

## Empowering Evil, or, Good Evil is Hard to Find

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When confronted with texts that deal with evil or violence, students often react rather predictably, asking why one has to read such texts. What is the point in reading these texts? What is their value? While experienced hands in the classroom might dismiss such reactions as typical resistance to difficult reading, these are important questions, for they point to the heart of the question of evil in aesthetics. A complementary interrogation underlies such objections: the *use* of evil and its *abuse*. This is a practical question: what can one do with evil and what can evil do to the reader (for in this paper it will be a question of literature and textuality)? From the point of view of many students (and readers in general), evil can do very little for the reader except repulse. At its best, evil in literature tends to depress the reader. In terms of practicality, evil appears only to weaken the reader and render one sad (or repulsed, or frustrated, or any other number of negative emotions). However, might this reading of evil not be mistaken? What if evil could empower the reader? If this were the case, then mistaken readings of evil that see it as debilitating and weakening are *abuses* of evil, turning an empowering concept around on itself and weakening it. How can this be the case? How might one's reading of evil, which appears so easily recognizable and repulsive, be erroneous? As the Nietzschean play on terms of this reading of evil implies, questions concerning evil in aesthetics and literature turn around the problem of judgment.

One of Nietzsche's foremost interpreters, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, made judgment and its misuse the target of his writings. From the early study of illusions of the subject in Hume's empiricism, the image of thought in *Difference and Repetition*, the illusions of psychoanalysis in his collaborations with Félix Guattari to his final work on immanence and a "transcendental empiricism," a recurring target was the illusions of judgment that install themselves behind a transcendental tribunal in thought and aesthetics. There are many ways to read Deleuze's work, but one of the most fruitful is in the practical application of a vision of life in which one seeks out empowering encounters in order to see the immanence of life itself and avoid the errors of judgment. This approach, as many have noted, owes much to his reading of Nietzsche, Bergson and, above all, Spinoza.

Deleuze wrote his complementary doctoral dissertation on Spinoza, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (published in English in 1990 and in 1968 in French); but it is a shorter and more accessible practical guide to Spinoza, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (published in English in 1988 and in French in 1970 and revised in 1981), that will offer some clues on the practical use of evil, specifically in literature. Before exploring this path in Deleuze, I would like to draw a distinction between this approach and one of the other more well-known readings of evil in literature—again from a French perspective: Georges Bataille and his *Literature and Evil*. Exploring the a-subjective experience of evil in literature, Bataille offers a fascinating and compelling reading of literature and evil as a quasi-mystical experience. However, the negativity such a reading introduces is exactly what Deleuze seeks to avoid. Bataille will then offer an introduction to the problems of evil in literature as well as take us

along part of the path of our reading before turning to Deleuze. In the final section of this paper, I will put these interpretations to the test of the text and explore a work that often elicits the reaction described above from students and general readers alike: Flannery O'Connor's well-known short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

### *Bataille and the Experience of Literature*

While stingingly criticized by Deleuze, Georges Bataille has perhaps greater affinities with Deleuze and his thought than might first be imagined. In order to understand how this might be the case, I would like to explore his reading of evil and the larger reading of life on which it is based. Author of a wide range of essays and novels and the editor of a number of revolutionary and influential journals in the twentieth century, Bataille is perhaps best known for his general theory of life in the three-volume work, *The Accursed Share*. The general thesis of this work is the universe is made up of a play of energy that exceeds any attempt to calculate or regulate it:

The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically (21).

That is, this excess of energy (called the "accursed share") must be consumed in either extravagant consumption (sacrifice or monumental expenditures) or destruction (war). Influenced by Marcel Mauss and his theory of the gift<sup>1</sup>, Bataille thus makes the distinction between an effort to limit and control energy and spending (a restrictive economy) and the larger play of energy at hand (a general economy)<sup>2</sup> (25). Much of his work is focused around the "Copernican revolution" involved in turning one's sense of economy around to take the excessive part of the accursed share into account (if such accounting is indeed possible).

This theory can be found in his reading of literature and evil and, in particular, what he terms literature's excessive nature. How can literature be "excessive?" Much like our above thesis on evil and its abuse, in *Literature and Evil*, Bataille makes a distinction between morality and hypermorality when reading literature. For Bataille, the limitations one places on oneself, thus enclosing oneself in a restrictive economy, should be understood as an *abuse* of morality because what is defined as "moral" turns on *use* value. Reducing oneself to the limits and laws of reason, one establishes a morality based on what is profitable and what is wasteful. That is, it is good to apply one's energy to work and study and then "invest" one's gains in income and knowledge in further development of work and study, while it is bad to "waste" one's time and energy on frivolous activities because this leads only to loss of wealth and knowledge. For Bataille, this is erroneous because it fails to take into account the excessive nature of life itself. Limiting life into calculable terms of profit and waste it erects a system of judgment and morality. Thus, what is "good" is profitable and what is "bad" is wasteful. While this might seem rather infantile and supportive of a simple reversal of good or bad actions, Bataille is much more radical. He even goes so far as to consider evil itself in terms of calculation. If one commits an evil act in order to gain something (murder for an inheritance or even simple vengeance)

then one is in the domain of morality and its inherent calculations. A truly evil act is committed for no calculable reason at all (evil for evil's sake) (*Literature and Evil*, 17-18).

