

The “Sur” of Sur Nietzsche: Bataille beyond Nietzsche

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The preposition “on” in *On Nietzsche* translates the word *sur*, meaning on but also over or above. It’s a word that serves as a prefix, in French, to both surrealism and *surhomme* – Nietzsche’s overman or superman. In those cases, the word carries connotations of a step *beyond*. With this in mind, I’d like to propose a reading of *On Nietzsche* as *Beyond Nietzsche*. Precisely how does Bataille see himself as *beyond* Nietzsche? And is he correct to do so?

[Some portions of what follows redirect materials from my introduction to *On Nietzsche*.]

[The preposition *sur* in *Sur Nietzsche*]

Sur Nietzsche

What’s in a name? Or a title for that matter?

In the book itself, Bataille observed, tellingly that “Each book is also the sum of the misunderstandings that it occasions,” (177).

The title *Sur Nietzsche* – which I have followed Bruce Boone in rendering as *On Nietzsche* – might just as easily, if not indeed more appropriately have been titled, *Beyond Nietzsche*.

The preposition *sur* means *on* but it can also mean other things: *over*, *above*, or even in this context and as I’d like to propose, *beyond*.

For members of Bataille’s generation and immediate circle, it is a loaded, even overloaded word.

Around 1930, Bataille himself wrote an article on the subject: “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* and *Surrealist*.” *Surhomme* is of course the French translation of Nietzsche’s word, *übermensch*, often rendered in English as either overman (Walter Kaufmann) or superman (RJ Hollingdale). In his article on the ‘Old Mole’, Bataille faulted both the surrealists and Nietzsche for seeking a revolutionary position *above* the world, *above* classes (the word he uses for “above” here is *au-dessus*).

While Bataille does sketch a reading of Nietzsche in the article that is largely consistent with his later readings, his interpretation also suggests that the *base* themes of Nietzsche’s work – laughter, Zarathustra’s “sense of the earth”, etc. – give way to “something elevated, weightless, Hellenic, etc.” (OC II: 102; VE 39): what he derisively calls an “Icarian subterfuge” (VE 43). In this interpretation, Bataille himself regards laughter as the “brutal expression of the heart’s baseness” (VE 39) but interprets Nietzsche’s laughter as “elevated [and] weightless”, light and frivolous, in other words.

The article was written as part of Bataille’s polemic with André Breton over materialism: in place of Surrealist idealism, Bataille offered *base* materialism. “By excavating the fetid ditch of bourgeois culture,” he proposed, “perhaps we will see open up in the depths of the earth immense and even

sinister caves where force and human liberty will establish themselves, sheltered from the call to order of a heaven that today demands the most imbecilic elevation of any man's spirit." (VE 43)

For Bataille, the *sur* of both *surrealism* and Nietzsche's *surhomme* share an idealist aspiration toward a sphere *above* the world, even outside of it.

We can set aside, for the moment, the far from straightforward question as to whether this is an accurate reading of Nietzsche's thought.

Part of my point, though, is to observe the shift that has taken place in Bataille's thought between his article on the "The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix *Sur*", in 1930, and *Sur Nietzsche* in 1944. Not only has he taken on the prefix *sur* on for himself, he has performed something rather more than a rehabilitation of Nietzsche in his thought. By 1944, he has taken Nietzsche and his work on as his own. In fact, in July 1939, Bataille offered his friend Roger Caillois an emphatic explanation of his thought and *his life* at the time in a letter, writing: "My insistence on claiming Nietzsche for myself indicates on its own the direction in which I am going." (*Choix de lettres*, 167)

Before we leave "The 'Old Mole'", we should note that Bataille did not publish the article. The journal *Bifur* accepted it but folded before the piece saw print. By that point, Bataille had probably moved on. The focus of his interests had shifted from his polemic with André Breton to the political questions he pursued in the pages of Boris Souvarine's journal, *La Critique Sociale*, with which he was by then affiliated.

