Agency and sovereignty: Georges Bataille’s antihumanist conception of child

Introduction
There is dismay amongst many educators about the deadening effects of regimes of measurement and narrowing educational objectives in our school systems. It seems that whilst the academic community talks about children’s agency, participation and ‘voice’, meanwhile contemporary education progressively diverges from these concerns with pedagogical approaches that are authoritarian, disciplinarian and transmissive. This divergence is likely to continue since policy is moved by many different social and political currents and eddies that have their origins in general, obdurate, and, often global trends. But rather than conceive of this divergence as a simple clash of educational values along the lines of a progressive/traditional binary, I want to consider the possibility that there is a fundamental misstep in the way we have come to think of children’s agency, and that this mistake has contributed to the difficulties now being experienced. The second part of this paper will venture the introduction of Georges Bataille, an unfamiliar voice in childhood studies, to explore alternative conceptions of agency, or something akin to it, through exploration of the concepts of taboo, transgression and sovereignty.

The agentic child
The agentic child is the pivot on which contemporary childhood studies turns. And yet the idea of agency has only a jagged and constrained relation to the two dominant, incommensurate but interweaving paradigms viz; firstly, the child as ‘being’, realising its potential, and bearing inalienable rights, that is, the humanist child with the moral and legal claims of personhood premised upon their essential nature as anthropos; and, secondly, the socially constructed, culturally constituted child: situated, plastic and acted upon.

Both models, in different ways, are the vehicles for emancipatory thinking: the recognition of children as rights-bearing members of the human species is the legal basis for protection, provision and for their participation in ‘all matters affecting the child’; while a social constructivist paradigm alerts us to the contingency of children’s lives and, to an extent, provides a foundation for interventions seeking social changes. (see Kraftl 2013 on premises of social constructivism). Nevertheless, each model has very different postulates: the primacy of the individual or the social, the position on nature versus nurture, and, most fundamentally, the essentialist/modernist or constructionist/postmodern versions of the world. In childhood studies these two distinct
paradigms appear sometimes to merge as though one somehow leads to the other, as in this recent description:

The ‘new paradigm’ offered a fresh and welcomed answer to the ontological question by positioning the child as socially constructed rather than universal; as a reflexive, social actor rather than as a passive presence within overwhelming structural determinations; and as an individual whose very ontological existence needed to be acknowledged as independent and autonomous.

This is quite puzzling. In what looks like a case of having your conceptual cake and eating it, we are told that there is no universal child and also, what that child is. The socially constructed child could equally be a passive presence – what would prevent it? Only appeal to a universal or transcendental vision, which cuts the feet from the original revelation of the child as socially constructed. A compatibilist approach is problematic. Following the comments of Alanen (2017) the ontological grounding of childhood studies has not, thus far, been a focus of attention. This situation is rapidly changing, however, as I will outline shortly.

What is curious is that in neither of these ontologies of childhood is there much space for a particularly ‘thick’ conception of agency. The importance afforded to voice and agency in childhood studies could hardly be overstated. Cook (2018) has recently described it this way:

Childhood studies has come to require its subject and object not simply to have and employ voice and agency … but to do so with inventiveness and resourcefulness…. Reportage about a reproductive or – God forbid – situationally passive child in childhood studies research carries the same kind of stigma as do ‘non-significant’ findings in experimental research (135).

