

Cells, Recesses, Tombs:

Vertiginous Spaces in Bataille's *Le Bleu du ciel*

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*As part of an ongoing PhD project exploring transgressive literary approaches to urban space and the city in twentieth-century Paris and London, this essay examines the writing of space in Georges Bataille's 1957 work of erotic fiction *Le Bleu du ciel* [Blue of Noon]. Considered in the light of Bataille's own early theoretical writings of the late 1920s and early 1930s, as found in articles published in the avant-garde journal Documents, *Le Bleu du ciel* will be viewed as the staging of an essential conflict, present throughout Bataille's thought, between transgression and containment, structure and formlessness.*

*Denis Hollier has suggested that Bataille's recourse to architectural and spatial analogy is tied to a wider impulse to question and transgress structure in general, for which the vocabulary of architecture provides a linguistic base. Drawing upon this argument, my study suggests that in *Le Bleu du ciel* Bataille's antistructural impulse is developed, within the inherently structured form of the novel, through the exploration of a network of thematically interconnecting spaces: cells, recesses, tombs. These spaces, it will be suggested, are in a state of vacillation in the novel, constantly enclosed and thrown open, confined and transgressed. Drawing upon theoretical work by Maurice Blanchot, the article considers how these vacillating, unstable, and vertiginous depictions of space might relate to the experience of reading – ultimately considering the status of *Le Bleu du ciel* as a textual space that induces vertigo in its readers.*

Towards the end of Georges Bataille's short novel *Le Bleu du ciel* (1957) the protagonist and narrator of the piece, Henri Troppmann, sits in a car outside an apartment building in Barcelona, waiting for a friend to emerge from a radical political meeting. In this meeting, headed by a fervent but unconventional revolutionary whom Troppmann refers to only by her surname, Lazare, a plan has been taking shape. The group, or *cell* (my stress on this word will be explained shortly), of revolutionary agitators has been debating the idea of mounting an assault on a local prison. This plan sparks the interest of the generally cynical and apathetic Troppmann, who immediately offers to act as getaway driver in the raid. It is not latent revolutionary fervor that has been stirred here, however, but rather an intuitive sympathy for the project in hand. Troppmann reflects that: '[a]u fond, j'étais fasciné par

l'idée d'une prison attaquée [‘basically, I was fascinated by the idea of assaulting a prison’].¹

If Troppmann is intrigued by the idea of a prison break, this is a fascination he inherited directly from Bataille, who had written about the symbolic value of such an endeavour as early as 1929. Indeed, Bataille’s enthusiasm for breaching the walls of penal institutions was to maintain a continuous presence throughout his work. In 1957, only five years before his death, he would write in his collection of essays on *La littérature et le mal* [Literature and Evil] that, ‘[i]l n’est pas de signe plus parlant de la fête que la démolition insurrectionnelle d’une prison’ [‘there is no greater symbol of festivity than the insurrectional storming of a prison’].² Denis Hollier has been instrumental in drawing attention to the significance of Bataille’s sustained interest in carceral architecture and space.³ Despite work by authors such as the architectural theorist Anthony Vidler, however, this aspect of Bataille’s work has remained a somewhat neglected area of study, and little has so far been written that explicitly ties the key principles of Bataille’s implicit critique of space to the spaces of his own fiction.⁴ Though Susan Rubin Suleiman has provided a highly influential analysis of *Le Bleu du ciel*’s exterior spaces and street scenes, relating these to the social and political context of the period in which the novel was written, her article does not dwell in detail on the dark, enclosed interiors of the novel.⁵ My essay takes these spaces as its chosen terrain, looking at how the reader’s passage through these claustrophobic, carceral, and vertiginous enclosures shapes the reading experience of *Le Bleu du ciel* itself.

Architecture: Cells

As noted above, Hollier has been pivotal in illuminating Bataille’s interest in penal architecture, arguing that such structures were, for Bataille, at the very origins of

¹ Georges Bataille, *Le Bleu du ciel* (1957; repr. Paris: Flammarion, 2004), p. 135; English translation from Georges Bataille, *The Blue of Noon*, trans. by Harry Matthews (1979; repr. London: Marion Boyars, 1988), p. 110. Though a more literal translation of Bataille’s title would be *The Blue of the Sky*, in what follows I refer to Matthews’s translation of the novel, *The Blue of Noon*. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from *Le Bleu de ciel* are from this source. All further references to these editions will be cited parenthetically as *BC* (in reference to Bataille’s original text) and *BN* (in reference to Matthews’s translation).

