

## Writing at the Limits of Reason

Brian Price

What can't I write?

Depending on how you hear it—on what sounds and rhythms come through these words for you—my question might simply be a boast. What can't I write? What, in other words, can't I understand? How can I fail to impress you?

Depending on what you hear, on what echoes forth in an effort of hearing, my question might also be understood to define the very apex of self-doubt. That is, if, in your hearing, the apostrophe fails to appear—and the sound itself certainly does not guarantee the border between supreme self-assurance and a public self-abnegation that the diacritical mark inscribes—I might be heard instead to complain: what cant I write. No question at all; simply an acknowledgment of my own jargon.

If you are hearing this in the U.K. you might take me to be referring to a German philosopher, to a debt I cannot stop owing. Successive words should trouble that sound, but let's at least admit the possibility of what can be heard.

My question, as I hear and here intend it, is an inquiry into what I might be allowed to say. In this sense, my question is much closer to the one asked by the 1980s D.C. punk band, Dag Nasty, when Dave Smalley screamed: "What can I say? Why should I try?" The question is sounded against furious waves of noise, from the paripatetic grinding of four musicians playing so fast that the song might fall apart—will eventually do so. Drums, bass, guitar move in and out of synch, held together less by virtuosity and technique than by a shared commitment to velocity and outrage, by a failure to comply to what is possible, by a belief only in the question itself.

In his treatise on hatred and poetry, *The Impossible*, Georges Bataille adopts a fictional voice; he speaks about poetry through the voice of fiction and not because he needs the mimetic remove. Rather, he does so in order to speak more directly about the medium and does so by way of fiction. Poetry, in Bataille's thinking, could never be understood as medium. Fiction is, perhaps, a way of beginning to speak of it, to speak beyond the limits that decide what constitutes any medium: stanza, verse, meter. We can all count. We can all affirm the categories; identify the terms of belonging. The point, perhaps, is not to belong but to stress the unfamiliar, to believe in the possibility of what is not yet, or ever, wholly sensible; what some, hollowed of thought and shot through with fear, prefer to name God and get on with things.

What cant I write.

## world picture 1

In *The Impossible*, Bataille's narrator, B.—if he can be described this way, if he can be described as *he* at all—answers this way: “I write the way a child cries: a child slowly relinquishes the reasons he has for being in tears.”<sup>1</sup> I cannot with any confidence say why a child ceases to cry, or begins. I am not yet a parent, and I don't know if I will ever be. For now, no child's tears define the outer reaches of my understanding, my values. I speak through no one. Resemblance, for that matter, has never been in the offing, only rarely a source of comprehension and comfort. How, after all, can one see from within a space of identity? How, that is, can we even understand identity spatially?

B.'s imagined child ceases to cry, I can only imagine, because he has forgotten the terms of the violation, whether his or another's. Why should I try gives way to what can I say. The limits have been discovered. One can move beyond them, define them in turn by the violence they produce. This could be bliss: being without involuntary recurrence, writing without deference. B. will eventually say: “Freedom is nothing if not the freedom to live at the edge of limits where all comprehension breaks down.”<sup>2</sup>

It is this very notion of freedom that moves me. While many of us stand accused of jargon, we might insist instead on writing. As an accusation, jargon is nothing but the fear of language, of writing that exceeds sense and ignores what is possible. What is possible is what has already appeared, what keeps on appearing and never as citation, never in a more spectral form. Discourse is heaped upon discourse; the edges are softened. The borders become clear and are widely and anonymously policed in journals, search committees, and advisory boards everywhere. *He reminds me of me. He doesn't remind me of me at all.* It is never said, of course; it doesn't need to be. It is, more simply, what can be said.

What can't I write?

Comprehension is an effect of jargon. It is an anchoring, a redundancy—apperception's victory over what might otherwise remain open. Comprehension cannot take place prior to naming, to the establishment of what we might like to see once we set out to do that looking. Of course, for cultural conservatives, the accusation of jargon—the effort to silence speculative, theoretical inquiry—refers more to words like *différance*, aporia, *Dasein*, the Other, *jouissance*—to all that resists facile comprehension, the one to one correspondence. For me, jargon consists of words like *fabula*, *syuzhet*, *mise-en-scene*, long-shot, shot/reverse-shot, Technicolor, diegetic sound, non-diegetic sound; the basic terms, in other words, of film studies. If you have ever taught a film class and relied too strongly on such terms, quizzed students on their ability to identify those structures, what you will recognize immediately is the way in which the terms themselves foreclose variation and difference. What one reveals, in so doing, is not art, but a muted structure of the beautiful, the culture industry, the apparatus—a term now regularly lambasted as jargon, as the irrational fantasy of the jargonist.

The concept has been historicized, set to period. Apparatus theory is said to describe a turn in film theory that emerges in French film culture in France after May '68 and sustained world-wide until the late 80s and early 90s, when cognitivism—a science of the mind—proved how unreasonable the whole thing was, how any desire to think state power as a question of the image and identification is but gross fantasy, raw fiction.

## world picture 1

How well these words come through me, still. How well I remember one such scientist drawing a map of the brain in chalk and pointing to the place D minor was said to reside. Historicism comes to replace it, to document what can be seen, touched, and counted and to create a period that can now be diagnosed and identified as other, as neither present nor desirable. If I dare speak the word, I earn myself a place alongside the obsolescent and wholly retrograde, the irrational. I can be sent back in time.

I was sent to Siberia and I built the sun.

On his way toward a discussion of Foucault and the *dispositif*, in *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif*, Agamben reminds us that Plato never offered a stable definition of his most important term: the idea.<sup>3</sup> Others do, Agamben tells us, and he is quick to call out Spinoza and Leibniz for their more geometrical inclinations. Heidegger and Derrida refused this, as well; were never satisfied by the stability of any frame. I'm still wondering about Lacan, about how loose those terms are. Many make them so.

I am also beginning to wonder why we pay more attention to how an image is made than to what it might be said to contain. *Margot at the Wedding* tells of two sisters in an unsuccessful effort of estrangement. It speaks well to the shifting patterns of intimacy within the family, between all of us—what we can know that the other cannot; what we can say to one, but not to the other; what gets said about us, even though we assumed that confidence was ours alone. Bodies move, reasons form, and everything changes. Margot wonders when it is that she's crazy. I wonder how we define our wellness and rest assured. How, that is, we comprehend being when being itself necessarily eludes comprehension.

Would it be better for me to point here to the way in which a long shot tends to capture the body from the ankles up, with some headroom?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Impossible*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights, 1991), 39.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif* (Paris: Rivages Poche/Petite Bibliothèque, 2007), 7.