Pedagogical theory, research methodologies, and public policy take children’s agency as precept, and yet neither paradigm – the humanist nor the constructivist - lend themselves to anything more than a disappointingly thin understanding of agency. In the humanist paradigm the child’s agency is circumscribed by the parameters of her nature and potential where, in its biological form, the child develops psychologically and physically to a predetermined biological mandate. In the constructivist paradigm the child is formed by determinant structural features of their situation. None of the principal theories of the mutual constitution of agency and structure address the particular situation of being a child. When Margaret Archer, for example, speaks of ‘our human ability to intervene in the world of nature and change it’, the first person pronoun does not obviously include children, nor are they specifically mentioned in her writing. In fact, the raison d’être of a great deal of childhood studies scholarship, is to make spaces and foster skills so that children might exert such influence, precisely because this does not happen as a matter of course in human society. Notwithstanding these conceptual difficulties, the agentic child reigns and sways research, policy and pedagogy.
The same vexatious tension runs through educational theory. Gert Biesta contrasts socialisation with individuation, and equating the latter with what he calls ‘subjectification’: ‘individuation or, as I prefer to call it, subjectification— the process of becoming a subject. The subjectification function might perhaps best be understood as the opposite of the socialization function [of education]’ (2010: 21). He refers to a long tradition of educational philosophy that held this process of subjectification to be the defining function of education: ‘to become more autonomous and independent in … thinking and acting.’ (2010:21). The notion of subjectivity at work here is so familiar that it is almost undetectable: to be a subject is to think and to act on one’s own. How else might we understand the agentic subject?

New scholarship in childhood studies is starting to engage with contemporary challenges to the primacy of human subjectivity and agency. Ryan made the observation in 2012 that a ‘new wave’ of childhood studies had started to emerge, which draws on the work of postwar Continental philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Bruno Latour, Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. What this emergent scholarship shares, according to Ryan, is a desire to bypass binaries, and instead employ notions of ‘hybridity’ and multiplicity’. I think that the desire is deeper. An attachment to the idea of human agency and dominion substantiates the agentic child; dominionist prejudice and the individualist ontology that it generates are the targets of ‘new wave’ endeavour. This is a direct challenge to Enlightenment humanism’s nationalism (Braidotti 16) colonialism (Fanon) and its creation of the racialised, gendered and naturalised other as a ‘justification for pillage’ (Sartre). The wider ethical import of our conception of the agentic child can no longer be ignored: it is offspring of the modern human, and so is implicated in the impending global ecological crisis, about which childhood studies is remarkably silent. Recent work has started to recognise underlying political and epistemological ideologies: Spyrou at al (2018) have observed that the “darling figure” of childhood studies... bears marked similarity to the idealised subject of neoliberalism, whilst others have noted the cultural specificity of the dominant interpretations of children’s agency, calling for ‘greater dialogue across majority and minority worlds’ (Punch, 2016, 193) or for the acknowledgement of the normative assumptions that are applied to the attribution of children’s agency (Kayser, 2016). The humanism of the European Enlightenment, through to its current manifestations in late capitalism, is where attention is now focussed.

Philosophical anti-humanism
Just as humanism has taken different forms: rationalist, Christian, socialist, existentialist, and so on, so too has antihumanism. The term was first used by Louis Althusser in 1964 to describe Marx’s rejection of humanist ideology post 1845 (Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach see Althusser) but its usage is versatile: it has been linked to both fascism and the evangelical extreme right in the US (Malik, Todorov), to the Frankfurt School (Adorno), philosophical animism (Plumwood), post-Newtonian cosmology and ‘deep ecology’ (Mathews), the re-positioning of the human in posthumanism (Braidotti), radical critiques of colonialism (Fanon), as well as in the turn toward eastern philosophies and
religions, nature-based spiritualities such as Wicca, and aboriginal belief systems. Opposition to humanism tells you nothing whatsoever about a person’s politics or other commitments, though the one commonality is a sense that humans have ‘gone wrong’ and that hubris has a great deal to do with it.

At no time before has this sense of human hubris been more intense than in Europe in the first half of the 20th Century. The technologically enabled catastrophe of the two World Wars, the Nazi death camps, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all left belief in progress tattered and shamed. It is during this period from the end of the First World War to the late 1950s that antihumanism came to be one of the dominant faces of philosophy, though, in a strange inversion of this philosophical aspect, the end of WW2 heralded the beginning of the human rights era (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). It is this period that Geroulanos (2010) describes as ‘a philosophical and intellectual revolution ... [that] created a new kind of atheism, demolished the value of humanism, and altered the meaning of ‘the human’ virtually beyond recognition’ (p.1). The importance of antihumanism to subsequent postmodern and posthumanist philosophy could hardly be overstated. Elsewhere I have explored Surrealist thought in relation to understandings of childhood. Here I introduce a thinker closely associated with the Surrealist movement, and whose philosophical anthropology is original, provocative, and might provoke some reassessment of the notion of agency, particularly in respect of children.

