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Writing Dirty: Paradoxical Embodiments of Nazism in Bataille's *Le Bleu du Ciel*

SYLVIE VANBAELEN

Since his death in 1962, and particularly in the last twenty-five years, Georges Bataille has become a major figure in intellectual circles. Critics such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Philippe Sollers, to name but a few, have all contributed to bringing Bataille's work to the foreground. Regarded as a significant influence on contemporary thought, Bataille is considered a precursor of post-structuralism and post-modernism. Yet, while he has received increasing attention, this attention has converged primarily on his essays and philosophical works. As Susann Cockal notes, "specific and detailed readings of many aspects of [his] fiction are still wanting".¹

Le Bleu du Ciel, written in 1935 but not published until 1957, is one of the still largely unexplored novels by Bataille. Critics have often interpreted it as a political novel vacillating between revolutionary Spain and Nazi Germany, and reflecting Bataille's own political views in the 1930s.² They have argued that the narrator, Troppmann, a leftist intellectual with communist friends, was also attracted to Nazism, and they have transferred Troppmann's political ambivalence to Bataille himself.³ This essay does not attempt to read *Le Bleu du Ciel* in order

¹ Susann Cokal, "Wounds, Rupture, and Sudden Space in the Fiction of Georges Bataille", *French Forum*, 25, 1 (January 2000), 75–96 (p. 75).

² See, for instance, Peter Collier, "*Le Bleu du ciel*: psychanalyse de la politique", in Jan Versteeg (ed.), *Georges Bataille, Actes du colloque international d'Amsterdam (21 et 22 juin 1985)* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), pp. 73–93; Jean-François Fourny, *Introduction à la lecture de Georges Bataille* (New York, Berne, Frankfurt am Main, Paris: Peter Lang, 1988); Ann Smock and Phyllis Zuckerman, "Politics and Eroticism in *Le Bleu du ciel*", *Semiotext(e)*, 2, 2 (1976), 57–85; and Allan Stoekl, *Politics, Writing, Mutilation: The Cases of Bataille, Blanchot, Roussel, Leiris, and Ponge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

³ Most critics drawing on Bataille's theoretical writings have concluded that he had pro-Nazi tendencies, even though he declared himself an anti-fascist and a leftist. Bataille criticizes fascism in the following essays: "Le problème de l'Etat", in *Œuvres complètes*, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1970); "Nietzsche et les fascistes", in *Œuvres complètes*, I; "Nietzsche et le national-socialisme", in *Sur Nietzsche, Œuvres complètes*, VI; "Vers la révolution réelle", in *Œuvres complètes*, I. For discussions of Bataille's ambiguous relationship to fascism, a movement which he found fascinating, see for instance: Denis Hollier, "On Equivocation (Between Literature and Politics)", trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October*, 55 (Winter 1990), 3–22; Jean-François Fourny, "Georges Bataille and Gaston Bergery: Sorcerer's Apprentices of the Thirties", *Clio*, 18, 3 (Spring 1989), 239–245; Benjamin Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* (London:

to clarify Bataille's political views. They are, and may well remain, elusive. Rather, it will explore the political ambiguity of the novel through one of its most intriguing characters, Dirty, the woman whom Troppmann loves madly but with whom he is impotent.

Dirty has been underestimated by critics. Although some of them (Smock and Zuckermann, and Stoekl) have suggested a connection between Dirty and Nazism, none have really looked at the various manifestations of this connection in the novel, nor commented on its highly paradoxical nature.⁴ Dirty is indeed a fundamentally apolitical character never voicing any ideological preferences. Her temperament and behaviours undoubtedly defy Nazi social and moral conventions. The ideal Nazi woman was to be strong and healthy, the guardian of respectability and of German national traditions, the pillar of family values. She was to be wife and mother, but also "an athlete [...] a lithe, tanned creature of nature";⁵ a symbol of the homeland, Germany. Weak, sick and debauched, neither a wife nor a mother, Dirty shows respect for nothing and lacks any guiding moral principle. Nazi ideologues, for whom respectability was "essential for the maintenance of an ordered society",⁶ would have condemned her promiscuity as "abnormal" and "unhealthy". As "a totalitarian masculinist ideology", fascism is "a symptom of a deep fear of women and results in the violent rejection of all nonsubservient or

Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 43–49; Michèle Richman, "Fascism Reviewed: Georges Bataille in *La Critique Sociale*", *South Central Review*, 14, 3–4 (Fall-Winter 1997), 14–30; Anthony Stephens, "Georges Bataille's Diagnosis of Fascism and some Second Opinions", *Thesis Eleven*, 24 (1989), 71–89; and Richard Wolin, "Left Fascism: Georges Bataille and the German Ideology", *Constellations*, 2, 3 (1996), 397–428. In fascism and Nazism, Bataille saw welcome threats of chaos, heterogeneous forces that resisted social integration by taking into account irrational, violent and unexplainable facets of society (see "La structure psychologique du fascisme", in *Euvres complètes*, I).

⁴ Stoekl does underscore the ambiguity of Dirty as representing Nazism, stating that "the redness of [the dress she wears in the train crossing Germany] may be double, signaling both a complicity with Nazism and the intervention of a communist (red) critique" (p. 19). The suggestion of a communist critique seems to go a bit far though, especially when the text itself relates the bright red of her dress to the Nazi flags. However, the real-life model for Dirty's character, Colette Peignot, was a revolutionary Communist and Bataille's lover at the time. (On Peignot, see Nadia M. Sahely, "The Laure-Georges Bataille Exchange. Celebrating the Dissymmetry of the Couple in Interwar French Thought", *Cincinnati Romance Review*, 15 [1996], 41–49.)

⁵ Robert Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986), p. 87. The Nazi view of women was not without contradictions and ambiguity itself. Women were "the bearer[s] of children, the helpmate[s] of [their] husband[s], and the custodian[s] of the old-fashioned virtues" (George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality. Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* [New York: Howard Fertig, 1985], pp.176–177). Madonna-like figures, they were chaste and pure, guardians of morality, order and traditions. At the same time, they were seen as "young athletes whose bodies were in some ways assimilated to those of men" (p. 179).

⁶ Mosse, p.182

nonidealized women [such as Dirty], all those who threaten masculine superiority and male values”.⁷ In fact, it would be hard to imagine anyone more distant from the Nazi ideal of womanhood than Dirty. Yet, in a paradoxical and significant way, Dirty functions as a reflection of Nazi ideology in the novel, embodying some of the fundamental principles at the core of the Nazi view of the world. This paradoxical embodiment is crucial in the exploration of the novel’s ambiguity.

Le Bleu du Ciel is best described, in Barthes’ terminology, as a “texte scriptible”, one that can be read in all directions, has no linear development, no real beginning, and no real end.⁸ Characterized by ambiguity and contradictions, it resists any single interpretation. Following Barthes’ notion of writerly texts, Brian T. Fitch’s *Monde à l’envers/Texte réversible* has explored the notion of “réversibilité” in Bataille’s fictional narratives, emphasizing the structure of the novel, the confusion between dream and reality, and Troppmann’s necrophilia (where the dead assume the role of the living) as examples of the “principe de la réversibilité” in *Le Bleu du Ciel*.⁹ Dirty, I would argue, is the most striking manifestation of this reversibility. Through an examination of her portrayal in the novel, I will show how her character is constructed as a series of paradoxes, which cannot, and should not, be resolved. To make of Dirty the epitome of reversibility in *Le Bleu du Ciel*, it seems crucial to demonstrate her tie with Nazism. Indeed, given that her actions and manners will appear to any reader as contrary to Nazi morale, the task is to highlight those of her characteristics that hint at a strong yet less obvious connection with Nazi ideology. These characteristics include her animal and divine qualities, her assimilation with Nature, her fascination with the violence of war, and her aggressive and “masculine” sexuality.¹⁰ Finally, this essay will discuss Dirty’s reversibility (political and other) as an inherent function of Bataille’s heterological writing, and suggest that all attempts to clarify it are useless.

Throughout the novel, Dirty is portrayed as both animal and divine, material and spiritual, as is evidenced in her names. The nickname that Troppmann gives her, Dirty, means soiled by dirt, but also physically and morally “dirty”; while her real name, Dorothea, from the Greek *doron* (gift) and *thea* (goddess) translates into “gift of God”. She is thus at once dirt and divinity; what is base, material, impure, and what is high, spiritual, pure. From the beginning of the novel, her polarity is emphasized. She is described as beautiful, dressed in a sumptuous evening dress in a squalid place, in the middle of a disgusting orgy. Troppmann adores and worships

⁷ David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism. Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 147–148.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).