[Bataille and Nietzsche: the return of the same]

But perhaps too, "The 'Old Mole'" had been abandoned because it overstated Bataille's distance from or ambivalence about Nietzsche's thought. Retrospectively, we perhaps too easily accept Bataille's own identification with Nietzsche and his thought, the most powerful and pointed expression of which, I find, appears in the final pages of *Inner Experience*, wherein Bataille imagines Nietzsche: "Walking the woods, along the lake of Silvaplana," he writes, "he [meaning Nietzsche] stopped 'at a powerful pyramidal rock not far from Surlei,'" quoting from *Ecce Homo*. And then Bataille continues, "I imagine myself arriving at the shore of the lake and, imagining it, I weep." (IE 154)

In *Sovereignty*, an unpublished manuscript written in the early 1950s, the author of *On Nietzsche* claimed: "I am the only one to offer myself not as a commentator of Nietzsche but as being the same as he. Not that my thought is always faithful to his... but that thought is placed under the same conditions as was his." (AS 2 & 3 367)

In *On Nietzsche*, he observed: "The difficulties Nietzsche encountered ... I have encountered them in my turn" (5) "To attempt, as [Nietzsche] asked, to follow him is to submit to the same tests, to the same wandering as he did." (5)

Clearly, Bataille's relationship to Nietzsche's thought seems to have undergone a decisive change between "The 'Old Mole'" and his 1939 letter to Caillois.

Obviously, Bataille did not always exhibit the proximity to Nietzsche's thought that we witness in *Inner Experience, Guilty, On Nietzsche, and Sovereignty*. His *complicity* with Nietzsche's thought and work was in fact far more varied than his own delirious over-identification with Nietzsche might suggest. His engagement with Nietzsche was never quite as thorough, never quite as complete as we scholars might like to believe. Indeed, across the forty or so years of Bataille's active writing life, his engagement with Nietzsche went through distinct periods, waxing and waning to a surprising degree. While Nietzsche is an indisputably dominant figure in Bataille's work during the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, by the mid-1950s, Nietzsche has again receded from explicit focus. Aside from a brief preface to an edition of *Zarathustra* published in 1957, Nietzsche's name hardly appears. He was not mentioned in *The Accursed Share* and his name appears only once in *Eroticism*.

Bataille tells us his first encounter with Nietzsche's work, most likely excerpts from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* included in a textbook for the baccalauréat in philosophy he completed in 1917, had come while he was still a believer.

Years later, he looked back on the era and observed: "I was struck and I resisted. But when I read *Beyond Good and Evil* in 1922, I had changed so much that I believed I read what I might have been able to say—if at least . . . I wasn't very vain: I simply thought I no longer had a reason to write. What I had thought (in my way, certainly very vague) was said, it was withering." (OC 8: 640) Another time he would simply say the encounter was "decisive" (OC 7: 459) or laconically claim: "it gave me the impression that there was nothing else to say." (OC 7: 615).

In light of this remark, it is perhaps not insignificant that Bataille's first mature publication – overlooking his early paean to *Notre Dame de Rheims* – was a co-translation of the Russian émigré philosopher Lev Shestov's book, *The Good in Tolstoy and Nietzsche: Philosophy and Preaching* (1923). Without making too much of this, we can nevertheless think of translation as a dramatic mode of mimicry and a way of speaking without speaking, of saying something *after* everything has been said. Bataille would not ultimately pursue a career in translation but he would often quote heavily and, in *Memorandum*, recede almost completely into the selection, arrangement, and presentation of Nietzsche's own words.

Nevertheless, after the Shestov translation, Nietzsche's work receded from view in Bataille's for more than a decade.

Something similar can be said of his reading of Nietzsche's works. We have a list of the books Bataille borrowed from the Bibliothèque Nationale. The list tells us several things on this topic. It tells us the titles and dates of books Bataille borrowed either by Nietzsche or about him. It tells us that Bataille occasionally borrowed books by Nietzsche in German as well as French. It also tells us, through omission, that Bataille owned his own copies of many, if not necessarily all of Nietzsche's books.

This record confirms Bataille's relative distance from Nietzsche's thought during this period: he borrowed a number of books, including some in German during the period from 1922 to 1924, then only one book about Nietzsche between 1924 and 1933. If we take this record as our guide, we can observe that Bataille did not return to a deep engagement with Nietzsche's works until May of 1936, at which point he borrowed sixteen books by or about Nietzsche from May to the end of that year alone.

