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## The Profane and the Sacred in *Insatiability*

In his lifetime Witkacy was strongly aware of his philosophic and artistic isolation among his Polish contemporaries; however, once placed on the world stage, his work seems to have found more than a few kindred spirits. Artaud, Strindberg, Shaw, Nietzsche, Heidegger have all been the subject of comparative analyses with the Polish avant-garde writer, but points of intersection between Georges Bataille and Witkacy have yet to be investigated. From a brief biographical comparison, one can see striking similarities: Both wrote in the first half of the 20th Century and were not well respected during their lifetimes, both underwent psychoanalysis, and both wrote philosophical as well as literary works. More important than common biographical details, their works have many recurrent themes, most notably, the theme of transgression. Bataille placed a great deal of importance on the topic of transgression; in fact, he devoted entire works to the subject, such as *Eroticism* and *Tears of Eros*. Witkacy, on the other hand, did not explicate the theme in his theoretical works, but he does ascribe a great deal of significance to it in his literary work, *Insatiability*. In this essay, I would like to investigate Witkacy's novel, *Insatiability*, with the aid of Bataille's socio-philosophical explorations of transgression and the limits of reason.

### *Insatiability* and the "Mystery of Everything"

"Awakening," the opening chapter of Witkacy's novel *Insatiability*, sets the tone for Genezip Kapen's (a.k.a. Zip) erotico-philosophical adventure. Based on a dream, in which he asphyxiates a stranger, and his first intimate en-

counters, the hero experiences both a sexual and existential epiphany: "All at once the mystery of his dream and his erotic future became the mystery of *Everything*: it encompassed himself and the whole world. It embraced not just the inscrutability of life's each and every moment but the stunning mystery of the entire universe." And so begins Zip's adventure to solve this mystery of everything without fear or "else perish," yet he still wonders "why this drive for the all?"<sup>1</sup>

Embedded in Zip's quest, we find Witkacy's theory of unity in multiplicity. In his most developed philosophical work, *Concepts and Principles Implied by the Concept of Existence*, Witkacy explicates this theme by an examination of the structures of being, i.e. what makes an individual existence unique in a world composed of multiple existences. Ultimately, he was unable to reconcile the duality of an Individual Being viewed externally, its corporeity, i.e. its multiplicity "for others," which determines its membership in the species, with an Individual Being viewed internally, its consciousness, its unity "for itself," which makes it unique.<sup>2</sup> For Witkacy, an individual's awareness of this fracture between "Self" ("I") and "Other" ("Not-I") evokes a metaphysical unrest or a feeling of strangeness because the recognition causes both an awareness of the uniqueness of personality – an occasion to rapture or wonder – and an awareness of the horror of being differentiated.

As noted above, Zip relates this existential mystery of everything to the erotic. Bataille's work on the erotic proves useful in exploring this connection. For Bataille, the erotic and our relationship to sexuality always involve anguish: "In essence the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation."<sup>3</sup> This violation in eroticism, related to reproduction, involves shifts between discontinuous states, i.e. separate beings, and continuous states, i.e. connected beings. Each individual being is distinct from all other beings. Beings that reproduce are distinct from each other, and the offspring is distinct from the parents. While the events of the life of the offspring may be of interest to the parents, the individual experiences his birth, life, and death alone, separate, discontinuous from others. "Between one being and another there is a gulf, a discontinuity." This gulf cannot be eliminated, but "we can experience its dizziness together."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Insatiability*, trans. L. Iribane, Northwestern University Press, Chicago 1996, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> See B. K. Michalski: *A System of General Ontology, or Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's Universal Science of Being*, "Dialectic and Humanism" 1985, No. 2, p. 169–190.

<sup>3</sup> G. Bataille: *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, City Lights Books, San Francisco 1986, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12–13.

Bataille begins the explication of eroticism by focusing first on asexual reproduction in simple organisms and then on sexual reproduction in complex organisms, including human beings. In human reproduction, in most cases, a process of transition from two individual beings in states of discontinuity in the act of sexual reproduction achieve “one moment of continuity” in which there is dissolution of the boundaries of bodies.<sup>5</sup> After this moment of continuity, the individual beings return to a state of discontinuity as separate beings. The play of this shifting, Bataille claims, is the feeling of eroticism. Ultimately, Bataille argues that as discontinuous beings, we strive for continuity. Our “ephemeral individuality” is difficult to accept, so “there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is.”<sup>6</sup> Bataille emphasizes that the continuity of existence is not knowable, but “it can be experienced” at certain moments. “The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self contained character of the participants as they are in their normal lives;”<sup>7</sup> the result of this dissolution is contact with an experience of the sacred.

It is this fracture, this metaphysical “*mystery of Everything*” that Zip sets out to explore through his erotico-philosophical adventures, for while this mystery cannot be explicated fully through philosophical discourse, for Witkacy and Bataille, it could be experienced beyond the limits of reason during intense physical and emotional moments that occur in sacred time.

