which touch us closely. This apparent insignificance is misleading but I shall take it first at its face value, just as if I did not intend to let the cat out of the bag the next minute.

You know that living creatures reproduce themselves in two ways; elementary organisms through asexual reproduction, complex ones through sexual reproduction.

In asexual reproduction, the organism, a single cell, divides at a certain point in its growth. Two nuclei are formed and from one single being two new beings are derived. But we cannot say that one being has given birth to a second being. The first being has disappeared. It is to all intents and purposes dead, in that it does not survive in either of the two beings it has produced. It does not decompose in the way that sexual animals do when they die, but it ceases to exist. It ceases to exist in so far as it was discontinuous. But at one stage of the reproductive process there was continuity. There is a point at which the original

one becomes two. As soon as there are two, there is again discontinuity for each of the beings. But the process entails *one instant* of continuity between the two of them. The first one dies, but as it dies there is this moment of continuity between the two new beings.

The same continuity cannot occur in the death of sexual creatures, where reproduction is in theory independent of death and disappearance. But sexual reproduction, basically a matter of cellular division just like asexual reproduction, brings in a new kind of transition from discontinuity to continuity. Sperm and ovum are to begin with discontinuous entities, but they *unite*, and consequently a continuity comes into existence between them to form a new entity from the death and disappearance of the separate beings. The new entity is itself discontinuous, but it bears within itself the transition to continuity, the fusion, fatal to both, of two separate beings.

Insignificant as these changes may seem, they are yet fundamental to all forms of life. In order to make them clear, I suggest that you try to imagine yourself changing from the state you are in to one in which your whole self is completely doubled; you cannot survive this process since the doubles you have turned into are essentially different from you. Each of these doubles is necessarily distinct from you as you are now. To be truly identical with you, one of the doubles would have to be actually continuous with the other, and not distinct from it as it would have become. Imagination boggles at this grotesque idea. If, on the other hand, you imagine a fusion between yourself and another human being similar to that between the sperm and the ovum, you can quite easily picture the change we are talking about.

These broad conceptions are not intended to be taken as precise analogies. It is a far cry from ourselves with our self-awareness to the minute organisms in question. I do warn you, however, against the habit of seeing these tiny creatures from the outside only, of seeing them as things which do not exist inside themselves. You and I exist inside

ourselves. But so does a dog, and in that case so do insects and creatures smaller still. However far we may go down the scale of organisms from complex to primitive we cannot draw a line between those which exist inside themselves and those which do not. This inside existence cannot be a result of greater complexity. If the tiniest creatures did not have their own kind of inside existence to begin with, no increase in complexity could endow them with it.

The distance between these diminutive beings and ourselves is nevertheless considerable, and the bewildering feats of imagination I proposed could never hold any precise meaning. All I meant was to give a clear idea through a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of those infinitesimal changes at the very foundations of our life.

On the most fundamental level there are transitions from continuous to discontinuous or from discontinuous to continuous. We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is. This nostalgia has nothing to do with knowledge of the basic facts I have mentioned. A man can suffer at the thought of not existing in the world like a wave lost among many other waves, even if he knows nothing about the division and fusion of simple cells. But this nostalgia is responsible for the three forms of eroticism in man.

I intend to speak of these three type of eroticism in turn, to wit, physical, emotional and religious. My aim is to show that with all of them the concern is to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity.

It is easy to see what is meant by physical or emotional eroticism, but religious eroticism is a less familiar notion. The term is ambiguous anyway in that all eroticism has a

sacramental character, but the physical and the emotional are to be met with outside the religious sphere proper, while the quest for continuity of existence systematically pursued beyond the immediate world signifies an essentially religious intention. In its familiar Western form religious eroticism is bound up with seeking after God's love, but the East, intent on a similar quest, is not necessarily committed to the idea of a personal God. This idea is absent from Buddhism in particular. I wish now to stress the significance of what I have been trying to say. I have been insisting on a concept that at first glance may have seemed inappropriate and unnecessarily philosophical, that of continuity of being as opposed to discontinuity of being. At the point we have now reached I insist again that without this concept the broader meaning of eroticism and the unity underlying its forms would escape us.