Bataille's article on the prefix *sur* falls precisely in the middle of this period, suggesting that his ambivalence toward Nietzsche in that piece was not necessarily overstated after all.

Bataille's renewed interest in Nietzsche in May 1936 can, I think, almost certainly be directly linked to the inception of *Acéphale*, the foundational document of which – Bataille's program piece, "The Sacred Conspiracy" – is dated from André Masson's house in Tossa, Spain, April 29, 1936.

This rehabilitation of Nietzsche's thought had been anticipated, even announced, through the abortive series of *Cahiers de "Contre-Attaque"* proposed for publication by that eponymous, unstable group beginning in the spring of 1936. Perhaps tellingly though, the projected "fascicule" on Nietzsche – promoted alongside the Marquis de Sade and Charles Fourier as a "precursor of the moral revolution" (OC 1: 390) – was to have been written not by Bataille but by Georges Ambrosino and Nicolas Calas (under the pseudonym Georges Gilet). Ambrosino was a close friend of Bataille's, while Calas had come into Counter Attack through Breton and the Surrealists.

We can only speculate as to why Bataille did not seek to associate his name with Nietzsche's in print at this point. Of the fourteen proposed publications, Bataille was listed as author or co-author of five, so perhaps he did not feel any necessity to write on Nietzsche. Or perhaps his authorship of the *cahier* on Nietzsche was contested for some reason and these two co-authors proposed as an acceptable alternative within the combustible group. The publication, in any case, was not to be. Counter Attack dissolved in acrimony almost as soon as its first pronouncements reached the public.

Indeed, when Bataille's "The Popular Front in the Street", the first and only *cahier*, appeared May 1936, it was greeted by a note to the press from the Surrealists who had been affiliated with the short lived group, denouncing the publication and the group in general which they claimed manifested *surfascist* tendencies, "whose purely fascist character had shown itself to be more and more flagrant." (OC I: 673)

[Surfascism]

With the *sur* of *Sur Nietzsche* in mind, we should linger for a moment on this word, *surfascism*.

The precise origin and intended meaning of the term remain in dispute. Henri Dubief attributes it to Jean Dautry as wordplay modeled on "Surrealism." Pierre Andler has also claimed responsibility for it and we encounter the term in a note on fascism he wrote in April 1936: "Just as fascism is only a definitive surmarxism, a Marxism put back on its feet, similarly the power that will reduce it can only be a surfascism. Fascism does not refer to itself as surmarxism, since it is called fascism. Similarly, surfascism will not refer to itself as surfascism. It is not forbidden to seek the name that surfascism will bear tomorrow."¹⁹ Henri Pastoureau, for his part, claimed in a letter to Marina Galletti that "the word *surfascism* had been invented by the Surrealists. It can designate both a surpassed fascism (positive) or an exacerbated fascism (negative)." (*Apprenti Sorcier* 297)

As a charge leveled against Counter Attack by the Surrealist group, the term is clearly intended negatively, as an assertion that Bataille and his other collaborators were "more fascist than the fascists." And there was more than a little truth to the accusation. In a letter to Pierre Kaan written in February 1934, during the planning stages of Counter Attack, Bataille had said explicitly: "I have no

doubt as to the level on which we must place ourselves: it can only be that of fascism itself, which is to say on the mythological level.” (*Apprenti Sorcier* 112)

In this light, I think it is fair to say that the *sur* of *Sur Nietzsche* carries shades not only of Nietzsche’s *surhomme* and of *surrealism*, but also, in its way, of *sur-fascism*. The title suggests a book that aspires to be, perhaps dialectically, beyond fascism, beyond surrealism, and, in some way, beyond Nietzsche.

As suggested above, more or less immediately upon the dissolution of Counter Attack, Bataille turned to Nietzsche’s work explicitly and in earnest.

After the first issue of the journal *Acéphale* appeared in June 1936, the second, carried the subtitle, “Nietzsche and the Fascists: A Reparation” (January 1937). The next issue appeared under the Nietzschean aegis of Dionysus (July 1937), and the final issue, published two years later, on the eve of the Second World War, commemorated Nietzsche’s descent into madness.