## The Sacred and the Profane

To understand how eroticism connects to the sacred and inner experience, Bataille employs the Roger Callois theory that human time is divided into profane and sacred time. Profane time is considered “normal” time, the time of work, during which taboos are respected; sacred time, on the other hand, is considered the time of celebrations, during which taboos are transgressed. In other words, sexual life, murder, war, and death in general “are grave if not overwhelming disturbances where work is concerned.”<sup>8</sup> For Bataille, work has been of central importance in human development; however, the world of profane time in a mechanical observance of the dictums of project and work has denatured our existence by removing it from the sacred, inner

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 257–258.

experience. Only through the intense emotions of sacrifice and the erotic can the sacred be reintroduced thereby ending the abuse of our existence in profane time and restoring the inner experience.

Bataille's insight is applicable to *Insatiability*, in which Zip recognizes a clear contrast between the world of work and eroticism:

Zip could not stand the sight of his father's workmen without shuddering and getting queasy in his lower gut. [And yet wasn't there something erotic about it too? Erotomania? No – but a person shouldn't stick his head in the sand while thugs are carving up his next door neighbor.] An immense sadness brought on by two irreconcilable contradictions – the life of the species versus the life of the individual – took possession of him now as he sat there contemplating this picture.<sup>9</sup>

Zip intuits the two "worlds:" the life of the species, associated with the world of work and automatization, and the life of the individual associated with the sacred and metaphysical intrigue. However, the world of work is not only relegated to the obvious factory setting. Zip prided himself on his intellect at an early age as he excelled in the natural sciences, but elementary school tasks dulled his "metaphysical wonder" of his place in the universe, and instead became, what the narrator calls, "forced labour." Furthermore, as he matures into a young man, his quest leads him through many philosophical conversations on ontology, existentialism, fine arts, and socio-political issues. Ultimately, he concludes that philosophy has reached a "dead end" and contains nothing more than "dead concepts", unable to gain access to life's inherent mysteries. In fact, philosophy as a "system of concepts" becomes a project associated with labour in the world of work because it attempts to justify rationally the horror of existence and not affirm/experience it.<sup>10</sup> Bataille would agree with this assessment. Philosophy, for Bataille, as an "undertaking is work" and is only the sum of certain well defined experiences aimed at knowledge." It "excludes without even deigning to notice" the outer most reaches of human life and "moments of intense emotion."<sup>11</sup> The world of work, therefore, sets a rational limit that for Zip must be transgressed, so he must continue his existential quest in the realm of the sacred.

Zip's prioritization of the sacred over the profane is evident early in his life. In fact, in contrast to the laborious elementary school lessons, his cousin

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<sup>9</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Insatiability*, op. cit., p. 30-31.

<sup>10</sup> See: idem: *New Forms in Painting*.

<sup>11</sup> Idem: *Insatiability*, op. cit., p. 258-259.

Toldzio “introduced him to a new world of autoerotic perversions” from which they attained a “diabolical thrill of some ineffable, eternally mysterious, unachievable lust”.<sup>12</sup> In addition to this initiation, Zip recalled finding “indecent prints” in an “insecurely shut drawer” in a family friend’s library, and “[h]e gazed like a spectator to some lewd effigy, upon her naked figure...”<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, in a library filled with philosophical and literary texts, Zip seeks the taboo; he opts for the erotic images which are located not on the shelves with the great works, but on the margins in a locked desk drawer.

Embedded in this prioritization of the sacred is the question of utility and uselessness. For Bataille, there is a clear distinction made between eroticism and animal sexuality. The latter was primarily for the purpose of biological reproduction, while the former was human non-reproductive useless pleasure. Abandoning the utility of procreation, eroticism revels in its uselessness and thus serves as a transgressive act of expenditure opposed to the profane working world, which always seeks to save or accumulate. This anti-social wastefulness is the sociological importance of eroticism:

Erotic conduct is the opposite of normal conduct as spending is the opposite of getting. If we follow the dictates of reason we try to acquire all kinds of goods, we work in order to increase the sum of our possessions or of our knowledge, we use all means to get richer and to possess more. Our status in the social order is based on this sort of behavior. But when the fever of sex seizes us we behave in the opposite way. We recklessly draw on our strength and sometimes in the violence of passion we squander considerable resources to no real purpose. Pleasure is so close to ruinous waste that we refer to the moment of climax as a ‘little death.’ Consequently anything that suggests erotic excess always implies disorder.<sup>14</sup>