My aim in sidetracking into a disquisition on the discontinuity and continuity of minute organisms engaged on reproductive activity has been to pierce the darkness that has always beset the vast field of eroticism. Eroticism has its own secrets and I am trying to probe them now. Would that be possible without first getting at the very core of existence?

I had to admit just now that it might seem irrelevant and pointless to consider the reproduction of minute organisms. They lack the feeling of elemental violence which kindles every manifestation of eroticism. In essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation. But let us ponder on the transitions from discontinuity to continuity of these minute organisms. If we relate such transitions to our own experience, it is clear that there is most violence in the abrupt wrench out of discontinuity. The most violent thing of all for us is death which jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being. We blench at the thought that the separate individuality within us must suddenly be snuffed out. We do not find it easy to link the feelings of tiny creatures engaged in reproduction with our own, but however minute the organisms may be,

we cannot visualise their coming into existence without doing violence to our imagination: existence itself is at stake in the transition from discontinuity to continuity. Only violence can bring everything to a state of flux in this way, only violence and the nameless disquiet bound up with it. We cannot imagine the transition from one state to another one basically unlike it without picturing the violence done to the being called into existence through discontinuity. Not only do we find in the uneasy transitions of organisms engaged in reproduction the same basic violence which in physical eroticism leaves us gasping, but we also catch the inner meaning of that violence. What does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners?—a violation bordering on death, bordering on murder?

The whole business of eroticism is to strike to the inmost core of the living being, so that the heart stands still. The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity. Dissolution—this expression corresponds with *dissolute life*, the familiar phrase linked with erotic activity. In the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive, female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity. But for the male partner the dissolution of the passive partner means one thing only: it is paving the way for a fusion where both are mingled, attaining at length the same degree of dissolution. The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives.

Stripping naked is the decisive action. Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self. Bodies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a

recognised and stable individuality. Through the activity of organs in a flow of coalescence and renewal, like the ebb and flow of waves surging into one another, the self is dispossessed, and so completely that most creatures in a state of nakedness, for nakedness is symbolic of this dispossession and heralds it, will hide; particularly if the erotic act follows, consummating it. Stripping naked is seen in civilizations where the act has full significance if not as a simulacrum of the act of killing, at least as an equivalent shorn of gravity. In antiquity the destitution (or destruction) fundamental to eroticism was felt strongly and justified linking the act of love with sacrifice. When I come to religious eroticism which is concerned with the fusion of beings with a world beyond everyday reality I shall return to the significance of sacrifice. Here and now, however, I must emphasise that the female partner in eroticism was seen as the victim, the male as the sacrificer, both during the consummation losing themselves in the continuity established by the first destructive act.

This comparison is partially invalidated by the slight degree of destruction involved. It would be only just true to say that if the element of violation, violence even, which gives it its destructive character is withdrawn, this erotic activity reaches its climax far less easily. If it were truly destructive, though, if a killing actually took place, the quality of the erotic act would be no more enhanced thereby than through the roughly equivalent procedure just described. When the Marquis de Sade in his novels defines murder as a pinnacle of erotic excitement, that only implies that the destructive element pushed to its logical conclusion does not necessarily take us out of the field of eroticism proper. Eroticness always entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns, I repeat, of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals. But in eroticism less even than in reproduction our discontinuous existence is not condemned, in spite of de Sade; it is only jolted. It has to be jarred and shaken to its foundations. Continuity is what we are after,

but generally only if that continuity which the death of discontinuous beings can alone establish is not the victor in the long run. What we desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain. De Sade's aberration exceeds that limit. Some few people find it tempting and occasionally some even go the whole way. But for the general run of normal men such irrevocable acts only indicate the extremes of practices in the first stages in which everyone must to some extent indulge. The stirrings within us have their own fearful excesses; the excesses show which way these stirrings would take us. They are simply a sign to remind us constantly that death, the rupture of the discontinuous individualities to which we cleave in terror, stands there before us more real than life itself.