In contrast to morality and its calculating judgment, Bataille proposes the term hypermorality. What does this mean? If the traditional morality of society seeks to wall off life in limited and calculable terms, distorting it and abusing it, then hypermorality means to live life in accordance with its natural and excessive disposition. Hypermorality requires one to go beyond the boundaries of morality and access those forbidden sites where the excessive share of life is to be found. In morality, at the bottom of all calculations one makes in life concerning "preserving" one's wealth, knowledge, and accomplishments there is life itself (or more precisely, a certain vision of life as preserving one's own existence). Thus, it is no surprise Bataille situates his hypermorality in the extreme experience of death and overturning the use value of life in terms of morality. While the limit experience of death is central in Bataille's philosophy, he nonetheless sets up a corollary in sexuality, because sexual reproduction implies death (in the long term because one is normally expected to be outlived by one's offspring and in the short term because reproduction involves a "doubling" of oneself and one never can go back to who one was before this doubling, thus creating a certain "death" to what one once was<sup>3</sup>) (*Literature and Evil*, 16). Thus, a secret link exists between pure love and death because both involve pure expenditure: "Whether it is a matter of pure eroticism (love-passion) or of bodily sensuality, the intensity increases to the point where destruction, the death of the being, becomes apparent" (*Literature and Evil*, 17). Where morality forbids access to life's excessive expenditure, hypermorality requires a *transgressing* of morality's false limits. The act of transgression is important for Bataille, for it situates itself along the fracture between morality and hypermorality. On the one hand, it involves the suffering that comes with transgressing the law<sup>4</sup> and thus has a punitive function; on the other hand, it is atonement for transgressing the more original laws of nature. Of course, this double reading of transgression as punishment and atonement has clear religious undertones, and it is in the theological sense Bataille uses the term "atonement" as both suffering and reconciliation. Death is thus the suffering one is condemned to endure for transgressing morality but also reconciliation with nature's more fundamental disposition. Indeed, as is well-known in questions of postmodern theology, the sacred plays a central role in Bataille's thought, and it is this aspect of "reconciliation" with life as the "accursed share" he links together the themes of death, sexuality, and the sacred<sup>5</sup>. Bataille draws a link between the limits erected by morality and Greek tragedy (which he situates on the side of morality because the playwright, in the end, comes down on the side of morality even though his sympathies lie with the tragic hero). He thus declares reason or the law of tragedy protect a sacred space: "The lesson of *Wuthering Heights*, of Greek tragedy and, ultimately, of all religions, is there is an instinctive tendency towards divine intoxication which the rational world of calculation cannot bear" (*Literature and Evil*, 22).

In the above quote, Bataille speaks of Emily Brontë's novel, and his essay on this novel serves as the opening one in his collection on literature. While the elements above help to form Bataille's theory on morality and its link to his greater theory of life, we have yet to see how all of this fits in with literature. In his reading of *Wuthering Heights*, Bataille finds Brontë's novel to be exemplary in terms of hypermorality because it ties together the themes of eroticism (Heathcliff and Catherine's love) and death (Heathcliff's revenge). Even more importantly, there is the suffering both Heathcliff and Catherine endure for their love, which, for Bataille, is their atonement for leaving behind the time of their childhood love. Interestingly, he notes how the time of childhood, in general, has ties to the hypermoral because children refuse to reason or "economize" for the future, preferring an endless

present of expenditure to a future-facing rationalization: “Divine intoxication, to which the instincts of childhood are so closely related, is entirely in the present. In the education of children preference for the present moment is the common definition of Evil” (22). Nonetheless, these elements (love, death, and childhood) correspond to themes in the text, and while the coincidence of such themes and a literary text may help demonstrate Bataille’s thesis, they do not show *how* literature can be better understood in terms of evil.

Bataille’s response is both simple and complex for he declares rather straightforwardly, “Literature, like the infringement of moral laws, is dangerous” (25). He is able to make such a statement because his analysis turns around a socio-historical analysis of literature. The works he chooses for his analysis of literature and evil can roughly be situated in the Romantic period (extending from as early to Sade and Michelet to as late as Proust, although one can arguably situate the latter in high Modernism). The very act of turning to a periodization of literature forces Bataille to enter a narrative in which literature “breaks” with a preceding tradition<sup>6</sup>. Not surprisingly, Bataille’s theory of literature as dangerous (and hence, evil) hews closely to the counter-enlightenment narrative of Romanticism and, later, in a more complicated fashion, of Modernism, for in a post-Enlightenment world, the function of literature becomes more and more “useless.” Slipping away from its early-modern and “organic” function, Romantic and modern literature “stand alone” and address an increasingly isolated and alienated reading subject. Thus, Bataille declares, “Being inorganic, it is irresponsible. Nothing rests on it ... Though the immediate impression of rebellion may obscure this fact, the task of authentic literature is nevertheless only conceivable in terms of a desire for a fundamental communication with the reader [...]” (25). Although one would hesitate to use the term “autonomy,” it is nonetheless this increasingly splintered, alienated, and modern world of isolated literature and alienated readers that allows Bataille to declare literature dangerous because it no longer plays a collective role in creating order or moral values. And it is, above all, the social or moral use of literature at question here. Thus, while Bataille never makes such an explicit argument in *Literature and Evil*, it is the social and historical conditions of early, modern capitalism that allow literature to de-couple itself from society and assume a paradoxical place where its function is the most powerful and the most use-less. Tracing the line opened with his discussion of death as “atonement” for turning away from the excessive quality of life, Bataille draws a parallel between the “isolated” case of literature and the intense and highly individual experience of mystical ecstasy. In a tight dialectic that recalls the complicated relationship between the later modernist and autonomous work of art and the individual, Bataille underlines how it is the “use-less” quality of literature that loses its functionality as a thing (becoming no-thing), which powerfully communicates with the individual:

Death alone – or, at least, the ruin of the isolated individual in search of happiness in time – introduces that break without which nothing reaches the state of ecstasy. And what we thereby regain is always both innocence and the intoxication of existence. The isolated being *loses himself* in something other than himself. What the ‘other thing’ represents is of no importance. It is still a reality that transcends the common limitations. So unlimited is it that it is not even a thing: it is *nothing* (26).