George Bataille (1887-1962)

Bataille mentions the child, childhood and childishness sporadically throughout his writings: she is pitied and admired, true and false, free and utterly constrained. Notions of ‘childishness’ and ‘child-like’ occupy a central place in his explorations of human experience. The Surrealist heirs to the more familiar Romantic critique were close intellectual and personal associates of Bataille, bringing him into the orbit of new conceptions of childhood, influenced by the Occult, by Freud and Jung, and by philosophical anti-capitalism. Despite all this, to date, there have been no studies focussing on Bataille’s child, and only passing mention of the child in the context of other Bataille scholarship. The steady posthumous development of Bataille’s reputation has entered a new wave since the mid-1990s, with a number of new translations, collections, and commentaries. The intention of this paper is to open up a neglected theme in the study of Bataille’s work, and also to explore the consequences of Bataille’s presentation of the human condition for our understanding of the child both as icon and lived reality. The pedagogical relationship is at the core of this understanding.

In addition to Bataille’s relative obscurity and his none too wholesome reputation, there is a much more serious issue that tends to scupper any attempt to make sense of his ideas. His texts *embody* his core notion of the bivalency of the human condition: the medium of one of these is discursive,
systematic and logical; the medium of the other is analogical, mythical, or magical thought: formless (Bataille, 1985: 31). One commentator has described his style as ‘forked’ and relates this to the ‘cloven origin story’ which relies on the notions of splitting rather than of unfolding or sublation in explaining the genealogical origins of humanity (Ades et al, 2006: 44). Bataille was not in the least anti-rational (how Habermas mistakenly interprets him) but the chances of understanding much of his writing are vanishingly small if one approaches it with the expectation of a systematic theoretical exposition. Foucault misrepresents Bataille in crucial ways, as I shall discuss below, but his description of the ‘difficulty with words’ (Foucault, 1977: 51) in relation to Bataille is spot on:

It is quite probable that the simple rules of alternation, of continuity, or of thematic contrast are inadequate for defining a linguistic space where descriptions and demonstrations are articulated, where a rational order is linked to an order of pleasures, and where, especially, subjects are located both in the movement of various discourses and in a constellation of bodies…. Bataille’s language, on the other hand, continually breaks down at the center of its space, exposing in his nakedness, in the inertia of ecstasy, a visible and insistent subject who had tried to keep language at arms length, but who now finds himself thrown by it, exhausted, upon the sands of that which he can no longer say. (Foucault, 1977: 39)

Bataille was sensible to the difficulty: ‘I am aware of the small chance I have of being understood…. I saw at first that these ideas were appetizing, that they aroused interest, but I also very quickly saw that they took a long time to digest’ (Bataille, 1991: 17). Though I have no advice to give about ‘digesting’ Bataille, I disagree that to attempt to do so is an act of appropriation or a form of violation or betrayal, as has been argued by, for instance Botting and Wilson (2001) and Hollier (1992). Michael Richardson warns that ‘it is no use approaching his work with the aim of ‘understanding’ him in any conventional sense’ (1994, viii) and I follow his advice that Bataille is not ‘for those who are merely interested in a vague way in this work, but for those who would seek out its consequences’ (Richardson, 1998: ix).

Because Bataille’s thought will not be generally familiar, the following sections will comprise an exegesis of the key concepts, before discussing the possible consequences of these ideas. I will first consider the adult-child relationship in Bataille’s anthropology, before setting these ideas in the nexus of concepts that constitute his conception of the human, culminating in the key notion of sovereignty.

child

The child in Bataille’s thought is not human: rather, his anthropology situates the child as animal-becoming-human. He proposes the notion of childishness as an adult construct propaedeutic to the state of reason. Grown-ups induct newcomers into the characteristically human system and over time children become human. This will be explored in greater detail below. It is axiomatic in the several disciplines that make up childhood studies that children are
persons. This is the foundation of the normative standard for the treatment of children: legal personhood is the determining condition for a standard of legal protection not granted to other beings. There is also the biological fact of human DNA indicating species membership. Neither of these conceptions either contradict or confirm the notion of child implicit in Bataille’s understanding of the human condition. What is at issue is the adult-child relationship and this is fundamentally *pedagogical*.

