Review of:

Fiorella BASSAN and Sara COLAFRANCESCHI (Eds.). Georges Bataille. Figure dell’Eros. Milan/Udine: Mimesis, 2016. 165 pages.

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There are many reasons why it is interesting to dwell on the recently released book, Georges Bataille. Figure dell’Eros (Georges Bataille: Figures of Eros), by Fiorella Bassan and Sara Colafranceschi. The volume not only contributes to the widening of Bataillean—the authors of the essays, as well as the curators, are famous names associated with these studies: Bruno Moroncini, Felice Ciro Papparo, Marina Galletti, and Chiara Di—but also offers an exploration of the amazing psychic turmoil inherent to eros. It shows us, once again, how philosophy is enriched when it opens up to the analysis of psychic experiences.

The editors, Fiorella Bassan and Sara Colafranceschi, have always been interested in unusual aspects of philosophy and its links to emotional experiences. Bassan, professor of Artistic Hermeneutics at the Sapienza University of Rome, is the author of several important studies on the relationship between art and madness—such as her 2009 study on Hans Prinzhorn—whereas Colafranceschi focused her studies on the thoughts of Georges Bataille, to whom she dedicated several essays and a monograph, seeking a deep intertwining between philosophy and psychoanalysis.

It is a book that makes us think, because the observations that Georges Bataille devoted to eros (as to other liminal phenomena such as tears, dancing and playing) are still shocking and topical: its pages reflect the inexorable intertwining within eros of life and death, of intense pleasure and a sense of impermanence; a tangle of ecstasy, torment and anguish that manages to catch a glimpse of the role of those that Bataille defines as “sovereign” communicative experiences.

One of the most important and discussed Bataillean theme is the coincidence of tragedy and ecstasy, of life and death: but how did Bataille understand it, and how do the authors interpret it? There is an aspect that, to Bataille, will always escape the daily and “wise” routine: the greatest
pleasure is linked to death. But how can the death of the individual, whether it is symbolic or real, be likened to ecstasy?

The answer to this question takes up most of the essays. Sara Colafranceschi, in her essay “L’erotismo e il sacro. La scrittura di Emily Brontë nella visione batailleana” (The Erotic and the Sacred: Emily Brontë’s Writing in the Bataillean Vision) shows us how the search for a flight from life can be to the philosopher a creative way to “feel” in a rich and profound way. It enables him to break free from the rigid constraints of a structure that is mainly linked to economic and utilitarian motives, reaching a deep communication with the universal happening—even at the cost of leaving room to a transgression that leads to cruelty towards oneself, cruelty that is likely to trespass into masochism. On whether it is an operation that, according to Bataille, takes place mainly within the feelings of the individual, with little chance of practical achievement, the author of the essay is rather clear: the burning desire for the infinite and continuous is, in fact, “impossible.” And yet, for the philosopher it is critical to grasp those “exorbitant” emotions of desire, beyond the profit and the instinct of appropriation.

It certainly would be difficult to bear life without feelings to color it, and sometimes transfigure or distort it. Art itself wouldn't have a proper space, because art is creativity and freedom, and there are no limits to its expressiveness. As we read in the fine essay by Fiorella Bassan, “Bataille e Ejzenštejn. Un incontro sui temi dell’estasi e della crudeltà” (Bataille and Ejzenštejn. An Encounter on the Themes of Ecstasy and Cruelty), the “Mexican” encounter between the two authors takes place in an “aesthetic” dimension. And it is precisely in this dimension that we find those experiences related to eros as well as to its surplus, to its own risk, to cruelty and to the promise of an alternative and deeper dimension of life.

In his search for the “exorbitant” beyond the law and beyond the rule, Bataille often intertwined the aesthetic dimension with the existential one. The inexorable intertwining of life and death, of good and evil, sometimes tends to obscure their difference. But the isolated individual’s death—according to Bataille—makes sense only on a metaphorical level, as an openness to others and to the world. This, however, requires a more discerning vision of the coordinates of reality, and changes are possible only within these coordinates.

Colafranceschi insists on the fact that the excess, the joy of destruction, the sovereignty which rejects all servitude, far from being just destructiveness, can give us a creative shock (Bassan & Colafranceschi 58). As stated by Bataille “The well-played destruction opens to the game of possibilities.” (40) The consciousness of our limitedness is a chance for a new beginning, states Chiara Di Marco (99) in “Perdersi, essere, vivere.
L’essere isolato è un’illusione” (Getting Lost, Being, Living: The Isolated Being is an Illusion).