For Bataille, then, the “evil” of literature is to be found in its profound affinity with the larger themes of the accursed share, or, life in its fundamentally excessive posture. Because literature no longer exercises a moral function in society, existing independently of a larger economic structure of use, its

essence is of the hypermoral. Good and evil from a “traditional” and moral standpoint no longer hold. Quoting Breton, Bataille asserts:

‘Everything leads us to believe,’ wrote André Breton, ‘that there is a certain point in the mind where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, are no longer perceived in contradiction to one another.’ I shall add Good and Evil, pain and joy. This point is indicated both by violent literature and by the violence of a mystical experience: only the point matters (28).

In a certain sense, this short detour through Bataille’s un-spoken historicization of literature has given us an answer to our above question concerning how literature can be understood in terms of evil, but there is still a certain amount of frustration that comes with this reading. To return again to the questions that opened this article, one can easily imagine the reactions of students and general readers when one informs them reading a text that turns around evil or violence is a sacred experience in which one is at last in communication with the fundamental nature of life itself. The work of Deleuze might help make, at this point, this experience much more practical (even if the term “practical” with its pragmaticist undertones flies in the face of Bataille’s criticism of morality and “use” value).

Before making this turn more fully to Deleuze, it is perhaps helpful to revisit his short but biting criticism of Bataille. As noted above, in *Dialogues II*, Deleuze treats Bataille as the worst example of the French writer hiding a “dirty little secret:” “He made the little secret the essence of literature, with a mother within, a priest beneath, an eye above. It is impossible to overemphasize the harm that the phantasm has done to writing... in sustaining the signifier, and the interpretation of one by the other, of one with the other” (35). While it is clear Deleuze is attacking certain novels by Bataille in this quote, he is also aiming at a much larger problem of interpretation and, above all, what he calls “sustaining the signifier.” What does this mean? True to his post-structuralist roots (although he never considered himself part of this movement), Deleuze is aiming at any position “outside of the text” that allows one to assume what appears to be a neutral and all-encompassing point of view (one might also say, a point of view that “sustains” a certain “signification”). While Deleuze’s criticism takes aim at Bataille’s own literary works, the larger and more general criticism against interpretation catches the underlying theory in which Bataille tries to situate his own literature and literature in general. In other words, Deleuze is taking direct aim at the historicizing narrative underpinning Bataille’s theory of evil in literature, specifically, the “use-less-ness” of literature in modernity as a simultaneous product and reaction to the rise of an increasingly productivist and industrialized culture. The advantage of such a well-known narrative of Romantic reaction against reason is it allows the reader to rather easily and quickly grasp the essential (literature as evil) as part of a larger narrative or evolution (the rise of reason and capitalism and the havoc a certain version of the former and most versions of the latter cause for Western civilization). However, it is obvious such a structuring narrative goes against Bataille’s argument, for the narrative allows for the *consumption* of literature’s role rather than its *consummation*.

This is a curious blind spot for Bataille, given the relentlessness with which he tracks down such “extra-textual” positions that allow morality to slip back into literature and cloud one’s vision. It is an even more curious criticism from Deleuze because he seems to ignore the implications of Bataille’s

theory of the accursed share and how closely they relate to Deleuze's own project. Perhaps the problem to Bataille's blind spot and to Deleuze's reading past Bataille is to be found in the manner in which Bataille remains enclosed in a thematic reading of literature as evil. Above we noted Bataille's declaration that literature as evil touches on a point similar to that of mysticism: "This point is indicated both by violent literature and by the violence of a mystical experience: only the point matters" (28). Perhaps Bataille would be better served here if he did not speak so much of violent literature that reaches this point (as in "literature with a violent theme") as quite simply literature *as violence*. Indeed, it is violence (the violence of death, sacrifice, or war) that allows one to have access to what Bataille calls, in an early collection of reflections, communication:

What you are is tied to the activity that links together the infinite number of elements that compose you, to the intense communication of these elements between themselves. Contagions of energy, of movement, of heat, or transfers of elements constitute the interior life of your organic being. Life is never situated in one particular point: it moves rapidly from one point to another (or from multiple points to multiple points), like a current or as a sort of electric flow. Thus, there where you would like to seize your timeless substance, you find only a sliding, the poorly coordinated play of your perishable elements (*L'Expérience intérieure*, 111, my translation).

The violence here, in this play of communication between an infinite number of elements, is directed against the illusion of one's timeless substance. Literature deploys violence against the fiction of one's subjectivity: of one's standing "outside" of the text. This seemingly obscure excerpt is extremely important for it points the way out of Bataille's historicizing narrative of literature as violent (and evil) and towards a violence of literature, out of an abuse of literature as violent and towards a use of the violence of literature to empower.

### *Deleuze and Thinking*

Now, while Deleuze's criticism of Bataille makes sense as it fits into the larger question of interpretation and extra-textual transcendence, it is nonetheless curious Deleuze does not manage to see the extent to which his project parallels that of Bataille. In order to understand how Deleuze and Bataille intersect and arrive at a more practical reading of evil from a Deleuzian perspective, it will be necessary to first situate the general orientation of his philosophy. This is fraught with difficulty, as Deleuze himself underlines, because attempting a beginning at anything and especially in philosophy means eliminating all presuppositions (*Difference and Repetition*, 129). We are not attempting a new beginning in philosophy but rather beginning a reading of Deleuze.