⁹ Brian T. Fitch, *Monde à l’envers, texte réversible: la fiction de Georges Bataille* (Paris: Minard, 1982). It is somewhat perplexing that although Fitch comments on the “réversibilité” of *Le Bleu du ciel*, he considers it one of Bataille’s most readerly texts (p. 161).

¹⁰ Not all Nazi ideology is embodied in Dirty and all of Dirty’s characteristics are not necessarily Nazi.

her like a goddess who is both admired and feared precisely because she is also an animal, “une bête” (*Le Bleu du Ciel*, pp. 20, 21 and 166) “écarlate et tordue sur sa chaise comme un porc sous un couteau” (p. 23).¹¹

The merging of animal and divine qualities in Dirty echoes Bataille’s belief that the animality of man is closely connected to his divinity. In *Lascaux* (1955), for instance, Bataille explains how at the beginning of time, before the emergence of self-consciousness, man could barely be distinguished from the animal and was living in the intimacy of nature and the gods. To be close to the animal is to be close to the divine. And humans are close to animals when they give way to violence, irrational behaviour and sexual exuberance. Dirty releases the animal within her, and in doing so reaches the divine.

Given her animal and divine nature and her connection with dirt, it is not surprising that, throughout the novel, Dirty is compared and even assimilated to natural elements. This assimilation is most striking in two scenes in *Le Bleu du Ciel*. In the first scene, Troppmann, swimming in the sea at Badalona, feels “la sensation que le corps de Dirty se confond [...] avec la lumière, surtout avec la chaleur” (p. 146). The light and the heat of the sun caressing him are identified with the desired body of Dirty and arouse him. “Je me raidis comme un bâton” (p. 146), says Troppmann. In this episode, Troppmann “makes love” to the sun and the heat identified with Dirty, and fuses with them. This metaphorical copulation leads to the dissolution of Troppmann’s being in the sea. After getting “stiff”, he feels “aussi faible qu’un vagissement, comme si [s]a vie [...] était dans les langes une chose insignifiante” (p. 146), a reference to the very beginning of life, to a stage close to indifferenciation.

The second episode takes place in the German countryside around Trier. There Troppmann and Dirty finally make love in a ploughed field overlooking a cemetery.¹² Troppmann “[s]’enfonce dans son corps humide comme une charrue bien manoeuvrée s’enfonce dans la terre”, and “souill[e] son linge et sa poitrine de la terre fraîche qui s’était collée à [s]es doigts” (p. 175). Dirty thus becomes literally “dirty”. The earth beneath her body is open like a grave. Similarly, her naked body is open like a grave, notes Troppmann (p. 175). A clear equation is made between Dirty’s body, the earth, the grave and death. Sexual intercourse brings about the fusion of the two lovers and the fusion of the lovers with the cosmos. Their mingled bodies move in harmony with the graveyard, illuminated by candles, an upside-down image of the sky. In their abandonment, Troppmann and Dirty begin sliding down the sloping ground. “Si je n’avais, d’un coup de pied, arrêté ce glissement, nous serions tombés dans la nuit; et j’aurais pu croire,

¹¹ All references to *Le Bleu du Ciel* are indicated in parentheses in the text, and are taken from the following edition: Georges Bataille, *Le Bleu du Ciel* (Paris: 10/18, 1990).

¹² This scene has been recognized by most critics as the “climactic” scene of the novel and has been heavily commented upon in the light of Bataille’s theory of eroticism.

émerveillé, que nous tombions dans le vide du ciel,” reflects Troppmann (p. 176). Taken to its logical conclusion, their coupling would have led them literally to fall into death.