Bataille’s engagement with Nietzsche in the context of *Acéphale* was both explicitly political and yet significantly an attempt to transcend politics. His “reparation” of Nietzsche was both a celebration of Nietzsche’s life and thought and a curious and possibly curiously misguided “reclamation” of it.

The quotation from Kierkegaard at the beginning of “The Sacred Conspiracy” makes Bataille’s goals clear: “What looks like politics, and imagines itself to be political, will one day unmask itself as a religious movement.” (VE 178)

In that essay, published in the pages of the first issue of *Acéphale*, he affirmed, in no uncertain terms: “We are ferociously religious.” (VE 179)

This moment in Bataille’s life and work was, needless to say, incredibly complicated. In *Acéphale* – the journal and the secret society – Bataille attempted to use the headless man depicted in André Masson’s famous drawing, as well as the Nietzschean god Dionysus and the figure of Nietzsche himself as masks in his efforts to simultaneously unmask fascism and propose an alternate path toward a new world he saw announced by Nietzsche’s work, a world beyond good and evil, beyond moral servitude.

Detailed analysis of this moment is beyond the frame of my inquiry today, not least because Bataille himself moved decisively beyond the gestures and strategies of that moment himself. As he put it in a note for the preface to *Guilty*, “the beginning of the war made decidedly tangible the insignificance of the attempt in question” (*Guilty* 158).

Some observations may however be made. First, Bataille’s dramatic use of Nietzsche’s life and thought – his use of Nietzsche’s life and thought, as well as Nietzsche’s “stolen” or betrayed legacy, as *dramatis personae* in Bataille’s own engagements. His “reparation” of Nietzsche offered him entrance into a dramatic narrative filled with “danger”, with characters he could support or denounce, be for or against. By thinking *with* Nietzsche, Bataille granted his thought the weight of an experience.

Second, that the “break” between this moment and the later moment in which he wrote and published *On Nietzsche* is ambiguous at best. *On Nietzsche* includes as an appendix a section on

“Nietzsche and National Socialism”. The section essentially reprints an article on Nietzsche and fascism that Bataille published in *Combat*, a journal founded as a journal of resistance to the Nazi occupation. But it also derives more or less directly from an article on Nietzsche and the fascists published prior to the war in *Acéphale*. *On Nietzsche*, in other words, constitutes a continuation of Bataille’s pre-war anti-fascist agitation not only conceptually but also in actual language.

On this point we should also recall that the band wrapped around the first edition of *On Nietzsche* was quite explicit: it proposed that the book was positioned “at the antipodes of fascism”.

Third, we cannot pass over this moment in Bataille’s work without regretting, for his sake, his misguided attempt to, in his words, “found a religion.” Again in the notes for a preface to the second edition of *Guilty*, Bataille observed of the period of his involvement with *Acéphale*: “I had resolved, if not to found a religion, at least to direct myself toward that goal.” (*Guilty* 158) He makes clear in the following paragraph that the beginning of the war put an end not only to *Acéphale* but also to the ambitions that motivated that endeavor, yet nevertheless, the suggestion is there.

That Bataille should have pursued this endeavor under a Nietzschean banner is all the more unfortunate. In *Ecce Homo*, among many other places, Nietzsche remarks rather definitively: “There is nothing in me of a founder of a religion – religions are affairs of the rabble; I find it necessary to wash my hands after I have come into contact with religious people. – I want no ‘believers’” (*Ecce Homo*, “Why I Am a Destiny” § 1).

To put the matter charitably, we might say that Bataille’s thought grapples with the problem of religion in ways that Nietzsche’s does not. But this is not to say that the conjunction was entirely baseless nor again that it would disappear from Bataille’s work following the dissolution of *Acéphale*. After the liberation of Paris in the fall of 1944, as Bataille prepared *On Nietzsche* for publication, he invited Michel Leiris to a small gathering— with Maurice Blanchot, Raymond Queneau, and a few others—at his apartment in Paris at which he planned to read a short text related to *Memorandum*, a book that would soon be published in honor of Nietzsche’s centenary. “The only question (in any case for me),” he wrote to Leiris, “is to know if a non-Christian spiritual life is possible and what it might be.” (*Choix de lettres* 233) Needless to say, this sentiment directly echoed one of the foundational concerns of *Acéphale*, proposed by Georges Ambrosino and Bataille as a question to Pierre Andler, and undoubtedly others, in 1938: “What does religious experience mean to you? Is it what you want for yourself? To what degree? And in what way?” (*Apprenti Sorcier* 455)