² Georges Bataille, *La littérature et le mal*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1970-1988), IX (1979), pp. 169-316 (p. 241); English translation from Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. by Alastair Hamilton (London: Marion Boyars, 1993), p. 107.

³ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

⁴ See Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

⁵ Susan Rubin Suleiman, ‘Bataille in the Street: The Search for Virility in the 1930s’, *Critical Inquiry*, 21.1 (1994), 61-79.

architecture itself.⁶ This argument is principally based on Bataille's early text 'Architecture', first published in the second issue of the subversive arts journal *Documents*.⁷ Here Bataille compares architectural edifices to the '*physionomie*' ['physiognomy'] of the most imposing figureheads of society, '*prélats, magistrats, amiraux*' ['prelates, magistrates, admirals'], arguing that architectural form *in general* presents an imposing expression comparable to the most officious, controlling, and hierarchical aspects of a given society.⁸ Hence the prison is the architectural form *par excellence* – a bald expression of a carceral aspect Bataille sees lurking in all monumental structures. Bataille provides 'proof' of this by referring to the historical example of the fall of the Bastille – a riotous moment that is best understood, he contends, as a venting of the deep animosity felt by the masses '*contre les monuments qui sont ses véritables maîtres*' ['towards monuments which are their veritable masters'].⁹ The prison thus becomes a visible example of an entrenched power relation in which all architecture – in a wider sense, all structure, all form – is implicated. As far as Bataille is concerned, all architecture is repressive and, therefore, '*les grands monuments s'élèvent comme des digues, opposant la logique de la majesté et de l'autorité à tous les éléments troubles*' ['great monuments rise up like dams, opposing a logic of majesty and authority to all unquiet elements'].¹⁰

Bataille's early description of architecture as a dam that holds back unruly elements is highly important. The specific choice of example here – the storming of the Bastille – is also revealing, tacitly relating this repressive, carceral, quality of architecture to an understanding of space. Famously, when the walls of the Bastille were breached the prison was found to be all but empty; the cells containing only seven prisoners.¹¹ Even the prison's most notorious occupant, the Marquis de Sade, was absent, having been transferred to another prison mere days before the liberation. There is a sense, then, in which both the storming and later the destruction of the Bastille can be seen primarily as liberations of *space*. What was predominantly set free in this 'prison break' was the empty space

⁶ Hollier, p. xiv.

⁷ This journal, founded by Bataille, started life as an academic arts review but is better known today as a gathering place for various disaffected members of the Surrealist movement. For more detailed explorations of *Documents* see, for example, Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (London: Zone, 1997); and Dawn Ades and Simon Baker, *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2006).

⁸ Georges Bataille, 'Architecture', in *Œuvres complètes*, 1 (1970), pp. 171-72 (p. 171); English translation from Georges Bataille, 'Architecture', in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, ed. by Alastair Brotchie, trans. by Iain White (London: Atlas Press, 1995), pp. 35-36 (p. 35).

⁹ Idem.

¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹ Richard D.E. Burton, *Blood in the City: Violence and Revelation in Paris 1789-1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 30.

contained within the cells – a process continued by the almost immediate destruction of the prison and ‘setting free’ of the *Place de la Bastille*, a public space created on the site of the former prison. That more or less the only thing locked up in the Bastille was space would perhaps have made perfect sense to Bataille who, as Vidler has elucidated, was consistently interested in investigating the ‘latent criminality’ of space itself.¹²

‘Espace’ [‘Space’] is the subject and title of another of Bataille’s *Documents* articles, in which he explored space with reference to a series of unexpected metaphors, all marked in some way by deviancy and taboo. Space is like an ape dressed as a woman, he says (implying that it is deceptive, anthropomorphic); it is also like ‘*un rite ignoble d’initiation*’ [‘an ignoble initiation rite’] or ‘*un poisson qui en mange un autre*’ [‘a fish swallowing another’].¹³ This last comparison is particularly resonant, suggesting that space is both stratified, like a series of Russian dolls fitting one inside the other, and predatory, devouring. For all these reasons – presented with all this evidence of deviancy – Bataille argues, the ‘*philosophe-papa*’ [‘philosopher-papa’] embodied by the architect or town planner recognizes space as criminal and seeks to contain and incarcerate it.¹⁴ Structures are built, walls erected. The architectural edifice is raised to impose order on unruly or ‘criminal’ space. Space itself thus becomes the ultimate ‘unquiet’ element held back by the architectural/philosophical order. As a partial remedy to this, Bataille mischievously suggests reversing the terms of criminality and putting the philosophers in prison, incarcerating them, ‘*pour leur apprendre ce que c’est que l’espace*’ [‘to teach them what space is’].¹⁵