In the third chapter of this work, Deleuze levels his sights on what he calls the history of a long error in philosophy, which he terms "the image of thought" (129). This error is the fundamental orientation of thought toward *truth* so deeply buried in the manner of thinking one barely gives any reflection to it before one begins thinking (for example, in philosophy, with the difference between subject and object, or between Being and being) (131). That is, before one goes about arguing whether one should situate the problem of thought in the subject or the object, or anything of that nature, one has already made the important decision to adhere to an image of thought in which

thinking will seek the Truth and thought is *good* (131-132). As Deleuze notes, speaking of this image:

In the realm of the implicit, [this image] nevertheless holds fast, even if the philosopher specifies that truth is not, after all, ‘an easy thing to achieve and within reach at all’. For this reason, we do not speak of this or that image of thought, variable according to the philosophy in question, but of a single Image in general which constitutes the subjective presupposition of philosophy as a whole. When Nietzsche questions the most general presuppositions of philosophy, he says that these are essentially moral, since Morality alone is capable of persuading us that thought has a good nature and the thinker a good will, and that only the good can ground the supposed affinity between thought and the True. Who else, in effect, but Morality and this Good which gives thought to the true, and the true to thought (132)?

This fundamental orientation of thinking then sets philosophy down the path of error for the work of thought is always brought back to this implicit orientation of moral value, the Good and Truth. For Deleuze, the whole history of Western philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle, through Descartes and Kant to phenomenology, can be understood in terms of the “good” and “harmonious” use of the faculties, what can colloquially be called “recognition” (133). By bringing thought back to this “re-” of re-cognition, it returns to “the reasonable” or “Good” of Greek thought, the thinking subject of Descartes *cogito*, the harmonious and ordered use of Kant’s faculties or the images of phenomenology’s “world.” In every case, thought returns to a home that gives it a foundation in which what was sought (thought) is always found in a Truth of “the Good,” “the reasonable,” the “I think,” the “law” of the faculties or the “world” of phenomenology.

Now, all of this seems quite complicated and rather far from the discussion of literature and evil that was the reason for this diversion in the first place. The important point in Deleuze’s philosophy is, however, already visible. By tethering thought to a moral orientation, thinking participates in what Deleuze calls a “tribunal of judgment.” The very act of thinking is always already submitted to an implicitly pre-supposed position against which it is then judged. Extending his analysis of re-cognition, Deleuze sees thinking in this manner as whittling down Being so it becomes simply a representation of the Good or Moral position to be found in any of the instances mentioned above (137-138). Like Bataille’s “narrative” of evil, the problem here is a familiar one for post-structuralist philosophy because Deleuze’s investigation into the origins of philosophy uncovers an un-thought ground or space from which thought works. By bringing being back to this ground, one loses the fabulous difference of being itself. This is why Deleuze (like others of his post-structuralist generation) asserts he is a philosopher of difference and not being (in the sense of the larger Western metaphysical tradition).

For Deleuze, the implications are extremely important. Going beyond re-cognition and representation, difference implies a radical new that “news” itself endlessly, avoiding the traps of the “re-”: “For the new – in other words, difference – calls forth forces in thought which are not the forces of recognition, today or tomorrow, but the powers of a completely other model, from an unrecognized and unrecognizable *terra incognita*” (136). In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Félix Guattari give a veritable manifesto for this model in philosophy as well as in science and the arts.

Each of these broad disciplines encounter what Deleuze calls the force of thought in different manners: philosophy creates concepts, science creates functions and art creates affect and percept. The key word in each of these fields is creation and because the question at hand (for the moment) is one of philosophy, understanding why Deleuze and Guattari speak of the creation of concepts will allow us to further understand thinking with Deleuze.

In everyday life, one tends to think of a concept as a shorthand reference for independent reality: the concept of “flower” refers to the concrete reality of things growing in the garden one generally cultivates for aesthetic pleasure. However, taking a cue from Nietzsche and his genealogical method, Deleuze and Guattari assert “flower” is simply an abstraction for a multitude of different plants and, furthermore, it subsumes a number of differences: the difference between animal and vegetal, the difference between flowering and non-flowering plants, the difference between desirable and non-desirable flowering plants (weeds), etc. In everyday thinking, the extreme ontological richness of what has gone into this concept is lost, “whittled down” as it were for a transparent image that appears to refer to an independent reality “out there” in the garden that is immediately re-cognized and re-presented. This is what we referred to above as the “image of thought.”

The creation of concepts allows us to reverse this erroneous image. In philosophy, this takes place through the confrontation with a problem in which the vast web of differences inherent to the problem is brought to the surface, and then a solution or concept is created which keeps those differences “in play.” Once again, this sounds extremely complicated, but let us return to the everyday problem and “concept” of the flower. To put this in Deleuzian terms, one might say the concept of the flower is “created” in response to a certain aesthetic problem (in everyday terms, one wants to have a pleasing garden, so one grows flowers instead of weeds) and the differences in that problem include the difference between plants that flower or do not, the difference between flowers that invade the garden (weeds) and those that do not, the difference between strong and weak-scented blooms, and so on and so forth. The concept changes, however, when one sows flowers in a fallow field (clover, for instance) because the underlying problem (soil erosion) is completely different from that of growing flowers for aesthetic pleasure. The concept of “flower” might appear to be the same, but behind it there is a different problem to which the concept responds. For Deleuze, philosophical concepts reveal what he will also call a *virtual* plane of differences that are *unthought* in the concept itself. Virtual does not mean they do not exist but they are simply unactualized for the problem at hand.<sup>7</sup> The task of philosophy is to “excavate” the difference that goes into the creation of each concept.