Dirty’s animality and divinity, and her assimilation with Nature – sun and soil – find a profound resonance in Nazism. In *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature*, Robert Pois refers to the Nazi view of the world and of humankind as a “religion of Nature”. “[T]he National Socialist ‘revolution of spirit,’” writes Pois, “was ultimately a true religious rebellion or, at the very least, assertion of religious values antithetical to the Judaeo-Christian tradition.”¹³ In this tradition, man is *between* the natural world and the infinite God, and therefore separate from both. In the Nazi view, on the other hand, man is *both* animal *and* divine. There is no gap between body and spirit, no transcendental divinity. Man is divine in so far as he obeys the laws of nature and lets them live in him. What is divine is natural, and what is natural is divine. Corollary to this first tenet is the belief that man is part of nature: there is no gap between man and nature. The world is a whole, and everything is part of it. “Man is a piece of earth,” said Himmler in a speech in 1939.¹⁴ So is Dirty, a piece of earth, an animal and a goddess. With her bright red dresses – the colour of blood and of the “drapeaux à croix gammée” (p. 148) – her nails painted “couleur de sang frais” (p. 46), and her connection with the sun, which also conjures up the image of blood in the novel, she is strongly reminiscent of the Nazi “blood and soil” motif.¹⁵ The blondness of her hair reinforces her bloody and “solar” aspect, which may be related to the swastika, or solar wheel, as well.¹⁶

Troppmann’s attraction to Dirty – animal and divine, earth and sun – and his fusion with her can only lead to loss of self and, ultimately, to “death”. In Nazism, writes Pois, there is a desire to return to a “state of ‘oceanic feeling,’ to a time in which that alienation made unavoidable by ego differentiation has not yet appeared”.¹⁷ Alice Kaplan comments on the “confusion about boundaries between self and other” characteristic of Nazism.¹⁸ In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud described the “oceanic feeling” as a sense of oneness with the universe, which characterizes the religious experience, and finds its origin in the nostalgia for the infant’s sense of unity with his mother. It is said to be the feeling of babies in the womb, before consciousness emerges, and of infants who still

¹³ Pois, p. 11

¹⁴ Quoted in Pois, p. 48.

¹⁵ “Le soleil était terrible, il faisait songer à une explosion: était-il rien de plus solaire que le sang rouge coulant sur le pavé comme si la lumière éclatait et tuait?” wonders Troppmann (p. 131).

¹⁶ George Mosse comments on “the analogy between the sun, light, and national regeneration [...] and the blondness and blue eyes of [...] German [...] stereotypes” (p. 50).

¹⁷ Pois, p. 158.

¹⁸ Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life*, *Theory and History of Literature* 36 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 6.

feel one with their mothers. Troppmann experiences this oceanic feeling when he makes love to Dirty-the sun in the waters of Badalona, and Dirty-the earth in the German countryside, and fuses with the sun, the water, the earth and the sky. Interestingly, the incident in Badalona makes Troppmann regress to the state of a baby (he feels “weak as an infant’s cry”), floating in the sea (“la mer”) as in the amniotic fluid of the mother (“la mère”). In the Trier countryside, Troppmann fuses with Dirty and sinks in her womb/tomb. This episode clearly demonstrates Troppmann’s necrophiliac tendencies. He needs to link sex to death in order to be able to perform sexually. It becomes even more meaningful when linked to Troppmann’s first manifestation of necrophiliac desire, which takes place as he stands before his mother’s corpse. There, frightened and aroused, he masturbates while gazing at her shrivelled body (p. 48). Troppmann links his impotence with Dirty to being necrophiliac – Dirty is simply too beautiful. In the Trier countryside, he is able to make love with Dirty precisely and only because he sees her open body as an open grave. Sinking into her body amounts to burying himself in the earth and plunging into death. In the light of his desire for his dead mother, Troppmann’s sexual encounter with Dirty can be read as a yearning to return to the womb, to an engulfing mother-earth. It is as if Dirty, who has turned into German soil (the dirt of the Trier cemetery), becomes the “motherland” to which he can return, a womb he can re-enter in order to lose himself and “die”. Troppmann’s experience in Trier evokes the irresistible urge of Nazis to lose themselves in the “motherland”, in the masses, and in Nazi ideology.¹⁹ It also foreshadows the morbid and quasi-necrophiliac sensuality of many Nazi leaders.²⁰

A *locus* of death, Dirty is also, throughout the novel, directly associated with violent destruction, and more specifically, with war. In one of Troppmann’s nightmares, she appears on a hearse as a corpse of pink wax, which soon grows into a monster with a fishbone or jawbone body, the legs of a horse, and a huge mare’s skull topped by a military helmet. The monster turns into “une Minerve en robe, cuirassée, dressée et agressive sous un casque” (p. 70). When she sees Troppmann’s fear, she rushes at him, twirling her scimitar. “[J]’étais paralysé d’horreur,” confesses Troppmann, who interprets the monster as Dirty “devenue folle, en même temps morte, [ayant] pris le vêtement et l’aspect de la statue du Commandeur et [...] se précipit[ant] sur [lui] pour [l]’anéantir” (p. 71).