Bataille explored eroticism as one of the few recourses left with which to combat society’s obsession with production and accumulation. The erotic experience is seen as being one of the few activities that involved useless expenditure; hence, it served as a release of energy for an individual in a society that no longer understands the value or need for such a release. For this reason Zip cannot stand to look at his father’s factory workers and their obsession with utility and production, opting instead to follow the path of the useless activity of the erotic/sacred. Moreover, *Insatiability* contains no

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> G. Bataille: *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, op. cit., p. 170.

discussion of procreation as a possible outcome of sexual intercourse, except for a brief statement that Zip's wife Eliza was barren.<sup>15</sup>

The concept of uselessness is carried to an even greater extreme in the novel. *Insatiability* contains numerous references to, what Bataille calls, ruinous waste, and they are evident in almost all of Zip's significant transformations. For example, in the chapter entitled *Demonism*, while witnessing the Princess and Toldzio's sexual encounter, Zip engages in autoerotism; the result of which is uselessly dispersed on the bathroom floor. In another reference to waste, he compares the Princess's first name Irina to urine. Lastly, he explicitly and frequently uses the term *excremental* to describe various things, including an idea, a city, and even a friend.

## Sacrifice and the Summit

Zip's transgressions intensify in his three mature relationships: the Princess, who initiates Zip; Persy, who tortures him; and Eliza, who acts as a maternal figure. Led by insatiable desires in these relationships, he violates the most basic taboos including sexual "deviant" acts and murder. In each of these encounters, he attempts to solve the "Mystery of Everything" by reconciling, albeit temporarily, the fissure between Self and Other. These transgressive, self-destructive acts reveal, what Witkacy called, a primordial contradiction: Zip gains a heightened awareness of self, but at the same time his very identity is nearly annihilated.

Zip's "drive for the all" through a reconciliation of self and other draws a striking similarity to certain aspects of Bataille's philosophy:

To ask oneself before another: by what means does he calm within himself the desire to be everything? Sacrifice, conformity, trickery, poetry, morality, snobbery, heroism, religion, revolt, vanity, money? Or by several means together? Or all together? A wink of an eye in which glimmers a deceitfulness, a melancholy smile, a grimace of fatigue together betray the disguised suffering which the astonishment at not being everything, at even having concise limits, gives us.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Significantly, erotic activity parallels Witkacy's theory of the creation of Pure Form in the work of art: just as erotic activity lacks any utility, one of the essential criteria for the creation of art is that it in no way have any utility, which would make assessment of its "value" based only on how well or badly it fulfills its use.

<sup>16</sup> G. Bataille: *Inner Experience*, translated by A. Boldt, State University of New York Press, Albany 1988), p. XXXII.

Bataille further claimed that we cannot escape our desire to be everything, to become one with the whole of being. In other words, there is the attempt to surpass our limited existence; however, an individual simultaneously desires autonomy, individuation. Bataille argued that there is an “uncertain opposition of autonomy to transcendence,” and the individual’s will for autonomy struggles with and occasionally succumbs to the temptations to unite with the “whole.”<sup>17</sup>

The contradictory tendencies to be at one with everything yet autonomous are evident in Zip’s first erotic encounter with the Princess. During this interaction, his fragile personal identity is in danger of disintegration, as he “fought back with the sheer instinct of personality against the herd and against the multiplicity of existence that personality engenders out of metaphysical necessity.”<sup>18</sup> His resistance, however, proves futile, as he and the Princess experience the loss of self in this interaction:

Their bodies meshed, interlocked, and Zip perceived that life was really something. She had the same sensation, only on the brink of death. And that young stud truly went berserk, gorging himself on the fatal passions, both his and hers [...], now melted into one floorless ocean of insanity. She became for him the embodiment of life’s essence: insolent, naked to the point of excoriated... He had been annihilated, so to speak.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, for Zip, erotic conduct reconciles momentarily self and other “into one floorless ocean of insanity.” He experiences “life’s essence” to the point of the “little death,” i.e. the loss of individuation. This is the beginning of his addiction to the erotic and the sacred as an approach to life’s existential mysteries, and similar to a drug, it requires increased doses to attain the same heightened effect.<sup>20</sup> Subsequent, perpetrated acts must therefore, go to greater lengths to test the limits of societal taboos in the profane world of work.

Zip’s next transgression occurs during his courtship of the actress, Persy. Persy plays a metaphysical “game” of insatiability, i.e. she prefers the sexual expectation without consummating or satiating the desire. The culmination of the game comes about when Zip, unable to quench his passion, finds

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<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Insatiability*, op. cit., p. 134.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 142.