For science, the inverse is at play, and scientific functions whittle down virtual differences to their actual state (one might think of sets of differential equations as applications of this “whittling down” for example) for practical applications. This is the framework of thought as it is applied to everyday thinking and the dominant archetype of thinking. Art is curious because, for Deleuze and Guattari, the task of the artist is to isolate affect and percept (the visceral and body-centered sensation of difference itself) in what they call a “monument” (*What is Philosophy?* 148). By giving art a “monumental” definition, Deleuze and Guattari underline the importance of art in communicating difference in a field that “precedes” (although one would perhaps be better suited to say “exceeds”) subjectivity and objectivity. The power of art is to allow one to “glimpse” the virtual field or plane of difference in its pre-subjective and objective deployment (again, the term is difficult because any “glimpsing” already implies a subject, and perhaps it would be better to simply speak, as does



Deleuze, of a “force” of difference). For Deleuze, each art accomplishes this in its own manner. For example, in his two works devoted to cinema, Deleuze examines how the camera reorganizes the presentation of space and time, not according to a human perspective but in multiple perspectives: the movement of the camera eye over movement itself offers a glimpse of movement as movement that is not tied to any one particular perspective of subject or object.

Although this might appear to be a quite long detour through Deleuze’s thought, we are at last able to return to some of the questions we left un-answered above concerning Bataille and the violence of literature. When examining Bataille, we noted it seemed odd for Deleuze to not acknowledge the importance of Bataille’s thought, for what we have sketched here is something remarkably similar to Bataille’s notion of “communication” and the “contagions of energy, of movement... or transfers of elements” that constitute it. Let us consider how Deleuze, at the end of his life, brings together the image of thought, difference, and the intensities they imply. Returning to the very beginning of his philosophical career and his study of David Hume (and the illusions of the “self” empiricism uncovers)<sup>8</sup>, Deleuze defines the field of difference as a “transcendental field:”

It can be distinguished from experience in that it doesn’t refer to an object or belong to a subject (empirical representation). It appears therefore as a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness, a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without a self. It may seem curious that the transcendental be defined by such immediate givens: we will speak of a transcendental empiricism in contrast to everything that makes up the world of the subject and the object. There is something wild and powerful in this transcendental empiricism that is of course not the element of sensation (simple empiricism), for sensation is only a break within the flow of absolute consciousness. It is, rather, however close two sensations may be, the passage from one to the other as becoming, as increase or decrease in power (virtual quantity). Must we then define the transcendental field by a pure immediate consciousness with neither object nor self, as a movement that neither begins nor ends? (*Pure Immanence*, 25-26).

As this passage makes clear, the moment the “image” of a fixed and “timeless substance,” to use Bataille’s terms, appears, one has slipped out this field of difference and into the errors of the image of thought. Where the two thinkers differ is obvious enough: Bataille’s response is a theory of transgression that allows one to *accede to* “communication” while, for Deleuze, the entire narrative of “breaking out” of one’s false images is erroneous because all of life is *already* this movement. To “transgress” the limits of thought means one has already “fallen” out of thought and into its image: “Consciousness becomes a fact only when a subject is produced at the same time as its object, both being outside the field and appearing as ‘transcendents’” (*Pure Immanence*, 26). This difference in orientation is important and is the crux of Deleuze’s argument with Bataille because for Deleuze, everything is part of this overwhelming flow of difference; even the illusions of thought and the subjects and objects that result are simply *creations* of difference, not to be overcome but seen as *part* of the flow of difference and becoming.

*Empowering Thought*

How does all of this fit together with evil? A preliminary response is in Deleuze's reading of difference as a "force:" when morality or Truth orient thinking, thought inevitably seeks out terms it re-cognizes, as noted above. However, when thinking in terms of pure difference with Deleuze, the re-cognition or re-presentation aspect of thought gives way to thinking as a constraint, as the appearance of the radically new that is impossible to re-cognize or re-present and that, in a certain sense, "precedes" all recognition and representation. To return to the phrase cited above: "For the new – in other words, difference – calls forth forces in thought which are not the forces of recognition, today or tomorrow, but the powers of a completely other model, from an unrecognized and unrecognizable terra incognita" (*Difference and Repetition*, 136). How is this force transmitted? Through an encounter, responds Deleuze (139). It may be with Socrates, a temple, or a demon, but the encounter is what forces the un-thought to create (139). In terms of art and literature, we have seen this occurs through affect and percept. However, little up to this point allows us to understand how such encounters and the thinking that ensues "empowers" us. In the opening essay on his collection on literature and philosophy, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze treats the writer as a physician (like Nietzsche), diagnosing the symptoms of his life and the world and the manner in which one falls into the traps of the image of thought. Art, and in this case literature, is a form of health because it allows one to overcome one's symptoms:

Literature then appears as an enterprise of health: not that the writer would necessarily be in good health... but he possesses an irresistible and delicate health that stems from what he has seen and heard of things too big for him, too strong for him, suffocating things whose passage exhausts him, while nonetheless giving him the becomings that a dominant and substantial health would render impossible (3).

The encounter the affect of literature allows one to become stronger, to rise above the illusions of thought and the "dominant and substantial health" that results from it. Here, the echoes of Bataille's near mystical experience of evil in literature and the dissolution of the subject it entails are not far. Indeed, is this not simply Bataille's same topography repeated, of thought overcoming its illusions, transcending its errors? If this is the case, the argument made above concerning Deleuze's reading of difference as an infinite plane of creation that needs no transcending falls flat. The immanence of Deleuze's project would reveal itself to be in a topography of transcendence with Bataille. Deleuze is resolutely against such a reading: "Transcendence is always a product of immanence" (*Pure Immanence* 31). The question, then, is how to put together the intense encounters of thinking and the transformation: the "passage" of health and the "giving of becomings" of which Deleuze speaks concerning the example of literature.