The calm ordering of life is brought to an end with the arrival of a baby: blood and shit and vomit and screaming are an unavoidable daily experience. (Reading about children in childhood studies literature, one can’t help wondering if the authors have ever met one.) When we are in a parenting relationship with a child we first deal with aspects of their behaviour that must be stopped in order to live a human life. The pedagogical relationship starts in this place. So I take nappies as my starting point.

*Intestinal Dejecta*

Menstrual blood seems to have condensed the abhorrence and the fear. The behaviors relative to the other excretions are striking, but there are no prohibitions dealing with them like those aimed at preserving humanity from the least contamination by blood. 

*He then goes on to suggest that the reason there are less elaborate purity rules about ‘intestinal evacuation’ is mainly because men do it too.*

*Children, with whom our contracts are unavoidable, would destroy a priori the hope of eliminating the contamination entirely. Nothing can be demanded of a young child, whereas a pubescent girl regularly observes the prescriptions. It was necessary to get used to bearing with this infantile waste, which explains the mildness of the disgust it provokes: nothing more extreme than the reaction to animal waste. Besides, what are children if not animals becoming human – but this is not on their own initiative… (Bataille, 1991: 65)*

What pedagogical initiative do adults to take?

*W*e teach our children to be ashamed of filth… the mother simply says to the child: ‘It’s dirty,’ and she often even uses the childish word denoting both excrement and the forbidding of contact. (Bataille, 1991: 72)

In a later work he returns to this idea:

*We do not take long to forget what trouble we go to to pass on to our children the aversions that make us what we are, which make us human beings to begin with. Our children do not spontaneously have our reactions…. We have to teach them by pantomime or failing that, by violence, that curious aberration called disgust … passed onto us from the earliest men through countless generations of scolded children. (Bataille, 2012: 58)*
This first initiative of adults in relation to the child is one of bifurcation: what can be admitted into human life and what must be excluded. This takes us to Bataille’s cloven conception of the human.

Taboo and transgression/sovereignty and enslavement

In contrast to social and cultural anthropology, the sense in which I use the word here is philosophical rather than comparative. There is no necessary assumption that there is a plurality of ways of being human. Rather, the presumption is that it is possible to make meaningful statements about the human condition per se. The question is, what is it to be human? For Bataille, to be human is to enter into the human economy of production. Human existence happens in the space of appearance formed by two modes of action: taboo and transgression.

The advent of taboo is what marks the genesis of human society. What makes the formation of the human collective possible is the exclusion of ‘violence’, and this is achieved by the institution of taboos. Freud’s writings on taboo were well known and highly influential at the beginning of the last century. Like Bataille, Freud associated taboos with desire. He also saw them as ancient, describing them in racialized language as ‘the dark origin of our own categorical imperative’ (Freud, 1919). But as that last quotation indicates, he distances modern European humans from the idea of taboo, seeing it as vestigial with no continuing function and appearing only in the form of compulsive disorders and neuroses. For proponents of homo rationalis that which is non-rational is less than human.

Freud’s assessment is turned on its head by Bataille. Taboo is itself non-rational, but it makes reason possible. Reason needs a certain kind of space, free from violent desire and its expression[2]. The means by which it does this is not through reason but emotional states such as fear, terror, disgust and shame, the prospect of anguish: ‘basically a shudder appealing not to reason but to feeling, just as violence is’ E64. Though we only become conscious of this relationship and feel this way when violation of taboo is a possibility before us. This ‘calm ordering’ (Bataille, 2012: 38) makes possible human society: the human collective. Thus violence, which is defined by its opposition to reason (ibid: 55) because it is the result of emotional states (ibid: 64), is in a sense both the beginning and the sub-stance of human society. Contrary to Freud’s belief that ‘taboo prohibitions lack all justification and are of unknown origin’ (1913, Totem and Taboo), taboo for Bataille is the foundation of all human societies.