The prison cell thus becomes the place to go to learn a hard lesson about the nature of space. This is partly, for Bataille, because it is analogous to another kind of cell: those that make up the human body. Here we come to the second key contention laid out in ‘Architecture’, where Bataille argued that: ‘*[L]es hommes ne représentent apparemment dans le processus morphologique, qu’une étape intermédiaire entre les singes et les grands édifices*’ [‘man would seem to represent merely an intermediary stage within the morphological development between monkey and building’].¹⁶ This suggests that humans are caught in the middle, somewhere between the animals that have preceded them and the buildings that rise around them. In this chain of relation the human is rendered, or perhaps

¹² Vidler, p. 130.

¹³ Georges Bataille, ‘Espace’, in *Œuvres complètes*, I, p. 227; English translation from Georges Bataille, ‘Space’, in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, pp. 75-77 (p. 75).

¹⁴ Idem.

¹⁵ Ibid., orig. p. 227; trans. p. 77.

¹⁶ Bataille, ‘Architecture’, orig. p. 172; trans., p. 35.

renders itself, increasingly redundant by the forms it creates. In modelling architecture on the human form, the human becomes a compromised link in an evolutionary process that climaxes in the construction of grand and imposing buildings. Hence architecture's fearful and imposing aspect. The building, for Bataille, is a reminder of a prison we have constructed around ourselves, an external form that surpasses our own.

Darkness: Recesses

The prison break proposed in *Le Bleu du ciel* is never enacted. Troppmann is distracted from it by the arrival in Barcelona of his lover, a typically Bataillean erotic female named Dorothea, or 'Dirty'.¹⁷ The prison walls are left standing, the 'unquiet elements' contained. Nevertheless, while the prison break remains an unrealized project, glimpses of the criminal disquiet contained within the cells are allowed to leak out, finding their way into the text in mediated, symbolic forms. An example of this comes as Troppmann recounts a visit paid to him by Lazare at a point at which he was himself 'imprisoned' – confined to his bed by illness. Recounting this incident to a friend, he says that: '[i]l y avait du soleil dans la chambre mais elle, Lazare, elle était noire, elle était noire comme le sont les prisons' ['There was sunlight in the room, but Lazare was dark. Dark the way prisons are dark'] (*BC*, p. 114-15; *BN* p. 94). Lazare, who proposes the plan to storm the Barcelonan gaol, also embodies something of the darkness and criminal ineffability such structures are built to contain. Her presence brings darkness into the sunny room, and into the imaginative space of the text, just as a successful assault on the prison would, we might infer, allow sunlight into the cells and release 'unquiet elements' onto the streets of Barcelona.

Lazare here becomes an ambiguous, dualistic figure. She carries darkness into the sunlight of Troppmann's room, yet also strives through her revolutionary activities to throw open dark spaces such as prisons. Bearing in mind the unusual biblical name given to this female character, it is revealing to turn here to the work of Bataille's friend and contemporary Maurice Blanchot, who also drew upon the figure of *Lazare* [Lazarus] in his 1955 work *L'Espace littéraire* [The Space of Literature]. In this book Blanchot uses the resurrection of Lazarus as a metaphor for the experience of reading. When approaching a literary work, Blanchot suggests, the reader assumes a role analogous to that of Christ on the threshold of Lazarus's tomb, demanding that meaning emerge from the text with a

¹⁷ For a more detailed critique of Bataille's representations of women in his fiction see Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Pornography, Transgression, and the Avant-Garde: Bataille's *Story of the Eye*', in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. by Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 117-36.

command comparable to the Biblical ‘*Lazare, veni foras*’ [Lazarus, come forth].¹⁸ The experience of reading therefore becomes for Blanchot ‘*quelque chose de vertigineux qui ressemble au mouvement déraisonnable par lequel nous voulons ouvrir à la vie des yeux déjà fermés*’ [‘something vertiginous that resembles the movement by which, going against reason, we want to open onto life eyes already closed’].¹⁹ Just as Lazarus is an ambiguous figure who moves between death and life, dark and light, reading, Blanchot suggests, is an ambiguous, vertiginous experience. Meaning comes forth in response to our call, but something also stays behind, overlooked, in the darkness of the tomb. Thus, for Blanchot, the miraculous ‘*ouverture*’ [opening] of reading is also an enclosure, its meaning also an obscurity: ‘*ne s’ouvre que ce qui est mieux fermé; n’est transparent que ce qui appartient à la plus grande opacité*’ [nothing opens but that which is closed tighter; only that which belongs to the greatest opacity is transparent].²⁰