In 1945, when Bataille published his lecture on sin – part two of *On Nietzsche* – in the Christian journal *Dieu Vivant*, he introduced the text with a letter to the editors explaining something of his purpose in the piece. He quoted Nietzsche: “We want to be the heirs of meditation and of Christian penetration” (*Volonté de Puissance*, bk. 4 §552) and “... to go beyond all Christianity by means of a *hyper-Christianity* and without contenting ourselves with giving Christianity up.” (*Volonté de Puissance*, bk. 4 §557; WP § 1051) For the word hyper-Christianity, in the English translation of *The Will to Power*, Kaufmann and Hollingdale have *supra-Christian*. Nietzsche’s word is *überchristliches*. One might propose an alternative French translation: in place of *hyper-Christianisme*, *sur-Chrétienne*.

At the conclusion of that passage, Bataille wrote: “What Nietzsche affirms, I affirm after him without a change.” (US 27)

[Selective Reading...]

Despite this affirmation, we are left to observe that Bataille's reading of Nietzsche is thus and quite clearly a *selective* reading.

This selective reading becomes literal in *Memorandum*, which is simply an assemblage of quotations and a rather messy one at that: the fabulist of *Zarathustra* appears alongside the aphorist of *The Gay Science* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. Aphorisms are occasionally culled from the essays of *On the Genealogy of Morals* and the autobiographical sketches of *Ecce Homo*. Notes and unfinished pieces from *The Will to Power* are intermixed throughout. Indeed, almost one third of the quotations in *Memorandum* derive from *The Will to Power*.

If Bataille read Nietzsche selectively, which books by Nietzsche did he read? Here again, *On Nietzsche* and *Memorandum* are useful guides. Across both of these volumes, Bataille quotes from only the books mentioned just now: *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, *Ecce Homo*, and *The Will to Power*.

The works of Nietzsche's early and mid-periods are notably absent, as are the later works, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*, *The Case of Wagner*, and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*.

The section titles in *Memorandum* give us another sense of Bataille's selective interest in Nietzsche. Where we might expect to find a list of Nietzsche's major concepts – the Eternal Return, Will to Power, Overman – we encounter instead: Essential Features, Morality, Politics, and Mystical States.

Needless to say, Bataille was not a Nietzsche *scholar*. He did not presume or pretend to offer an *objective* or *critical* reading of Nietzsche. But herein lies another paradox of his approach to Nietzsche: his reading is *selective* but not fragmented. Bataille does not attempt to isolate topics for study in Nietzsche's corpus but rather attempts to engage that corpus in such a way as to embrace it not only as a whole, but also as the record of *one* experience, Nietzsche's experience, an experience he attempts to *take on* or, as he remarked to Roger Caillois, *claim*, as his own.

Thus, we do not find Bataille sifting through Nietzsche's work, separating wheat from chaff, attempting to "correct" Nietzsche's errors or oversights, or curb his excesses. Nor does Bataille seek to *apply* Nietzsche's thought as if it were a body of critical tools for cultural interpretation. Most importantly, for our purposes now, Bataille never pains to distinguish his thought from Nietzsche's, as does, for example, Walter Kaufmann.

Bataille is in fact occasionally, perhaps even frequently both critical and, worse, dismissive of Nietzsche's major concepts as well as of his approach to thought.

In *On Nietzsche*, he observes: "Nietzsche's doctrines are strange in this way: in that one cannot follow them. They put imprecise, often dazzling hints in front of us: no path leads in the indicated direction. ... Nietzsche: prophet of new paths? But overman, eternal return are empty as motives for exaltation or action. ... The will to power is itself a poor subject of meditation. Having it is good but reflecting on it?" (94-95)

Moreover, as this quotation suggests, Bataille consistently limits the will to power to a political interpretation of this phrase (see *On Nietzsche* 8 and AS 2 & 3 367), which is to say that Bataille misunderstands at least one of Nietzsche's major concepts in a crucial way.