The mode of the human collective is ‘work’ and it is work that results in production, which enables us to meet our physical needs and, crucially, to meet the needs of our dependent children: ‘Taboos are there to make work possible; work is productive’ (Bataille, 2012: 68). Work entails deferred or functional expenditure and allows us to plan and think beyond the present. At the centre of Bataille’s thought is the idea of the social: living together in a complex future-orientated social nexus and communicating with one another are core distinguishing features of the human animal. Communication means
'all forms by which the individual moves out of a state of enclosure in its own isolated existence and opens on to others' (Hewson and Coelen, 2016: 13).

The idea of ‘project’ is closely connected to that of work: this is the term Bataille prefers to progress. Work literally ‘projects’ into the future creating what he calls a ‘paradoxical way of being in time: it is putting existence off until later’ (Bataille, 2014: 51). He declares his ‘opposition to the idea of project’ and , more playfully, his ‘project of escaping from project’ (ibid 64). The ultimate project is salvation – Christianity is the religion of project (ibid 52-53). Emersion in project is slavish and degrading (ibid 49).

Transgression is the crossing of a line drawn by taboo. ‘Organised transgression’ complements taboo: in earlier human societies there were designated times for transgressive behaviour: rituals, festivals, the death of kings. These were occasions on non-productive consumption, of expenditure and excess. This weft in the fabric of society changed as ‘the great free forms of unproductive social expenditure’ (Bataille, 1985: 124) fell out of use as capitalism replaced feudalism. Transgression took the individual form of the erotic, until even this was subdued by project. In its place is the hypocritical ‘hatred of expenditure’ of the bourgeoisie (ibid124-125). The venal behaviour and insatiable appetite of this class makes it the target of Bataille’s most cutting criticism – he does not miss and hit the wall when he spits:

It is right to recognise that the people are incapable of hating them as much as their former masters, to the extent that they are capable of loving them, for the bourgeois are incapable of concealing a sordid face, a face so rapacious and lacking in nobility, so frighteningly small, that all human life, upon seeing it, seems degraded. (ibid: 125)

In a reversal of the common order, it is not prohibition that Bataille identifies with sacred, but transgression. The sacred is present in what is expelled from homogenous society: from the body (blood, sweat, tears, shit), in extreme emotions (anger, laughter, drunkenness), and in non-utilitarian social activity (games, poetry, eroticism) (Richardson, 1994: 36). It is in this ‘dejecta’ that humans are sovereign – free from the instrumental and utilitarian thinking that is required of project:

The interest in philosophy resides in the fact that, in opposition to science or common sense, it must positively envisage the waste products of intellectual appropriation. (‘The Use Value of D. A. F. De Sade’ in: Visions of Excess p.96)

Sovereignty is that state of being which is defined by the absence of project. Autonomy is the opposite of heteronomy, but sovereignty is different from both. Autonomy is a kind of algorythmic freedom - liberty to determine and pursue ends. Sovereignty, by contrast is ‘pure expenditure’ - ‘generous, orgiastic and excessive’ (VE 124) as opposed to the functional expenditure of work and project.
heterology: ‘the science of what is completely other’ (Use Value 27)

A slack reading of Bataille could miss the radical reversals in his account of being human. The role of taboo is not that of conquest over emotion, reason does not have dominion over violence. Rather reason is dependent on strong emotion for its very existence. The images that Bataille uses to describe this relationship are not oppositional, as one has come to expect in the more familiar Christian binary of good and evil, light and darkness. Nor is it a question of challenge to taboo, the notion of subversion, since the transgression reinforces and confirms taboo: transgression ‘does not deny the taboo, but transcends it and completes it’ (Bataille, 2012a). Rather Bataille employs symbiotic metaphors such as dance: ‘The dance of human life would now come closer to violence, now distance itself from it in terror, as if its attitudes were composed in view of a compromise with violence itself’[3]. Elsewhere he describes the movement between the taboo and the desire to transgress it as a heartbeat: ‘just as the diastolic movement completes the systolic one…. The compression is not subservient to the explosion, far from it; it gives increased force’ (ibid: 65).