In this dream, Troppmann recognizes Dirty in a military, aggressive figure with whom contact would bring death. His reaction to the “monster” is one of both attraction and fear. The creature is first “une cire rose d’une fraîcheur éclatante” (p. 70). “[R]ien de plus séduisant,” comments Troppmann (p. 70). It is both animal (“cheval”, “poisson”) and divine (“Minerve”), like Dirty herself. The soldier’s

¹⁹ “Becoming a part of the nation or of nature provided a ‘slice of eternity’,” according to Nazism (Mosse, p. 183).

²⁰ See Pois, p. 118.

helmet and fishbone body of the dream announce the final scene of the novel, in which a band of Nazi boys, lined up in military formation, plays music in front of the Frankfurt train station. Some of the children have doll-like faces – like the wax doll – pretty and innocent-looking, but soon to turn into aggressive military figures. Their leader has “le visage hargneux d’un poisson”(p. 183). Their music, “violente [...] d’une aigreur intolérable,” yet “splendide, déchirant les oreilles, exultant[e]”, fascinates Troppmann (pp. 182–183):

Chaque éclat de la musique, dans la nuit, était une incantation, qui appelait à la guerre et au meurtre. Les battements de tambour étaient portés au paroxysme, dans l’espoir de se résoudre finalement en sanglantes rafales d’artillerie: je regardais au loin ... une armée d’enfants rangés en bataille [...] Je les voyais, non loin de moi, envoûtés par le désir d’aller à la mort. Hallucinés par des champs illimités où, un jour, ils s’avanceraient, riant au soleil: ils laisseraient derrière eux les agonisants et les morts. (p. 184)

The music of the Nazi children announces the “marée montante du meurtre”, the “catastrophe” (p. 184) of the war that will be impossible to avoid. Like the creature of the dream, and like Dirty, the Nazi children are appealing and obscene, they fascinate and frighten. They are a promise of death, of violent destruction and war.

The nightmare, in which Dirty appears under the guise of Minerva, the goddess of war, while confirming her divine character, establishes her direct relationship with war and the Nazi children. The comparison between Dirty and the Commander serves the same purpose. The Commander, an emblem of death and of divine retribution for Don Juan (Troppmann’s *alter ego*) is also, according to Stoekl, “the embodiment of the military and legal state apparatus”,²¹ “the instance of the deleterious retributive code in the form of fascist law”.²² At the end of the novel, in a train from Trier to Frankfurt, Dirty, dressed in “une robe de soie d’un rouge vif, du rouge des drapeaux à croix gammée” (p. 180), prophesies the coming of World War II, and expresses her desire for a war.

The fascination with violence and war found in Dirty and Troppmann reflects Nazism’s fascination with violence. The glorification of war is at the core of Nazism, which justifies irrational violence. The laws of nature are cruel and merciless, and so is the man who follows them. The “ideal [Nazi] type was the storm trooper [...] soldiers who led the charge against the enemy”.²³ Both Dirty and Troppmann express their desire for a war, a desire that appears unmotivated by anything but a yearning for violence itself. In a conversation with Lazare, a young communist activist, Troppmann acknowledges that war would make him happy; “elle aurait répondu à ce qu [’il] avai[t] dans la tête” (p. 53). Unlike Lazare, he is not interested in what a war might achieve, but in war itself. *Le Bleu du Ciel* draws a distinction between war (seen as pure and gratuitous violence) and revolution,

²¹ Stoekl, p. 7.

²² Stoekl, p. 11.

²³ Mosse, p. 154.

which implies a transformation of society. Whereas Dirty and Troppmann stand for war, with no concern for its consequences, Lazare, on the other hand, feels compelled to be “à côté des opprimés” (p. 78), even if there is no hope of seeing them succeed in their struggle to take power, and is ready to sacrifice herself for a greater cause.