As noted in the opening of this paper, one of Deleuze's greatest influences is Spinoza, and it is in the way Deleuze reads him that the "plane" of Deleuze's thought deploys itself the most fully. For Deleuze, the audacity of Spinoza's philosophy is not in his first principal of one substance and an infinite number of attributes, but is in the much later principal concerning the body and parallelism. Deleuze is drawn to the manner in which Spinoza de-emphasizes consciousness for the body (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 17). This is a simple reversal of a traditional mind-body hierarchy but precisely an effort to draw the foundations for a system of thought in which the force of thought functions in a "plane." By parallelism, Deleuze reads Spinoza as establishing a link between the body

and consciousness where an extremely important dynamic emerges: as the mind or consciousness increases its ideas of what the body can do, the body follows and vice-versa. To put it in terms encountered above, a “newing” of the body occurs. To understand this, one might take a rather common scene at a community swimming pool: a dozen children are on the pool deck imitating a stroke they are learning. From their movements, it is obvious the idea of the stroke is not clear in their mind. However, when the children enter the water, something happens, and through the interaction of their bodies with the water of the swimming pool, they begin to swim. The stroke is perhaps not perfect, but their bodies discover a new power, something the children did not imagine possible until their encounter with the water. With this newly discovered power in their bodies comes the idea of the stroke. More importantly, this bodily encounter with the water transforms their idea of their body and the world in which that body interacts. Thus, their consciousness has been transformed. Two bodies (that of a child’s and that of the “body” of water) have entered into relation with each other and out of this encounter a newer and more capable body has emerged. Bodies thus enter into relation with each other and either increase their power (new ideas are created, new visions are traced and a new knowledge of the world is possible) or diminish it (ideas are destroyed, visions are erased, and knowledge and life diminish).

In a Spinozist system, the effects of these encounters reveal themselves as joy or sadness in the human subject, but these are only the effects of these encounters and not the actual encounters themselves (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 19). Importantly, it is by focusing solely on the effects of these relations that a series of errors takes place: one mistakes effects for causes which then results in consciousness believing it acts on and over the body. Furthermore, where the human subject and consciousness cannot imagine itself as the cause of a relation, it erects an ultimate subject with the same endowments (understanding and volition) as the human subject: God (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* 20). This triple illusion is what leads Deleuze to declare, “Consciousness is only a dream with one’s eyes open” (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* 20). Consciousness is simply the “intersection” of an incalculable number of encounters between different bodies, running from atoms, cells, minds, and bodies to a child jumping into a swimming pool.

Now, as should be clear, this brief reading of Spinoza with Deleuze is important because of how it re-works what we above called the topography of our problem of thought in relation to Bataille. Out of this plane of encounters between bodies come a series of effects felt as joy or sadness in the Spinozist system. What Deleuze and Spinoza do is elaborate a system to explain how errors, such as the image of thought and the transcendence it implies, emerge from such a plane of thought. In other words, by passing through Spinoza, Deleuze explains how thought “produces” its own errors. There is really nothing to escape, transcend, or transgress in Deleuze’s system; there is simply a perspective that must be changed.

Crucially, from this perspective, morality or values of good and evil change radically. It is a short step from the illusion of consciousness to the illusion of value, for if effects are mistaken as causes, what is judged as “good” or “evil” is what increases joy and diminishes sadness. When it is impossible to attribute joy or sadness to an individual subject, “good” and “evil” become transcendent moral values, empty of any “relational” context, simply requiring blind allegiance. When one raises values to a position “outside” of any context, they become what Deleuze, following Spinoza, defines as “morality” (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 23). In contrast to morality, Deleuze, with Spinoza, pleads for what he defines as an “ethics” which is closely tied to the immanence of the event itself. An action

is “good” or “bad” if it increases or decreases one’s powers and one’s capacity to have adequate ideas of the world around oneself. Thus, following Spinoza’s reading, Deleuze reads the Christian God’s commandment not to eat the forbidden fruit not as a transcendent imperative but rather as an explanation of the nature of reality itself and the dangers of the fruit for Adam’s composition. In this context, the fruit is bad simply because it is poison and will cause Adam’s body to enter relations that do not accord with his nature (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 22). The stakes of ethics are then completely different from the imperatives of a morality. “Good” is what increases one’s capabilities or, as Deleuze puts it, one’s power and “bad” or “evil” is what diminishes one’s power or capacities. “Power” here is used in its Nietzschean sense referring to the will to power, and Deleuze underlines that desiring power to dominate is one of the most reactive manners of living where all of the aspects of what he has above termed “bad” come together in a servile and increasingly weakened life (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, xvii). Far from reinforcing power or domination, this Spinoza/Nietzsche-influenced vision of ethics is, for Deleuze, living life as life: striving to exist according to life itself and searching out the proper encounters that allow for that to happen.

### *Empowering Literature*

With this detour through Spinoza and Nietzsche, Deleuze finally allows us to re-phrase the question of evil and its proper use. From the Deleuzian perspective, “evil” has no existence in itself but is simply a mistaken way of seeing and acting in the world that separates one from the plane of becoming. It is in this manner I could suggest at the beginning of this paper evil as something to be avoided in literature or at least tolerated as depressing. Encountering evil in these terms is in fact an extremely impoverished manner of living, a manner based on the image of thought and the tribunal of judgment that accompanies this image. In Nietzschean terms, one operates an active selection (this novel deals with something repulsive) and affirms it reactively (this is evil). This is an abuse of evil. To properly use evil would not be the simple and puerile affirmation of evil for evil’s sake (in a certain manner reminiscent of Bataille), but rather to better understand the immanent conditions that separate one from life. In other words, one can certainly be repulsed or saddened by evil in the way it separates one from life and weakens oneself. In this manner, one gains a more adequate idea of life and leaves the encounter with evil empowered rather than weakened.

Now one can imagine the reaction of readers and students to such a position. If Bataille’s affirmation that evil literature is a quasi-mystical experience elicited a certain amount of resistance, a reading in which evil in general and more specifically is life affirming and empowering in literature can only solicit more disbelief and backlash. It is with Deleuze’s position firmly in mind that a practical turn to literature is appropriate.