This symbiotic relationship gives us the first layer of understanding heterology. This is the profound and dynamic duality of human existence:

There are therefore, broadly speaking, two opposed regions in human affairs, one homogeneous, profane and commonly practiced, the other heterogeneous, completely other, deeply separated from the first and, additionally, itself deeply divided by the violent opposition between pure and impure, angelic and obscene, noble and common – it being understood that homogeneous is used here in its proper sense, while het-erogeneous on the contrary takes on a new sense which to some extent would suit better the expression of the completely other, if it were of some practical use. (Bataille, 2018: 36)

At the beginning of The Accursed Share Bataille describes a man who bounces his child on his knee at home but in war burns, kills and tortures. (Written in the immediate aftermath of the WW2, one thinks about the death camp commanders who enjoyed domestic normalcy with their families just outside the camps where they committed their atrocities.) Through such apparently exceptional examples of belonging to two worlds, Bataille proposes this as the essential human condition, a universal antisyzgy: ‘Man belongs in any case to both of these worlds [taboo and transgression] and between them willy-nilly his life is torn.’ (Bataille, 2012: 40).

What is portioned off as inhuman is what Bataille calls ‘the accursed share’. We deny our own heterogeneity, our forked nature (I am this; I am also this) in order to ‘keep [our] place in the mechanical order” (Bataille, 1991: 24). But humanity is not homogeneous: ‘We often speak of the world, of humanity, as if it had some unity. In reality, humanity forms worlds, seemingly related but actually alien to one another…. [T]his incompatibility also concentrates in a single individual’ (ibid: 21). ‘Conceivable humanity’ is that thinking, planning,
rational way of being. We achieve this delusion of unity by refusing the integration or assimilation of what Bataille calls the ‘erotic’.

**adult-child pedagogical relationship**

In Bataille’s thought there is nothing inevitable about the eventual humanity of the child. They do not become human of their own volition, or due to any biological process of maturation. Bataille’s understanding of the child as ‘animal-becoming-human’ involves the intentional activity of adults upon the child in order to take them to the state of being we call human. This is how the adult-child relationship is described in Inner Experience:

> The miniscule ‘absents’ are not in contact with the world, *if not through the channel of grown-ups*: the result of the intervention of grown-ups is *childishness*, a fabrication. Grown-ups *obviously* reduce the being that comes into the world, which we are at first, to trinkets. This seems important to me: that the passage from the state of nature (of birth) to our state of reason necessarily takes place along the path of *childishness*.

Childishness is the state wherein we put the naïve being, from the fact that we must lead it there, even without precisely willing it, we lead it to the point where we are. When we laugh at childish absurdity, the laugh disguises the shame that we feel, seeing to what we reduce life emerging from nothingness. (Bataille, 2014: 47)

The intention to change someone’s relation to the world is fundamentally pedagogical. The child is not ‘in contact with the world’, that is, with the world as object of its attention. The adult ‘fabricates’ the artificial construct of childishness, in which state the child is first reduced and uprooted from now, and then brought to the place where we are, the world of existence deferred, of utility and of continence.

What this means is that a child *cannot transgress*. If the child is on the pathway of childishness then by definition they are not yet properly subject to taboo. There are things that they are not permitted to do, but they do not yet experience anguish at the thought of transgression. The child is not yet fully ‘uprooted from nature’ so their impulses do not yet have meaning in the human world and childhood is not ‘an active expression of human being’ (Jenks, 1996). Nonetheless, they are never members of any other animal species. Conversely an animal is never childish: their existence is *chrysalid*, liminal between animal and human.