Physical eroticism has in any case a heavy, sinister quality. It holds on to the separateness of the individual in a rather selfish and cynical fashion. Emotional eroticism is less constrained. Although it may appear detached from material sensuality it often derives from it, being merely an aspect made stable by the reciprocal affection of the lovers. It can be divorced from physical eroticism entirely, for the enormous diversity of human kind is bound to contain exceptions of this sort. The fusion of lovers' bodies persists on the spiritual plane because of the passion they feel, or else this passion is the prelude to physical fusion. For the man in love, however, the fervour of love may be felt more violently than physical desire is. We ought never to forget that in spite of the bliss love promises its first effect is one of turmoil and distress. Passion fulfilled itself provokes such violent agitation that the happiness involved, before being a happiness to be enjoyed, is so great as to be more like its opposite, suffering. Its essence is to substitute for their persistent discontinuity a miraculous continuity between two beings. Yet this continuity is chiefly to be felt in the anguish of desire, when it is still inaccessible, still an impotent, quivering yearning. A tranquil feeling of secure happiness can only mean the calm which follows the long storm of suffering, for it is more

likely that lovers will not meet in such timeless fusion than that they will; the chances are most often against their contemplating in speechless wonder the continuity that unites them.

The likelihood of suffering is all the greater since suffering alone reveals the total significance of the beloved object. Possession of the beloved object does not imply death, but the idea of death is linked with the urge to possess. If the lover cannot possess the beloved he will sometimes think of killing her; often he would rather kill her than lose her. Or else he may wish to die himself. Behind these frenzied notions is the glimpse of a continuity possible through the beloved. Only the beloved, so it seems to the lover—because of affinities evading definition which match the union of bodies with that of souls—only the beloved can in this world bring about what our human limitations deny, a total blending of two beings, a continuity between two discontinuous creatures. Hence love spells suffering for us in so far as it is a quest for the impossible, and at a lower level, a quest for union at the mercy of circumstance. Yet it promises a way out of our suffering. We suffer from our isolation in our individual separateness. Love reiterates: "If only you possessed the beloved one, your soul sick with loneliness would be one with the soul of the beloved." Partially at least this promise is a fraud. But in love the idea of such a union takes shape with frantic intensity, though differently perhaps for each of the lovers. And in any case, beyond the image it projects, that precarious fusion, allowing as it does for the survival of the individual, may in fact come to pass. That is beside the point; this fusion, precarious yet profound, is kept in the forefront of consciousness by suffering as often as not, by the threat of separation.

We ought to take account of two conflicting possibilities.

If the union of two lovers comes about through love, it involves the idea of death, murder or suicide. This aura of death is what denotes passion. On a lower level than this implied violence—a violence matched by the separate

individual's sense of continuous violation—the world of habit and shared egotism begins, another mode of discontinuity, in fact. Only in the violation, through death if need be, of the individual's solitariness can there appear that image of the beloved object which in the lover's eyes invests all being with significance. For the lover, the beloved makes the world transparent. Through the beloved appears something I shall refer to in a moment in speaking of religious or sacred eroticism, to wit, full and limitless being unconfined within the trammels of separate personalities, continuity of being, glimpsed as a deliverance through the person of the beloved. There is something absurd and horribly commixed about this conception, yet beyond the absurdity, the confusion and the suffering there lies a miraculous truth. There is nothing really illusory in the truth of love; the beloved being is indeed equated for the lover,—and only for him no doubt, but what of that?—with the truth of existence. Chance may will it that through that being, the world's complexities laid aside, the lover may perceive the true deeps of existence and their simplicity.