Vertigo: Tombs

Le Bleu du ciel was fully drafted by May 1935. However, as Michel Surya, Bataille’s biographer, has illustrated, the text of the novel was revisited and revised prior to its eventual publication in 1957.²¹ Given that, as Surya also illustrates, Blanchot and Bataille were close friends from 1941 onwards, and that Blanchot’s 1948 novel *L’Arrêt de mort* [The Death Sentence] is briefly mentioned in the foreword to *Le Bleu du ciel*, it does not seem beyond the bounds of possibility that the Lazare of Blanchot’s work may have had some influence on that of Bataille’s novel.²² Certainly vertigo, and vertiginous spaces, were of the utmost importance to Bataille. In *L’Impossible* [The Impossible], a text written some years after the initial draft of *Le Bleu du ciel* (though published before it), he would write that: ‘*[c]e qui nous fascine est vertigineux: la fadeur, les replis, l’égout ont la même essence, illusoire, que le vide d’un ravin où l’on va tomber*’ [‘what fascinates us is vertiginous: insipidity, recesses, the sewer, have the same illusory essence as the void of a

¹⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *L’Espace littéraire* (1955; repr. Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 256 (translation by the author).

¹⁹ Blanchot, *L’Espace littéraire*, p. 257; Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Anne Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 257. All further English translations of Blanchot are from this source.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, orig. p. 258; trans., p. 195 (modified).

²¹ Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. by Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2002), p. 216.

²² Surya, p. 311. Along with such novels as *Wuthering Heights*, *L’Arrêt de mort* is mentioned in Bataille’s foreword to *Le Bleu de ciel* as an example of a literary work which embodies a state of anguish and excess that Bataille sees as key to his authorship of *Le Bleu du ciel* (BC p. 12).

ravine into which one is about to fall’].²³ *Le Bleu du ciel* offers various explorations of this feeling of vertigo – explorations which play, significantly, upon some of the same motifs of ambiguity and contradiction (openness and enclosure, dark and light, life and death) suggested by Blanchot.

The most intense example of this comes in a scene in the closing sections of the novel. Here Troppmann and Dirty, walking on the outskirts of the German town of Trier, find themselves on the edge of a cliff overlooking the city’s cemetery. Candles mark out the graves below, and the view becomes a vision of a night sky lit by star-like ‘*tombes illuminées*’ [illuminated tombs] (*BC* p. 174).²⁴ A curiously inverted and hallucinatory perspective is achieved – a sense of the sky opening up below as well as above. Troppmann notes that ‘*ce vide n’était pas moins illimité, à nos pieds, qu’un ciel étoilé sur nos têtes*’ [‘this empty space, at our feet, was no less infinite than a starry sky over our heads’] (*BC* p. 174; *BN* p. 143). Space in its most limitless form opens up around them as Troppmann and Dirty, making love for the first time, teeter on the cliff’s edge and nearly fall to their deaths. The vertigo experienced is intense, but also complex. What is conjured is an impression of weightlessness – what Patrick ffrench, borrowing from Paul Virilio, describes as ‘the “fall upwards” into the blue of the sky’.²⁵ This is vertigo as Bataille understands it: not simply a fear of falling, but a moment of abandon in which notions of ‘up’ and ‘down’ are rendered meaningless. Here we glimpse space at its most ‘unquiet’ and unruly. As space becomes unbound and unordered, all means of orientation are surrendered in a moment of limitlessness and impossibility.

Even within this moment of openness, however, a sense of containment is maintained. Dirty and Troppmann push themselves quite literally to the edge of the void, but they do not fall. They achieve a fleeting moment of limitlessness, but even this is compromised by a dual thread of suffocation and enclosure that runs alongside it. Troppmann’s description of the sex taking place between himself and Dirty underlines this impression: ‘*je m’enfonçai dans son corps humide comme une charrue bien manœuvrée s’enfonce dans la terre. La terre, sous ce corps, était ouverte comme une tombe, son ventre nu s’ouvrit à moi comme une tombe fraîche*’ [‘I sank into her moist body the way a well-

²³ This book was first published in 1947 as *La Haine de la poésie* [The Hatred of Poetry] and reissued in 1962 as *L’Impossible*. The quotation here is from George Bataille, ‘L’Impossible’, in *Œuvres complètes*, III (1971), pp. 97-232 (p. 123); English translation from Georges Bataille, *The Impossible*, trans. by Robert Hurley (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 1991), p. 38 (translation modified).