Despite this criticism and misunderstanding, Bataille takes Nietzsche's experience as a starting point for his own understanding of a certain kind of experience, even as he suggests that Nietzsche himself did not understand the full implications of that experience.

In *On Nietzsche*, for example, Bataille observes that Nietzsche was "critical in the name of a *moving* value, whose origin and end he has – obviously – been unable to grasp" (106). Elsewhere in the same book, he writes: "the extreme, unconditional longing of humanity was expressed for the first time by Nietzsche *independently from a moral goal and from serving a God.*" But in the next sentence he proposes that "Nietzsche could not define [this longing] precisely but it animated him" (4).

For his part, Bataille will ultimately describes that longing in his own terms, those of the accursed share, in which "the positive value of loss can only be given in terms of profit" and claims that Nietzsche was "not clearly aware of this difficulty" (4).

Rather than correcting Nietzsche, Bataille supplements his thought or translates it into his own terms, and thereby makes a very curious *use* of it. What makes Bataille's *use* of Nietzsche curious is that he uses him, as he says, for *nothing*.

Indeed, over and over again, Bataille tells us that Nietzsche's work – his concepts – are useless. In *On Nietzsche*, he observes, in both chagrin and self-defense: "Viewed from the perspective of action, Nietzsche's work is an abortion – one of the most indefensible – his life is only a failure, the same as the life of anyone who attempts to put his writings into practice." (ON 13)

As noted previously, Bataille is quite clear on this point: "Nietzsche's doctrines are strange in this way: in that one cannot follow them. They put imprecise, often dazzling hints in front of us: no path leads in the indicated direction" (94)

In *Memorandum*, he's blunt: Nietzsche's paths "lead nowhere" (193).

This view is consistent with his critique of the fascist recuperation of Nietzsche: "It is frightful to see reduced to the level of propaganda a thought that remains comically unemployable," (6).

If Nietzsche is *useless*, the fascists betray him when they attempt to make use of him *in any way*. That their *specific* uses were in so many cases the precise opposite of Nietzsche's stated values – the cosmopolitanism of the Good European harnessed for German nationalism and anti-Semitism – was only an additional betrayal.

But more importantly this view is also consistent with Bataille's contemporaneous self-criticism, voiced in his famous 1937 letter to Alexandre Kojève, in which Bataille describes himself and his own life as "unemployed negativity".

"My experience," he wrote, "lived with a great deal of concern, has led me to think that I have

nothing left 'to do.' ... If action ('doing') is—as Hegel says—negativity, the question poses itself of knowing if the negativity of someone who has 'nothing left to do' disappears or persists in a state of 'unemployed negativity.' Personally, I can only decide in one sense, being myself precisely this 'unemployed negativity' (I could not define myself in a more precise fashion)." (*Guilty* 111)

The very uselessness, instability, even incoherence of Nietzsche's concepts seems to be at the core of their paradoxical utility for Bataille. Were those concepts scientifically accurate they would stand as merely stable, objective facts. As unstable concepts, fictions even, they open an abyss in thought, or rather the experience of an abyss in thought, what Bataille calls inner experience.

[Nietzsche's inner experience]

Bataille offers perhaps his most condensed "exegesis" of Nietzsche's life and thought in "Nietzsche's Laughter," an article published in 1942 in the journal *Exercice du silence*. Therein he reimagines Nietzsche's experience and core doctrines in his own terms: the possible, the impossible, inner experience. Written more or less immediately following *Inner Experience* and prior to *Guilty*, drafts for the essay appear in notebooks that also contain embryonic material for *The Little One*, *The Accursed Share*, *The Oresteia*, and other works. In it and in the notes and drafts for it, we can see Bataille making an effort to situate his work in relation to Nietzsche's. Later that fall, he would return to the notebooks for what would become, *Guilty*, and, still later, in the January 1944, begin *On Nietzsche*. The piece, I think, serves as a kind of fulcrum and point of clarification between *Inner Experience* and the two later works.