Apart from the precarious and random luck that makes possession of the loved one possible, humanity has from the earliest times endeavoured to reach this liberating continuity by means not dependent on chance. The problem arises when man is faced with death which seems to pitch the discontinuous creature headlong into continuity. This way of seeing the matter is not the first that springs to mind, yet death, in that it destroys the discontinuous being, leaves intact the general continuity of existence outside ourselves. I am not forgetting that the need to make sure of the survival of the individual as such is basic to our desire for immortality but I am not concerned to discuss this just now. What I want to emphasise is that death does not affect the continuity of existence, since in existence itself all separate existences originate; continuity of existence is independent of death and *is even proved by death*. This I think is the way to interpret religious sacrifices, with which I suggest that erotic activity

can be compared. Erotic activity, by dissolving the separate beings that participate in it, reveals their fundamental continuity, like the waves of a stormy sea. In sacrifice, the victim is divested not only of clothes but of life (or is destroyed in some way if it is an inanimate object). The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is what religious historians call the element of sacredness. This sacredness is the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite. A violent death disrupts the creature's discontinuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one. Only a spectacular killing, carried out as the solemn and collective nature of religion dictates, has the power to reveal what normally escapes notice. We should incidentally be unable to imagine what goes on in the secret depths of the minds of the bystanders if we could not call on our own personal religious experiences, if only childhood ones. Everything leads us to the conclusion that in essence the sacramental quality of primitive sacrifices is analagous to the comparable element in contemporary religions.

I said just now that I was going to talk about religious eroticism. *Divine love* would have been a phrase more easily understood. The love of God is a concept more familiar and less disconcerting than the idea of the love of a sacred element. I did not use this term because eroticism geared to an object beyond immediate reality is far from being the equivalent of the love of God. I thought it better to be less easily understood and more accurate.

Sacred and divine are essentially identical notions, apart from the relative discontinuity of God as a person. God is a composite being possessed of the continuity I am talking about on the affective plane in a fundamental way. God is nevertheless represented by biblical and rational theology alike as a personal being, as a creator distinct from the generality of things created. I will say just this about con-

tinuity of existence: it is not in my opinion knowable, but it can be experienced in such fashions, always somewhat dubious, as hazard allows. Only negative experience is worthy of our attention, to my thinking, but this experience is rich enough. We ought never to forget that positive theology is matched by a negative theology founded on mystical experience.

Although clearly distinct from it, mystical experience seems to me to stem from the universal experience of religious sacrifice. It brings to a world dominated by thought connected with our experience of physical objects (and by the knowledge developed from this experience) an element which finds no place in our intellectual architecture except negatively as a limiting factor. Indeed, mystical experience reveals an absence of any object. Objects are identified with discontinuity, whereas mystical experience, as far as our strength allows us to break off our own discontinuity, confers on us a sense of continuity. The means it uses are different from those of physical or emotional eroticism. To be more precise, it does not use means independent of our wills. Erotic experience linked with reality waits upon chance, upon a particular person and favourable circumstances. Religious eroticism through mystical experience requires only that the subject shall not be disturbed.

Generally speaking, though not invariably, in India the succession of the different forms I have mentioned is envisaged with great simplicity. Mystical experience is reserved for the ripeness of old age, when death is near, when circumstances favourable to experience of reality are in default. Mystical experience linked with certain aspects of the positive religions is occasionally opposed to that assenting to life up to the point of death that I take to be in the main the fundamental meaning of eroticism.

But this opposition is not intrinsic. Assenting to life even in death is a challenge to death, in emotional eroticism as well as physical, a challenge to death through indifference to death. Life is a door into existence: life may be doomed but

the continuity of existence is not. The nearness of this continuity and its heady quality are more powerful than the thought of death. To begin with, the first turbulent surge of erotic feeling overwhelms all else, so that gloomy considerations of the fate in store for our discontinuous selves are forgotten. And then, beyond the intoxication of youth, we achieve the power to look death in the face and to perceive in death the pathway into unknowable and incomprehensible continuity—that path is the secret of eroticism and eroticism alone can reveal it.

If this train of thought has been closely followed the significance of the sentence already quoted will be abundantly clear in the light of the oneness of the various modes of eroticism:

"There is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image."