<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Witkacy claimed that artists must attempt more elaborate experimentation to access the world of Pure Form and the metaphysical strangeness of existence.

release not in the sexual act, but in murder. Colonel Sump fails in his attempt to use rational discourse to calm Zip, who, in a state of temporary insanity or insatiability, “gripped the hammer... and with all his might struck the bearded, bushy-blonde, brute skull...” In Freudian terms, the pleasure principal was not sublimated to the reality principal, the world of a functional society concerned with production. Immediately after the murder a sense of freedom sets in, but Zip once again doesn’t recognize himself: “He was tasting true freedom now, an unprecedented levity. ‘Gawd! Who am I?’ he thought, going down the stairs.” Despite this exhilarating feeling of freedom in the loss of identity, in the very next paragraph he expresses the beauty of necessity and uniqueness, how things could not be otherwise, once social laws are seen as nothing more than fictitious human constructs:

[...] the sense of ‘thisness’ as opposed to ‘otherness’ – how wonderful to apprehend the quality of absolute necessity in this outrageous kingdom of chance and nonsense such as is raw existence when it is stripped of fictitious social laws concealing the most abominable contingencies.<sup>21</sup>

Fictitious social constructs which allow for society to exist become exposed and the transgressive act is the only manner to achieve some form of heightened self.

Zip’s transgressions escalate from childhood experimentation to sexual intimacy with the Princess to the murder/sacrifice of Colonel Sump. The final transformation takes place on his wedding night. After a period of abstinence, due to the Devamesque B pills, Zip and his wife Eliza consummate their wedding vows. Zip realizes that his efforts to reconcile the contradictions of self and other for any extended duration were futile: “He stopped loving her at that very moment. And why? For his having been liquidated alive: because he could never be himself and her at the same time...” The climactic conclusion of his quest occurs on his wedding night, when he commits the ultimate transgression. Zip, in a manner which bears a striking similarity to the dream that began his quest, asphyxiates his bride. Only through erotic/sacrifice can he simultaneously destroy and become united with the Other:

He [...] dug his hands into that detestable neck. Eliza’s eyes bulged from their sockets and became even more beautiful than before. She offered no resistance, evidently preferring to drown in ecstasy. Pain became fused with pleasure, death with eternal life in

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<sup>21</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Insatiability*, op. cit., p. 401.

praise of the unfolding mystery of Panexistence, which was on the verge of being illuminated. She took a deep breath, but it was no longer a living breath that came out of her body. Her body shook in the final convulsions of death. [...] At last he could love Eliza in his own way; at last they were one.<sup>22</sup>

Through reaching such heights, Zip completely loses the ability to experience metaphysically. Zip had already recognized that after attaining such summits of becoming one with the other, existence becomes utterly banal and a horrific boredom sets in:

Oh to wed life's contradictions for a hundredth of a second and then hold out a split second longer! But, alas, all the joy lies in the overextension; don't count on any orgasm there; climax is nothingness incarnate. Woe to one who holds out for too long; he or she will return to a boredom the likes of which the planet has not seen yet. And only by boredom shall he or she know what death is actually like...<sup>23</sup>

Here we witness Zip experiencing, what Bataille refers to as, the summit and the decline. As mentioned earlier, all erotic acts entail violence, which shatter social boundaries. Transgressions of eroticism and death, performed without an appeal to reason, can leave us with a sense of a summit. The summit takes tragic intensity to its limit: "Essentially, the summit is where life is pushed to an impossible limit. I reach it, in the faint way that I do, only by recklessly expending my strength..."<sup>24</sup> Once the summit is reached or, more precisely, approached, since it can never be truly reached, decline sets in. Decline results from exhaustion, from fatigue. In decline the being is restored to preserving rules of morality, and ultimately boredom sets in.

For Bataille, Zip's final sacrifice approaches a sense of the summit because this crime is a clear expression of violent passions and is devoid of reason. It is not carried out with a specific goal, such as monetary gain or political ambition, but his actions are rather an end in themselves. In this moment of extreme passion achieves *for a moment* his desire for the all, i.e. union of self and other. However, due to such intense experience of the erotic and death, the decline or "the little death" is just as extreme. As a result, Zip experiences the horrific boredom of life. Zip's quest ends and he loses the sense of metaphysical wonder, which coincides with the new society where the world of work, i.e. the world of utility and morality, is prioritized, providing no time for intense emotions and metaphysical experiences.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 566–567.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 309.

<sup>24</sup> G. Bataille: *On Nietzsche*, trans. B. Boone, Continuum Press, London 2004, p. 39.

## Abstract

In this essay I examine Genezip's effort to solve the mystery of existence by employing the theoretical and social insights of Georges Bataille. I argue that Bataille's division of human time into profane and sacred time is applicable to Zip's adventures as he follows sacred/erotic passions as opposed to the world of the profane/work to encounter the mystery. I examine this dichotomy as it is prevalent throughout the novel from Zip's earliest encounters with sexuality and observations of his father's factory workers. He abandons the world of profane not only in the forms of manual labor, but also in the forms of philosophy and literature. Instead, Zip opts for the sacred/erotic as he is initiated into the world of bohemia and experiences self individuation ironically at moments of transgression.

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