The essay is as much about God or rather the absence of God as it is about Nietzsche. It also evidences that kind of dismissiveness and neglect that we've seen Bataille display in his other writing about Nietzsche. For that reason it offers a condensed case study of Bataille's strategies and purposes.

He's quite direct: "I explain myself in this way," he writes, "with the intention of giving Nietzsche's inner experience a significance that has not yet been drawn from it." (US 22)

Here again as we've observed elsewhere, Bataille dismisses the overt meaning of Nietzsche's major concepts one after another or rather translates that meaning into his own terms.

Of the will to power, he writes: "The will to power is at bottom the will to the impossible, but practiced in the spiritual realm as much as the temporal." (Notes for "Nietzsche's Laughter" OC VI: 480)

Still more pointedly, of the thought of the eternal return, Bataille observes that it is best understood not as truth but as an abyss: "As a truth on which to seat a thought, the eternal return is a fable, but as an abyss? It cannot be closed." (OC VI: 312; US 24 tm)

The thought, he says, "opens an abyss ... the abyss is the impossible and remains impossible, but," he writes, "a leap introduces into the impossible the possible that it is; devoted from the outset, without the least reserve, to the impossible. The leap is Zarathustra's overman [*surhomme*], the leap is the will to power" (OC VI: 313; US 25 tm).

In a short paragraph, a few sentences, Bataille collapses the meanings of all of Nietzsche's core concepts – eternal return, overman, will to power – into his own notions of inner experience and the impossible.

At the end of the essay, Bataille links this inner experience to his search for a “form of spiritual life unimaginable prior to Nietzsche”. That search is familiar to us from *Acéphale* as well as his remarks on hyper-Christianity in the *Discussion on Sin*.

“Nietzsche's leap is inner experience,” he writes, “the ecstasy in which the eternal return and Zarathustra's laughter are revealed. To understand is to make an inner experience of the leap ... After Nietzsche, the experience of the leap remains to be done. There remains only the clearing of the path from which we leap ... In other words, to create, in a practice and a doctrine, a form of spiritual life unimaginable prior to Nietzsche, and such that a worn-out word in the end unmasks the face of the impossible” (OC VI: 314; US 25 tm).

This form of spiritual life unimaginable prior to Nietzsche is a spiritual life without God, indeed predicated on the absence of God.

As Bataille puts it, still in “Nietzsche's Laughter”: “Nietzsche's inner experience does not lead to God but to his absence; it is the possible making itself equal to the impossible, it is lost in a representation of the abominable world” (OC VI: 312; US 23).

“The limit of man,” he says, “is not God, is not the possible, but the impossible, the absence of God” (OC VI: 312; US 23)

But the absence of God marks the limit of man. Nietzsche's inner experience, in Bataille's understanding of it, his experience of it, is an experience of the encounter of man and his limits.

Backing up slightly in order to gather the threads of this discussion together, we can observe that here Bataille has collapsed two of Nietzsche's core concepts – eternal return and will to power – into another one of those concepts, understood in one of its guises: the overman understood in the sense of the self-surpassing or self-overcoming of man.

More explicitly on this point, in *On Nietzsche*, Bataille is uncertain and equivocal about his understanding of the overman and the self-overcoming of man.

He copied this passage from the prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (§4) into his notebook:

“What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is a going across and a going down.

“I love those who do not know how to live except their lives be a going under, for they are those who are going beyond.

“I love the great despisers, for they are the great venerators and arrows for the other bank.”

And he – Bataille – reflected on it:

“If read, these sentences from Zarathustra have hardly any meaning. They evoke a possibility and ask to be lived *to the end*. By those who would risk measurelessly, only accepting the leap, *by which they would surpass [dépasserait] their limits*. [...]

“*Maybe* the overman is a goal. But if the overman is a goal, it is only as an evocation: if real, he would have to risk himself, desire the beyond of himself.” (ON 126-7)

This interpretation of inner experience as self-overcoming seems to be the one indispensable figure from Nietzsche for Bataille. The will to power, the eternal return, even other interpretations of the overman – too often understood as an omnipotent “superman” figure – are dismissed in his readings of Nietzsche or even, as in the passages from “Nietzsche’s Laughter”, *displaced* by this figure.