What I have been saying enables us to grasp in those words the unity of the domain of eroticism open to us through a conscious refusal to limit ourselves within our individual personalities. Eroticism opens the way to death. Death opens the way to the denial of our individual lives. Without doing violence to our inner selves, are we able to bear a negation that carries us to the farthest bounds of possibility?

To finish with, I should like to help you to realize fully that the point I have brought you to, however unfamiliar it may have seemed at times, is none the less the meeting of the ways for violent impulses at the very heart of things.

I spoke of mystical experience, not of poetry. I could not have talked about poetry without plunging into an intellectual labyrinth. We all feel what poetry is. Poetry is one of our foundation stones, but we cannot talk about it. I am not going to talk about it now, but I think I can make my ideas on continuity more readily felt, ideas not to be fully identified with the theologians' concept of God, by reminding you of these lines by one of the most violent of poets, Rimbaud.

Elle est retrouvée.
Quoi ? L'éternité.
C'est la mer allée
Avec le soleil.

Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism—to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea.

THE LINK BETWEEN TABOOS AND DEATH

The contrast between the world of work or reason and that of violence

In the section which follows, whose subject is eroticism at white heat (the blind moment when eroticism attains its ultimate intensity), I shall consider systematically the relationship between those two irreconcilables already mentioned, taboo and transgression.

Man belongs in any case to both of these worlds and between them willy-nilly his life is torn. The world of work and reason is the basis of human life but work does not absorb us completely and if reason gives the orders our obedience is never unlimited. Man has built up the rational world by his own efforts, but there remains within him an undercurrent of violence. Nature herself is violent, and however reasonable we may grow we may be mastered anew by a violence no longer that of nature but that of a rational being who tries to obey but who succumbs to stirrings within himself which he cannot bring to heel.

There is in nature and there subsists in man a movement which always exceeds the bounds, that can never be anything but partially reduced to order. We are generally unable to grasp it. Indeed it is by definition that which can never be grasped, but we are conscious of being in its power: the universe that bears us along answers no purpose that reason defines, and if we try to make it answer to God, all we are doing is associating irrationally the infinite excess in the presence of which our reason exists with our reason itself. But through the excess in him, that God whom we should like to shape into an intelligible concept never

ceases, exceeding this concept, to exceed the limits of reason.

In the domain of our life excess manifests itself in so far as violence wins over reason. Work demands the sort of conduct where effort is in a constant ratio with productive efficiency. It demands rational behaviour where the wild impulses worked out on feast days and usually in games are frowned upon. If we were unable to repress these impulses we should not be able to work, but work introduces the very reason for repressing them. These impulses confer an immediate satisfaction on those who yield to them. Work, on the other hand, promises to those who overcome them a reward later on whose value cannot be disputed except from the point of view of the present moment. From the earliest times¹ work has produced a relaxation of tension thanks to which men cease to respond to the immediate urge impelled by the violence of desire. No doubt it is arbitrary always to contrast the detachment fundamental to work with tumultuous urges whose necessity is not constant. Once begun, however, work does make it impossible to respond to these immediate solicitations which could make us indifferent to the promised desirable results. Most of the time work is the concern of men acting collectively and during the time reserved for work the collective has to oppose those contagious impulses to excess in which nothing is left but the immediate surrender to excess, to violence, that is. Hence the human collective, partly dedicated to work, is defined by taboos without which it would not have become the world of work that it essentially is.

The main function of all taboos is to combat violence

What prevents us from seeing this decisive articulation of human life in its simplicity is the capricious way these taboos are promulgated. They have often had a superficially

¹ Work made man what he is. The first traces of man are the stone tools he left behind him. According to recent research it seems as though Australopithecus, still far from the highly developed form which we exemplify, left tools of this sort; Australopithecus lived about a million years before us (while Neanderthal man, whose burial places are the earliest known to us, lived only some few thousand years ago).

insignificant air. The significance of taboos if we take them as a whole, particularly if we take into consideration those which we do not fail religiously to observe, is none the less reducible to a simple element. I will formulate this without demonstrating the truth of it immediately (that I will do systematically later and my generalisation will be seen to be a sound one). Violence is what the world of work excludes with its taboos; in my field of enquiry this implies at the same time sexual reproduction and death.