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the more widely read authors of twentieth century American fiction is Flannery O’Connor. While associated with the sub-genre of Southern Gothic in American letters, O’Connor often took pains to distance herself from a quick and easy reading of her work into “Southern” or “gothic;” she preferred to underline how her fiction aimed at a larger literary problem of “romance” and “realism” that only happened to find itself aided by geography and certain tendencies that one might label “gothic.”<sup>9</sup> Be it “southern” or “gothic” or “grotesque,” almost any fiction writer would agree with her when she claims, speaking of Conrad, the writer “subjected himself at all times to the limitations that reality imposed, but that reality for him was not simply

coextensive with the visible. He was interested in rendering justice to the visible universe because it suggested an invisible one..." (*Mystery and Manners*, 80). O'Connor's preoccupations are those of a writer first and a regionalist second. Yet it is often through a very visible use of violence and evil she attempts to render justice to the invisible universe. As a writer, she offers a test for our thesis of empowering evil.

The plot of her short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is well known: a grandmother, her son and his family travel from Georgia to Florida for a family vacation. The grandmother attempts to convince her son, Bailey, not to take the family to Florida because she wants to go Tennessee to visit relatives. One of her arguments is the fact that an escaped killer, the Misfit, is on the loose and headed to Florida as well. During the trip, the Grandmother recalls a plantation she once visited when she was young and convinces Bailey to turn off the main road to find it. Realizing she was mistaken in her memory of the plantation, the Grandmother accidentally sets the family cat free in the car, causing an accident. On the desolate country road, the Misfit and two other criminals find the family, and when the Grandmother recognizes the killers, she seals the family's fate. One by one, the Misfit kills the Grandmother's family (Bailey and his son and then his wife, daughter and baby) before the Grandmother, in a widely-commented moment, reaches out to touch the Misfit, declaring, "Why, you're one of my babies. You're one of my children!" The Misfit recoils from her and shoots her, ending the story.

The advantage of this text is it invites the reader to judge. Of course, with a character called the Misfit, this is not much of an accomplishment, but it is the character of the Grandmother who comes in for the most scrutiny. O'Connor pushes the reader in this direction, to a certain extent, noting how the Grandmother's fate is particularly tied to a Christian encounter with death (*Mystery and Manners*, 110). But she also is careful about the Grandmother's last act, adding a word of warning to those quick to judge: "It would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make. It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery" (*Mystery and Manners*, 111). O'Connor here offers an interesting clue on reading that ties in very closely to the structure we have elaborated with Deleuze, in spite of her choosing later to align the "mystery" of her text in a Christian framework. What is this mystery for O'Connor and how does it fit in to our reading of evil with Deleuze?

Let us return to the problem of judgment. There are two ways of judging in this short story. The first and most obvious is built around a simple thematic reading: the Misfit and his cohorts are clearly evil and the Grandmother's self-absorbed satisfaction and smugness come in for a rather severe payback. There is thus a tendency to read the story as a form of extremely severe retribution for sins of pride and selfishness on the Grandmother's part. That the Misfit remains unpunished and free at the end of the story is a source of profound resistance on the part of most readers. Another, more subtle level of judgment at work in O'Connor's fiction in general is that of the very literary genre in which she writes: realism. While the grotesque certainly exaggerates, it remains anchored in the constraints of modern prose in which the text finds a value or meaning in its reflection of reality. Thus, O'Connor famously declares she is a realist but one of distances (*Mystery and Manners*, 44). This is important because it explains the difficult relationship she (and other writers of different "regions") has with her work being defined by the South. When speaking of her "realism of distances" she notes the grotesque and the South's production of particularly grotesque characters is more about the superior role of fiction than it is about any one region. In making this comment,

O'Connor is then taking aim at the more fundamental judgment that good fiction reflects the world and presents a believable re-presentation of reality. The grotesque and the violence it often engenders are meant to undo the judging eye of the reader and present something else. When speaking of her realism of distances, O'Connor says something much like Deleuze above when describing the writer as someone who returns from a journey, her eyes pierced and bloodshot from the overwhelming vision she has seen: "In the novelist's case, prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up. The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that you find in the best modern instances of the grotesque" (*Mystery and Manners*, 44).

These two systems of judgment are visible from the first pages of O'Connor's story. Typically, it is O'Connor who sets the reader up by choosing a narrative technique that modulates between direct and indirect presentation of speech and thoughts. Thus, the reader easily slips into a mode of reading that judges the novelist's craft (does the scene adequately re-present reality?) and follows the broad, thematic lines of judgment of the plot itself. Thus, the first paragraph opens with the Grandmother attempting to talk her grandson out of the trip to Florida: "Now look here, Bailey," she said, "see here, read this," and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose [*sic*] from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose [*sic*] in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did" (*The Complete Stories*, 117). In this short quote, the direct presentation of the Grandmother's speech appears to prop up a neutrality on the part of the narrator, a neutrality immediately undercut by the masterful use of adjectives setting up the confrontation between mother and son: "thin hip," "bald head" and the verb "rattling." While this grandmother seems intent on protecting her family, the guilt she invokes by arguing against a trip to Florida and the almost devilish energy she deploys in haranguing her son cast her, from the first lines in, an unflattering light. O'Connor then explicitly reinforces this view on the following page when she describes the scene in the car as it sets out on the road to Florida, foreshadowing the fate of the family:

The old lady settled herself comfortably, removing her white cotton gloves and putting them up with her purse on the shelf in front of the back window. The children's mother still had on slacks and still had her head tied in a green kerchief, but the grandmother had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady (118).