The implications of Bataille’s notion of childishness should be a barrier to the instrumentalization of children’s behaviour, that is, as a challenge or critique of the current order. And this is important: transgression can never be part of a *project*. The appropriation of transgression to an end is a recurring mis-step in Bataille scholarship. The origins of this may be traced in part to the interpretation of Bataille presented by Foucault in his essay ‘Preface to Transgression’[4]. Here he acknowledges the co-dependence of taboo and transgression:
‘The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows’ (Foucault, 1977)

And yet his account does just this: the ‘limits’ – he does not use the term ‘taboo’ except once, preferring ‘la limite’ – are pale and insubstantial, without purpose or definition. A limit is always genitive, always a limit of something else. Foucault’s over-riding interest is in the nature of transgression rather than in taboo, that human-defining digression from the animal. Regardless of his acknowledgement of the reciprocity and co-dependency of the two concepts he manages to succeed in separating transgression from the whole. This permits precisely the oppositional positioning of transgression that appears in many contemporary Bataille studies[5]. Given the definitional centrality of taboo to the human and to the human collective, and the central importance of the child in relation to taboo in Bataille’s anthropology, this Foucauldian reconfiguration changes substantially what can be said about the pedagogical relationship.

**consequences**

Any study of Bataille can only be a quest marked by interpreting signs and traces. It is no use approaching his work with the aim of ‘understanding’ him in any conventional sense…. [He] never wrote to convince but to provoke the reader, to draw the reader into his world and make him complicitous with his thought. (Richardson, 1994, viii)

Earlier in this paper I quoted Richardson saying that he wrote for ‘those who would seek out the consequences’ of Bataille’s work (Richardson, 1998). I turn now to consider what those consequences could be for our thinking about the pedagogical relationship.

If we were previously imagining that pedagogy is an intention in relation to reason, then Bataille pushes our attention back to a primary intention to ‘make space’ for reason through the harnessing of un-reason (shame, fear) in order to control and hold back what is not admissible in the space of reason (extreme emotion, desire, bodily excreta, useless activity). What are the implications of this shift of attention? And what does it mean when he says that we feel shame at what we do to children?

Generally it seems to be better to avoid dissemblance and hypocrisy in any interaction or transaction that takes place between people. It may be that our treatment of children, whether we are paid or unpaid educators is misdirected if we pay too little attention to the task of introducing children to the system of taboo that defines the human collective in that we reduce the chances of the children participating in discursive reasoning at some point along the path. On first impression, this seems to be an inherently conservative educational
position: education as the creation of ‘docile bodies’. But docility is not a requirement for taboo – quite the opposite. Docility is about the eradication of desire, strong emotion, violence. This kind of education is narcotic. The pedagogical relation that is implicit in Bataille’s ‘path of childishness’ is, in contrast, highly emotionally charged. Induction relies on shame, violence, mockery, and, in time, the experience of anguish when the transgression of taboo is contemplated.

Those educators who see their role in at least some degree as ‘progressive’, in that they profess to have the aim of fostering autonomy, creativity, and criticality, are, if we follow Bataille’s description, only turning the Crank – a machine of pointless labour pursued to the point of exhaustion. The space created by taboo is itself not sovereign space. Rather it is a space of solidity: of work directed to goals, with utility as the only measure of value, of traditional disciplinary scholarship, of quantifiable inert existence. Though work is not servility, nonetheless it is an a priori impossibility to foster sovereignty as the outcome of end-orientated pedagogical activity. Progressive education is, then, worse than a lacuna: it is an oxymoron.

But this does not mean that change – transformation if you prefer – is impossible. Docility favours the status quo, but not so taboo. Because taboo is constituted by the very things it seeks to limit, it means that there is an explosive tension in being human. Belief in growth and evolution is part of project since it describes linear progress; it is not a description of human life. Change, for Bataille, is more like a chemical explosion, a build up of internal tension, the continuity of the erotic around the world of work and project.

Why do we even need to think about this? Bataille struggles to speak about the state we are in. To do so is to be entangled in a contradiction: discursive reason is the mode of project not of sovereignty. The task of talking about sovereignty is heavy and resistant, and takes on the shape of project as soon as discursive reason is applied. Bataille playfully describes this impossibility as the ‘project of escaping from project’ (IE64). But there is a need to pursue this out of a sense of crisis or end-game in the human collective. In the 30s and 40s the reason for this is obvious. In our own time, even more so as ecological collapse and species extinction come into clear view.