Only later on shall I be able to establish the profound unity of these apparent opposites, birth and death. However, even at this stage their external connections stand revealed in the universe of sadism, there for anyone who thinks about eroticism to ponder on. De Sade—or his ideas—generally horrifies even those who affect to admire him and have not realised through their own experience this tormenting fact: the urge towards love, pushed to its limit, is an urge toward death. This link ought not to sound paradoxical. The excess from which reproduction proceeds and the excess we call death can each only be understood with the help of the other. But it is clear from the outset that the two primary taboos affect, firstly, death, and secondly, sexual functions.

Prehistoric evidence of taboos connected with death

“Thou shalt not kill”; “Thou shalt not perform the carnal act except in wedlock”. Such are the two fundamental commandments found in the Bible and we still observe them.

The first of these prohibitions is the consequence of the human attitude towards the dead.

Let me return to the earliest days of our species, when our destiny was at stake. Even before man presented the appearance that he does today, Neanderthal man, whom prehistorians call ‘homo faber’, was making various stone instruments, often very elaborately, with the aid of which he hewed stone—or wood. This kind of man living a hundred thousand years before ourselves was already like us but still more like the anthropoid. Although he held himself erect like

us his legs were still a little bent; when he walked he leaned more on the ball of the foot than on the outer edge. His neck was not as flexible as ours (although certain men have conserved certain of his simian characteristics). He had a low forehead and a jutting brow. We only know the bones of this rudimentary man; we cannot know the exact appearance of his face; not even if his expression was already a human one. All we know is that he worked and cut himself away from violence.

If we look at his life as a whole, he remained inside the realm of violence. (We have not yet entirely abandoned it ourselves). But he escaped its power to some extent. He worked. We have the evidence of his technical skill left by numerous and various stone tools. This skill was remarkable enough in that if he had not given it his considered attention, going back on and perfecting his first idea, he could not have achieved results that were constant and in the long run greatly improved. His tools are in any case not the only proof of an incipient opposition to violence; the burial places left by Neanderthal man bear witness to this also.

Besides work, death was recognized by this man as terrifying and overwhelming, and indeed as supernatural. Prehistory assigns Neanderthal man to the Middle Paleolithic era; as early as Lower Paleolithic, apparently some hundreds of thousands of years before, fairly similar human beings existed who left traces of their work just as Neanderthal man did: the heaps of bones of these earlier men that have been found encourage us to think that death had begun to disturb them, since they paid some attention to skulls at least. But burial of the dead, still a religious practice for humanity at the present time, appears towards the end of the Middle Paleolithic, a little while before the disappearance of Neanderthal man and the arrival of a man exactly like ourselves whom prehistorians, keeping the name ‘homo faber’ for the earlier type, call ‘homo sapiens’.

The custom of burial is the sign of a taboo similar to ours concerning the dead and death. In a vague form at least the

taboo must have arisen before this custom. We can even admit that in one sense, so imperceptibly that no proof could have remained, and doubtless unnoticed by those who lived at the time, the birth of this taboo coincided with the beginnings of work. The essential difference is that between a man's dead body and other objects such as stones. Today the perception of this difference is still characteristic of a human being as opposed to an animal; what we call death is in the first place the consciousness we have of it. We perceive the transition from the living state to the corpse, that is, to the tormenting object that the corpse of one man is for another. For each man who regards it with awe, the corpse is the image of his own destiny. It bears witness to a violence which destroys not one man alone but all men in the end. The taboo which lays hold on the others at the sight of a corpse is the distance they put between themselves and violence, by which they cut themselves off from violence. The picture of violence which we must attribute to primitive man in particular must necessarily be understood as opposed to the rhythm of work regulated by rational factors. Lévy-Bruhl's mistake has long been recognized; he denied primitive man a rational mode of thought and conceded him only the uncertain and indistinct images that result from participation.¹ Work is obviously no less ancient than man himself, and though work is not always foreign to animals, human work as distinct from animal work is never foreign to reason. It supposes that a fundamental identity is accepted between itself and the wrought object, and it supposes the difference, resulting from the work, between its substance and the developed tool. Similarly it implies awareness of the use of the tool, of the chain of cause and effect in which it is about to become involved. The laws which govern the acquired skills which give rise to tools or which are served by