And this is perhaps a fair condensation of Nietzsche’s work. In *Ecce Homo*, in the chapter on “Why [he is] a Destiny” (§3), Nietzsche explains the meaning of the name Zarathustra: “The self-overcoming of morality, out of truthfulness; the self-overcoming of the moralist, into his opposite – into me – that is what the name of Zarathustra means in my mouth.”

Zarathustra, for Nietzsche, is the oldest name in morality, the inventor of morality, he for whom morality has the greatest weight, but also the one most thoroughly acquainted with morality and therefore the one best suited to overcome it.

Another measure of the significance of this figure for Bataille can be found in the frequency and privilege with which it appears in his work.

For example and somewhat surprisingly, as noted, Nietzsche’s name does not appear in *The Accursed Share*. It does however appear in drafts for the project, several of which were written alongside *On Nietzsche*. In one of these drafts, where Bataille does in fact cite a passage from Nietzsche, he cites only a few lines from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, part one, “Of the Gift-Giving Virtue”: “How did gold attain the highest value? Because it is uncommon and useless and gleaming and gentle in its splendor; it always gives itself. Only as the image of the highest virtue did gold attain the highest value. Goldlike gleam the eyes of the giver... Uncommon is the highest virtue and useless; it is gleaming and gentle in its splendor: a gift-giving virtue is the highest virtue. Verily I have found you out, my disciples: you strive, as I do, for the gift-giving virtue... This is your thirst: to become sacrifices and gifts yourselves.” (See OC VII: 513 and Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “Of the Gift-Giving Virtue” § 1 (1883) *The Portable Nietzsche* p. 186.)

Or again, at the moment when Bataille began to lay claim to Nietzsche, in 1936, in “The Sacred Conspiracy”, the program piece for *Acéphale*, he began with quotations from Sade, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. From Nietzsche, the quotation is another passage from the same chapter of *Zarathustra*: “You solitaries of today, you who have seceded from society, you shall one day be a people: from you, who have chosen out yourselves, shall a chosen people spring – and from this chosen people, the life that goes beyond [*dépasse*] man.” (*Zarathustra*, “On the gift-giving virtue” § 2)

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The band wrapped around the first edition of *Inner Experience* in 1943 read: “Beyond Poetry” [*Par-delà la poésie*]

Bataille once considered using that phrase as the title for a multivolume re-edition of his first books including: *Inner Experience*, *On Nietzsche*, and *The Hatred of Poetry*, known in English under its later title *The Impossible*. (OC V: 459; IE 258)

The “beyond” of beyond poetry links Bataille’s writing to his quest inner experience and his search for a form of spiritual life unimaginable prior to Nietzsche.

The *over* of the overman, the *sur* of *surhomme* is undoubtedly linked to this beyond, as a desire for the *beyond* of oneself.

The *sur* of *Sur Nietzsche* is thus an overloaded preposition: suggesting at its root a surpassing, a going beyond: beyond surrealism, beyond fascism, beyond Nietzsche – not *on* Nietzsche, but *beyond* his experience.

Bataille takes as his starting point what he understands to be Nietzsche’s fundamental experience, his inner experience, his overcoming of morality and his self-overcoming. From there he attempts to chart pathways toward a new world of experience predicated on an experience of self-overcoming, self-surpassing, sacrificing one’s highest values and thereby surpassing oneself.

Part one of *On Nietzsche* is suggestive of this gesture. It begins with a quote from *The Gay Science*: “But let us leave Mr. Nietzsche...”

But where does one go *after* Nietzsche?

This is another fundamental paradox and Bataille cannot break free of it: by following someone whose thought is *useless*, Bataille’s book leads us *nowhere* and gives us *nothing* in its turn.

He remarked that reading Nietzsche gave him the “impression that there was nothing else to say.” (OC 7: 615).

Perhaps he meant that remark in the same way that John Cage might have meant it: I have nothing to say and I’m saying it.

This is a paradox encapsulated in the title of one of Maurice Blanchot’s later works: *le pas au-delà*, the step beyond, the not beyond, the step not beyond...Nietzsche, Bataille, *on Nietzsche*, beyond Nietzsche, after Nietzsche, after Bataille, there is nothing left to say.