²⁴ Translation by the author.

²⁵ Patrick ffrench, ‘Dirty Life: London – Paris – Barcelona – Trier – Frankfurt’, in *The Beast at Heaven’s Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, ed. by Andrew Hussey (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 61-73 (p. 65).

guided plough sinks into earth. The earth beneath that body lay open to me like a grave; her naked cleft lay open to me like a freshly dug grave'] (*BC* p. 175; *BN* p. 144). The meeting point of sex and death that would become an increasing preoccupation in Bataille's later work could hardly be more explicit here. But it is also significant that this episode, which initially seems like a radical 'opening' of space, in fact involves a far more ambiguous vacillation. The panorama of ravine, cemetery, and sky seem to expand and, simultaneously, to narrow. Everything is drawn back into the enclosed space, the recess, found between Dirty's legs. Both the cut in the landscape and the slit in Dirty's body become 'vertiginous' spaces, open to the vastness of sky and void, certainly, but also drawing us back to the subterranean level of dungeons, basements, graves. Making love above the cemetery, Troppmann finds himself lost in the immensity of the void and, figuratively speaking, dragged beneath the earth, buried alive.

Shortly after this episode Troppmann and Dirty descend and enter Trier itself, passing through the streets of a rundown district on the edge of town. Here they encounter an obnoxious young boy who reminds Troppmann of a '*petit Karl Marx*' (*BC* p. 177). As Troppmann watches this boy pass on the streets, he thinks of the real Karl Marx lying in his grave, '*sous terre, près de Londres*' ['underground now, near London'] (*BC* p. 177; *BN* p. 146). Both Surya and ffrench have noted the significance of this episode, pointing to the fact that *Le Bleu du ciel* is structured by its beginning in London, where Marx is buried, and climax in Trier, where he was born.²⁶ Indeed, if Marx is '*sous terre*', near London, at the novel's opening we find Troppmann and Dirty in a similarly subterranean context: '*[d]ans un bouge de quartier de Londres, dans un lieu heteroclite des plus sales, au sous-sol*' ['in London, in a cellar, in a neighbourhood dive – the most squalid of unlikely places'] (*BC*, p. 17; *BN* p. 11). This basement bar, haunt of drunks and rodents, can be seen as a dungeon-like place. More importantly, when viewed in relation to the '*sous terre*' Marx, whom the novel is subtly structured around, the opening setting of the novel might also be seen to resemble a tomb, a grave ready to accommodate the '*corps étalés*' ['sprawled bodies'] of Dirty and Troppmann (*BC* p. 18; *BN* p. 12). In the most subtle way, through a light but definitely present association, the reader is drawn back to the opening pages of the book, where we find ourselves, much like the reader evoked by Blanchot, standing on the threshold, gazing back into a tomb-like space.

²⁶ Surya, p. 213; ffrench, p. 62.

Conclusion

Narrative pathways through *Le Bleu du ciel* are never straightforward. Moving through the text involves negotiating one unstable, disorientating space after another, passing through an elaborate network of symbolic spaces – basements, recesses, cells, and tombs – whose borders touch each other and whose limits are continuously lacerated and transgressed. The text itself becomes labyrinthine and circuitous, subject to what Bataille himself refers to in the novel's foreword as '*monstrueuses anomalies*' ['freakish anomalies'] (BC p. 12; BN p. 154). Through a study of the treatment of space in the *Le Bleu du ciel* – spaces constantly shifting between light and dark, openness and enclosure, form and the formless, this essay has examined some of the novel's 'anomalies' and obsessions, looking at their place in relation to ideas explored in the broader corpus of Bataille's thought. Seen in this context, what has become apparent is that such anomalies are not anomalies at all, but rather nodal points in a system of thought itself devoted to an interrogation of notions of impossibility and contradiction. Reference to the work of Blanchot, itself linked to the territory inhabited by Bataille through numerous biographical and textual connections, expands the scope of this interrogation, helping to show how the spaces of *Le Bleu du ciel* might be seen to relate to experiences outside the limits of that book, and ultimately to a broader understanding of the unstable, vertiginous experience of reading itself.