¹ Lévy-Bruhl's descriptions are none the less correct and of indubitable interest. If, as Cassirer did, he had talked about 'mythical thought' and not 'primitive thought', he would not have encountered the same difficulties. 'Mythical thought' may be contemporary with rational thought, though it does not originate in the latter.

them are laws of reason from the outset. These laws regulate the changes which work conceives and effects. No doubt a primitive man could not have made them explicit; his language made him aware of the objects it named for him, but was inadequate to deal with the naming process itself. A workman today, the best part of the time would not be in a position to formulate them; nevertheless he observes them faithfully. Primitive man as Lévy-Bruhl describes him may have thought irrationally some of the time that a thing simultaneously is and is not, or that it can be what it is and something else at the same time. Reason did not dominate his entire thinking, but it did when it was a question of work. So much so that a primitive man could imagine, without formulating it, a world of work or reason to which another world of violence was opposed.¹ Certainly death is like disorder in that it differs from the orderly arrangements of work. Primitive man may have thought that the ordering of work belonged to him, while the disorder of death was beyond him, making nonsense of his efforts. The movement of work, the operations of reason were of use to him, while disorder, the movement of violence, brought ruin on the very creature whom useful works serve. Man, identifying himself with work which reduced everything to order, thus cut himself off from violence which tended in the opposite direction.

The horror of the corpse as a symbol of violence and as a threat of the contagiousness of violence

Violence, and death signifying violence, have a double meaning. On the one hand the horror of death drives us off, for we prefer life; on the other an element at once solemn and terrifying fascinates us and disturbs us profoundly. I shall return to this ambiguity. I can only point out in the first place the essential aspect of

¹ The expressions 'profane world' (= world of work or reason) and 'sacred world' (= world of violence) are none the less of great antiquity. *Profane* and *sacred*, though, are words from the vocabulary of irrationalism.

recoil in the face of violence which is expressed by taboos associated with death.

A man's dead body must always have been a source of interest to those whose companion he was while he lived, and we must believe that as a victim of violence those nearest to him were careful to preserve him from further violence. Burial no doubt signified from the earliest times, as far as those who buried the body were concerned, their wish to save the dead from the voracity of animals. But even if that wish had been the determining factor in the inauguration of this custom, we cannot say that it was the most important; awe of the dead in all likelihood predominated for a long time over the sentiments which a milder civilization developed. Death was a sign of violence brought into a world which it could destroy. Although motionless, the dead man had a part in the violence which had struck him down; anything which came too near him was threatened by the destruction which had brought him low. Death presented such a contrast between an unfamiliar region and the everyday world that the only mode of thought in tune with it was bound to conflict with the mode of thought governed by work. Symbolical or mythical thought, erroneously labelled 'primitive' by Lévy-Bruhl, is the only kind appropriate to violence whose essence is to break the bounds of rational thought implicit in work. According to this way of thinking, the violence which by striking at the dead man dislocates the ordered course of things does not cease to be dangerous once the victim is dead. It constitutes a supernatural peril which can be 'caught' from the dead body. Death is a danger for those left behind. If they have to bury the corpse it is less in order to keep it safe than to keep themselves safe from its contagion. Often the idea of contagion is connected with the body's decomposition where formidable aggressive forces are seen at work. The corpse will rot; this biological disorder, like the newly dead body a symbol of destiny, is threatening in itself. We no longer believe in contagious magic, but which of us could be sure of not quailing at the sight

of a dead body crawling with maggots? Ancient peoples took the drying up of the bones to be the proof that the threat of violence arising at the time of death had passed over. More often than not the dead man himself held in the clutch of violence, as the survivors see it, is part and parcel of his own disorder, and his whitened bones are what at last betoken the pacification of his spirit.