Bataille’s diagnosis is unexpected. Under conditions of late modernity we are experiencing the fruition of denial of eroticism – ‘an attempt to deny and close out death and our connection with nature’ (Richardson, 1994). The absence of transgression in modernity results in homogeneity, in direct denial of the bivalency of human nature. This is an absolute and irrevocable loss of sovereignty:

The mind of man has become its own slave and, through the labor of autodigestion that the operation assumes, has consumed, subjugated, destroyed itself. Cog within the available cogs, the mind of man makes of itself abuse whose effects escape him – to the extent that this effect is only the end, nothing subsists in the mind of man that is not a useful thing.
What we are experiencing is not the result of the Enlightenment, though this is an important acceleration of a trend in human history. The current state we are in has its genesis in the notion that the relation between taboo and transgression was adversarial. This is the Christian belief in good and evil, and, ultimately, of salvation: ‘salvation is the summit of every possible project and peak in matters of project’ (Bataille, 2014: 52). There can only be one victor in the battle between sin and salvation and this understanding constitutes the germ of homogeneity.

The path of childishness enrols the child in the human project and entails ‘putting existence off until later’. Under conditions of homogeneity, we require that the child, like ourselves, put existence off forever. Modernity’s futurism is utterly self-defeating: instead of ensuring future survival, it makes it an impossibility. The total suppression of heterology is dangerous:

Bataille’s whole thinking assumes that the enormity of what happened in the concentration camps was not an aberration of mankind, rather it showed the danger we run if we engage in a collective repression of our fundamental internal violence. (Richardson, 1994: 131)

Rescuing the pedagogical project needs to start with self-examination about where we are leading children if we are taking them to where we are, and where we are heading as a species. The adult shame is not to do with our fundamental relation as adults to the animal-becoming-human: it is a response to a refusal to allow children to come into their heterologous inheritance by denying the fundamental dualism of the human species.

Being drawn into Bataille’s world and becoming complicitous with his thought involves adopting his ‘opposition to the idea of project’. Such a position results in a profound ambivalence about the education of children under conditions of late, homogenous modernity. A partial immersion in this world might lead one to ask: What spaces are there for transgression, for the dejecta, the ‘waste products of intellectual appropriation? (Bataille, 1985: 96). What is the place of non-discursive modes of thought: the mythical, analogical, affective? How can we to ‘recognise the profound value of these lost modes of thought’? And finally, is there a way of regaining what he calls ‘the domain of the moment (the kingdom of childhood)’ (Bataille, 2012b: 10) in opposition to modernity’s futurism?

However, it may be, as Bataille occasionally argues that:

It is time to abandon the world of the civilized and its light. It is too late to want to be reasonable and learned, which has led to a life without attractions. Secretly or not, it is necessary to become other, or else cease to be.

There is a sense in which the iconic child that is found in Bataille’s work can be seen in the Romantic tradition of nostalgia for what is lost to the human condition under late modernity. But there is an important difference: as non-productive expenditure (sovereignty) is diminished, so also is taboo, which is
the defining character of the species. The pedagogical relationship becomes shameful if we lose our sense of the fundamental bivalency of being human and that there are absolute dangers to both work and sovereignty in our denial of what is useless, excessive, and transgressive.

references

[1] Adorno and Horkheimer thought that the Enlightenment was a break with religion. Bataille saw the Enlightenment as continuous with religion, in particular with Christianity. See (Richardson, 1994: 127)
[2] Bataille’s interest in prehistoric art and culture is reflected in his many writings on archeology spanning three decades from 1930 till his death in 1962. The victorious adversary of all work is death: ‘Consciousness of death is a corollary of work and of the waiting implied by work which death disappoints’ (Cradle p. 153). Horror of death expressed in various ceremonial treatments of the corpse, and the prohibition of incest are universal themes of taboo.
[4] Richardson (1994) is scathing about Foucault’s reading of Bataille: ‘the best that can be said about it is that it takes misunderstanding to its limit as it utilizes Bataille’s concepts for purposes that correspond with nothing at all in Bataille’s own work (6).
[5] For example, a recent study of Bataille’s notion of heterology talks of a ‘heterological revolution’ and the ‘revolt of the excluded part’ Galletti and Boyne 3, 7