

EROTISM
DEATH & SENSUALITY

GEORGES BATAILLE

Translated by
Mary Dalwood



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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 neurosis 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 two new beings are equally products of the first. 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. Eroticism 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.

Taboos acted on behalf of science in the first place. They removed the object of the taboo from our consciousness by forbidding it, and at the same time deprived our consciousness—our full consciousness, at any rate—of the movement of terror whose consequence was the taboo. But the rejection of the disturbing object and the disturbance itself were necessary for the clarity, the untroubled clarity, of the world of action and of objectivity. Without the existence of prohibitions in the first place, man would not have achieved the lucid and distinct awareness on which science is founded. Prohibitions eliminate (violence,) and our violent impulses (those which correspond with sexual impulses) can be counted among them) destroy within us that calm ordering of ideas without which human awareness is inconceivable. But if this awareness is to bear precisely on those disturbed impulses of violence, that implies that it has first been able to set itself beyond the reach of taboos: this presupposes that we can direct the light of the questioning intelligence on to these taboos themselves, without whose existence it would never have functioned in the first place. The aware intelligence cannot in this case look on them as a mistake we are victims of, but as the outcome of the fundamental emotion on which humanity depends. The truth of taboos is the key to our human attitude. We must know, we can know that prohibitions are not imposed from without. This is clear to us in the anguish we feel when we are violating the taboo, especially at that moment when our feelings hang in the balance, when the taboo still holds good and yet we are yielding to the impulsion it forbids. If we observe the taboo, if we submit to it, we are no longer conscious of it. But in the act of violating it we feel the anguish of mind without which the taboo could not exist: that is the experience of sin. That experience leads to the completed transgression, the successful transgression which, in maintaining the prohibition, maintains it in order to benefit by it. The inner experience of eroticism demands from the subject a sensitiveness to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great

than the desire which leads him to infringe it. This is religious sensibility, and it always links desire closely with terror, intense pleasure and anguish.

Anybody who does not feel or who feels only furtively the anguish, nausea and horror commonly felt by young girls in the last century is not susceptible to these emotions, but equally there are people, whom such emotions limit. These emotions are in no sense neurotic; but they are in the life of a man what a chrysalis is compared with the final perfect creature. Man achieves his inner experience at the instant when bursting out of the chrysalis he feels that he is tearing himself, not tearing something outside that resists him. He goes beyond the objective awareness bounded by the walls of the chrysalis and this process, too, is linked with the turning topsy-turvy of his original mode of being.