The taboo on murder

The taboo relating to the corpse does not always appear intelligible. In '*Totem and Taboo*' Freud, because of his superficial knowledge of ethnographical data, nowadays much less vague, thought that the taboo generally countered the desire to touch. The desire to touch the dead was doubtless no greater in former times than it is today. The taboo does not necessarily anticipate the desire; in the presence of a corpse horror is immediate and inevitable and practically impossible to resist. The violence attendant upon a man's death is only likely to tempt men in one direction: it may tend to be embodied in us against another living person; the desire to kill may take hold of us. The taboo on murder is a special aspect of the universal taboo on violence.

In the eyes of primitive man violence is always the cause of death. It may have acted through magical means, but someone is always responsible, someone is always a murderer. The two aspects of the taboo are interrelated. We must run away from death and hide from the forces that have been unleashed. Other forces like those which have overpowered the dead man and are temporarily in possession of him must not be loosed in ourselves.

As a rule the community brought into being by work considers itself essentially apart from the violence implied by the death of one of its members. Faced by such a death the body politic feels that a taboo is in force. But that is only true for the members of the community. Within it the taboo has full force. Without, where strangers are concerned, the taboo is still felt but it can be violated. The community is

made up of those whom the common effort unites, cut off from violence by work during the hours devoted to work. Outside this given time, outside its own limits, the community can revert to violence, it can resort to murder in war against another community.

In given circumstances, during a given time, the murder of members of a given tribe is permissible, necessary even. Yet the wildest hecatombs, in spite of the irresponsibility of their instigators, never entirely remove the malediction falling on murder. The Bible commands 'Thou shalt not kill', and this sometimes makes us smile, but we deceive ourselves in regarding the Bible as unimportant. Once the obstacle is overthrown what outlasts the transgression is a flouted taboo. The bloodiest of murderers cannot ignore the curse upon him, for the curse is the condition of his achievement. Transgression piled upon transgression will never abolish the taboo, just as though the taboo were never anything but the means of cursing gloriously whatever it forbids.

In the foregoing proposition there is a basic truth: taboos founded on terror are not only there to be obeyed. There is always another side to the matter. It is always a temptation to knock down a barrier; the forbidden action takes on a significance it lacks before fear widens the gap between us and it and invests it with an aura of excitement. "There is nothing", writes de Sade, "that can set bounds to licentiousness . . . The best way of enlarging and multiplying one's desires is to try to limit them".¹ Nothing can set bounds to licentiousness . . . or rather, generally speaking, there is nothing that can conquer violence.

¹ Introduction to 'Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome'.

TABOOS RELATED TO REPRODUCTION

The taboo universally found in man as opposed to the sexual freedom of animals

Later on I shall return to the complementary relationship uniting taboos which reject violence with acts of transgression which set it free. These counterbalanced urges have a kind of unity. From considering the significance of a barrier at the moment of its being overturned, I already have gone on to introduce a group of taboos parallel with those called into existence by death. The taboos centred on sexuality have now to be considered. We have very old traces of customs concerned with death. Prehistoric evidence on sexuality is more recent; what is more we can draw no conclusions from them. There are Middle Paleolithic burial sites but evidence of the sexual activity of the first men goes no further back than Upper Paleolithic. Art (representation) does not appear with Neanderthal man¹ but begins with homo sapiens, and such images of himself as he has left are rare anyway. These images are generally ithyphallic. Hence we know that sexual activity like death was early on a subject of interest to man, but we cannot deduce any clear indications from such vague data as we can with death. Ithyphallic pictures obviously show a relative freedom. Nevertheless they cannot prove that those who traced them believed in unlimited freedom in this field. All we can say is that as opposed to work, sexual activity is a form of violence, that as a spontaneous impulse it can interfere with work. A

¹ Neanderthal man knew how to use colouring matter but he left no trace of drawing at all, while such traces are numerous as soon as homo sapiens comes on the scene.