Life and death are therefore intertwined in a union of opposites. However, if death is seen as the opposite of life, does it not risk not being the “dialectic” opposite described by Bataille, but rather a deaf, mute and leaden contrast, as claimed by Sartre? In the essay, “Esperire tutte le ‘antinomie implacabili.’ Bataille and Laure” (Experiencing all the “Implacable Antinomie”: Bataille and Laure), Marina Galletti outlines the relationship between Bataille and Colette Peignot, focusing on that “abysmal experience” that the nocturnal ascent of Etna represented for them both. The vision of Etna’s “immense and bottomless” mouth led her, as a matter of fact, to a stampede. But from this vision, in which life seemed to shut “its cover of lead” upon her, Colette would no longer be separated, taking with her Masson's image of “ashes and flames” depicting the volcano (113). The death anxiety can certainly be mitigated by the thought of an image depicting the beauty of life that others will benefit from when we are not around anymore. Colafranceschi calls this a “game of love,” (69) remembering, with Bataille that ultimately “the true life of smile appears,” a smile to which life is essentially reduced.

In her essay dedicated to the erotic language in One Thousand and One Nights, the Arabist Roberta Denaro tells us about a time when “playing” freely with sexuality was allowed. This contrasts with tragic periods that were dominated by horror and violence, and eros seemed to have lost its living space. In contrast to the soft and free eros of the Arabian Nights, the author cites the Story of Zahra, by Hanan al-Shaykh, one of the most disturbing stories produced by the Lebanese civil war. The story revolves around the link between sex, violence and death as the only practices in which the protagonist can experience freedom and joy in a universe dominated by death (86).

One of the strengths of this book, as already stated at the beginning, is that it shows the complexity of eros, a subject that has always caused some friction with civilization. In the essay “Perdersi, essere, vivere.” Chiara Di Marco believes that it is appropriative selfishness, exacerbated by capitalism, that renders the issue thorny. Only a love that respects the other can coexist with civilization; we should develop the ability to tolerate the incomplete, the ability to “wait” and to be generous.

In the essay “La comunità degli amanti. Bataille, l’erotismo e la letteratura” (The Lovers’ Community: Bataille, Eroticism and Literature), Bruno Moroncini, one of the best-known interpreters of Bataille, insists on the importance of the link between literature and evil. The ability to express and tell even the most extreme experiences, filled with anguish and ecstasy, can transform one's fantasies into socially shared experiences,
without on the other hand losing their transgressive and glowing content. Through literature, the author writes “the antisocial aspect of sexual debauchery and perverse practices finds a way to enroll in those corporate boundaries made of standards and values that tend to deny the transgressive impulses of sexuality.” (121) Moroncini seems to also interpret the “excessive” sentiment as an opening to one’s individual hereafter: discussing with Jean-Luc Nancy he is not satisfied by the “exposure” of individuals mentioned by the author, but dwells on that deep, strong and impossible feeling that can lead to a crime of love, but can also lead to finding “the transparency of the world” in the beloved individual (132).

A vindication of the human aspects of Bataille, those that can enlighten our lives, comes from the essay by Felice Ciro Papparo, “Mon cœur mis à nu: Il lato romantico dell’erotismo batailleano (Mon cœur mis à nu: The Romantic Side of Bataillean Eroticism). The author dwells on the importance that feelings have for Bataille, and how history is interwoven with these subjective experiences (145). Papparo, digging into Bataille’s texts, shows us how the philosopher is interested in analyzing the passions of human beings, especially in the excess of a soul that expresses the desire to no longer be a limited subject, but seeks to join the world in a “continuous” dimension. The author shows how Bataille warns us about the attempt to “realize” this experience: in the relationship with the other, “continuity” would only represent violation, pain or exhaustion (155). Within the emotional area, however, falling in love transforms the beloved, interrupts daily life and almost leads us to believe in the “impossible.” It is a profound experience that expresses the tension of the human condition like few others, “to be unable to avoid our limitations but also to remain within them” (Bataille quoted in 157). It is, however, an experience produced by desire and it does not set up another reality. Further developments that could come from this approach are, in my opinion, very important. It could be the key to profitably enter the universe of Bataille, in order to meditate, together, on the unsolved issues of the contemporary world.

Works Cited


BASSAN, Fiorella, and Sara COLA Franceschi (Eds.). *Georges Bataille. Figure dell’Eros*. Milan/Udine: Mimesis, 2016.