Once again, it is in a tightly controlled use of adjectives that O'Connor reinforces the vanity of the grandmother through the litany of accoutrements described in open comparison with her daughter-in-law: note the chiming of the fricatives in "collars" and "cuffs," of the liquids of "lace" and "neckline," of the plosives in "pinned" and "purple," and the aspirates in "spray" and "sachet." In three lines, O'Connor offers a quick lesson in the poetic use of sound as she subtly underlines the manners of the Grandmother and the vanity underpinning them, even to her shortly-to-come death.

While subtle, O'Connor has nonetheless stepped into the narration to open up a rift between the grandmother and her family, and it is into this opening that the reader jumps, opening up his judgment. It is important to note in these two examples of O'Connor's narration, the realist pact between the writer and the reader is not broken: language is deployed in a manner that appears to adhere to reality, and thus, the reader is only too eagerly led down the path of judgment by the writer.

O'Connor's story continues in a controlled deployment of direct and indirect (and sometimes free direct) presentation until approximately two-thirds of the story and the family's accident. It is at this point, in the family's encounter with an embodiment of evil that O'Connor's style changes in an important manner and one can detect her "realism of distances." In this final third of the story, direct and indirect presentation are still present, but their veracity is called into question by her style. The use of the conditional mood and conditional phrases suddenly undermine the solidity of her language. Even more importantly, it is in this section of the story O'Connor turns to what is perhaps her trademark phrase: "as if." The structure of this phrase is important because "as" sets up an equivalence, a re-presentation in language based on the un-thought judgment of realism and mimesis. However, at the very instant O'Connor offers this "grounding" of language, she undoes it with the conditional use of the interrogative "if." Thus a strange no-man's land opens up, with re-presentation suddenly caught in a plane of sorts where signifier and signified are brought together in realist narration and then suspended. O'Connor deploys this phrase at crucial moments in the story, such as when the family first encounters the Misfit: "The grandmother had the peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew. His face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was" (126). Importantly, throughout this section, as in this quote, the "as if" appears in combination with the faculties (of vision, of hearing, of speaking, and, in their synthesis, of re-cognition). Suddenly, the characters of the story (and, in particular, the Grandmother) and the reader cannot quite correctly see, hear, or understand. The tribunal that had cleverly been erected by O'Connor's story and narration comes teetering down and the story veers into the deformation of a realism of distances, or, the grotesque: "She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally she found herself saying, 'Jesus, Jesus,' meaning, Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing" (131). Of course, it is in the crucial scene of the Grandmother's murder the "as if" returns twice: "She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, 'Why, you're one of my babies. You're one of my children!' She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake has bitten him and shot her three times through the chest" (132).

This ending leaves readers utterly distraught. To a certain extent, the violence of the grandmother's death is to be blamed for this, but more fundamentally, it is the confusion of judgment that is the true source of trouble. What has occurred is a very literal encounter with evil but one that no longer allows the reader to make the distinction between good and evil. Indeed, the grounds on which this judgment can be made have been erased and one has shifted from a topography of judgment and the transcendence that grounds such a viewpoint to one of immanence. Yes, the evil depicted is reprehensible but encountering it *beyond* the grounds of judgment (in the no-man's land of O'Connor's "as if") allows one to rise above one's reactive judgment and see evil as part of the forces that create one's point of view and Life itself. This is what O'Connor refers to as the "mystery" of the text, but it can also be read with Deleuze as affect and the crossing of a certain threshold of judgment. Above, we noted, for O'Connor, a realism of distances is a kind of prophecy and it allows the writer

to see far things close up. For Deleuze, the affect of literature is to make one stronger, which is what he calls literature's "fabulating function," recalling the powers of difference examined above: literature reveals powers and becomings one never thought possible, like the child swimming for the first time or one going *beyond* evil, *through* evil. "The ultimate aim of literature is to set free, in the delirium, this creation of a health or this invention of a people, that is, a possibility of life," declares Deleuze (*Essays Critical and Clinical*, 4).

Deleuze is well aware of possible reactions to such a reading. One desires sure ground in the face of the grandmother's brutal murder. One demands retribution, justice, and judgment. Going beyond evil here provides none of that. As Deleuze notes, "Here again, there is always the risk that a diseased state will interrupt the process or becoming... pushing literature toward a larval fascism, the disease against which it fights – even if this means diagnosing the fascism within itself and fighting against itself" (*Essays Critical and Clinical*, 4). The stakes of such a practical reading are, however, beyond judgment. Every body, every text, every encounter, carries with it a capacity to change our present situation, and the practical use of literature and evil is to situate ourselves in such a way that active change can be possible. Why read evil and violent texts? To live life fully, to become active and empowered.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Mauss' *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls, London: Routledge, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> As is well-known, this distinction had a significant influence on the work of Jacques Derrida as well as that of Michel Foucault (the importance of "limit experiences" in his work) and Jacques Lacan.

<sup>3</sup> This explains why parenthood is often explained as a life-changing threshold one crosses, never to go back again.

<sup>4</sup> Bataille notes primitive taboo is primarily directed against violence and to transgress taboo results, necessarily, in suffering (*Literature and Evil*, 23-24).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (edited by Graham Ward, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), the "Introduction" to the collection by Graham Ward (xv-xlvii) and equally the "Introduction" to Bataille by Craig James (3-15).



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<sup>6</sup> Tellingly, in the preface to his collection, Bataille retrospectively situates the texts of his study in relation to his encounter with Surrealism (ix). Again, the argument is not explicit, but this historicization of literature into movements makes possible this narrative of literature breaking with a larger order.

<sup>7</sup> At many points, Deleuze makes a similar argument by underlining how two “horses” are completely different from one another, revealing an entire different world of underlying virtual forces at play: a draft horse is closer to an ox and a racehorse is closer to a greyhound, he declares (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 124).

<sup>8</sup> See Deleuze’s *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> On this question, see the collection *Mystery and Manners* and more specifically “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction.”