In many ways, Lazare stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from the dazzling Dirty. In Troppmann’s eyes, she is “laide et visiblement sale”, with an “aspect macabre” (p. 38). Dressed in “des vêtements noirs, mal coupés et tachés” (p. 38), she has black, short, unkempt hair, and “un grand nez de juive maigre, à la chair jaunâtre” (pp. 38–39).²⁴ Her “race juive” (p. 73) is reiterated once more in the novel, even though her name, Lazare, would itself indicate it. Troppmann finds her physically revolting and accumulates derogatory terms to describe her: “corbeau” (p. 38), “avaleur de déchets” (p. 46), “rat immonde” (p. 140). Whereas Dirty’s “bestiality” carries all the positive connotations of the irrational and the excessive, Lazare is equated with dark and repulsive animals, low on the scale of life.²⁵ Troppmann’s feelings towards Lazare are no less ambiguous than his feelings towards Dirty: fascination and obsession, but also fear, disgust and hatred, going so far as a desire to “la tuer[...]”, “la battre, la frapper” (p. 108).

If the beautiful Dirty embodies Nazism, the ugly Lazare can be read as her Communist and Jewish counterpart. There is a clear politicized aesthetics of women in the novel. Attraction prevails in Troppmann’s relation to Dirty/brutalNazism/war for the sake of violence; contempt and disgust, in his relation to Lazare/well-meaning Communism/revolution for the sake of a better society. Towards the end of the novel, in Trier, Nazism “f[a]it une horrible grimace” at Communism in the guise of Dirty, covered with mud like a soldier after a fight, grimacing at a little boy passing by and staring at her (p. 177). The boy, ugly like Lazare, recalls the little Karl Marx who “avait dû courir, lui aussi, dans les rues désertes de Trèves, quand il était petit garçon” (p. 177). This brief encounter, foreshadowing a Nazi aggression that Communist forces would be unable to resist, at least for some time, is followed, significantly, by the final scene, in which aggressive Nazi boys play terrifying music announcing the carnage of war.

Closely related to Dirty’s connection with war is her “masculine” and aggressive sexuality. Dirty has a very feminine appearance: blond hair, elegant dresses, polished nails. She is the most beautiful and exciting woman Troppmann has ever met. Both her nickname, Dirty, and her name, Dorothea, underscore her femininity. Yet she also has a strong masculine side. In the Badalona episode, commented upon earlier, she is assimilated with the sun. Later in the novel, she reminds Troppmann of a “squelette solaire” (p. 156). In *Le Bleu du Ciel* and

²⁴ Lazare, like Dirty, is characterized by sexual ambiguity. Beside a masculine name and manly looks, she acts like a man as the leader of a revolutionary group.

²⁵ Nazi propaganda films often equated Jews with rats and other vermin.

elsewhere in Bataille's writings, the sun is an image of the phallus. In "L'anus solaire", for example, the sun is a "verge ignoble",²⁶ "écoeurant et rose comme un gland, ouvert et urinant comme un méat".²⁷ "[L]e soleil fixé" is identified with "l'éjaculation mentale" in "Soleil pourri".²⁸ By her assimilation with the sun, Dirty is imbued with the phallic connotations of the orb. Appearing in Troppmann's dream as Minerva, goddess of war, she is invested with an aggressive, virile quality. In *Le Bleu du Ciel*, whereas Troppmann is passive and impotent, not only sexually but on all levels, Dirty takes the initiative.

The violence of her sexuality echoes the violence of war. Eroticism, like war, is an unproductive expenditure, a potentially deadly explosion of energy. The firing in the streets of Barcelona, signalling the beginning of the workers' rebellion, has a strong impact on Dirty: she gets sexually "déchaînée [...] soulevée par une sorte de fureur" (p. 165). When Xénie (a wealthy bourgeoisie in love with Troppmann) knocks on Troppmann and Dirty's hotel door at that very moment, Dirty wants her to stay, for a reason that the reader can only surmise: "J'ai une idée horrible," she tells Troppmann, "[t]u sais que je suis une bête!" (p. 166). This mysterious remark alluding to Dirty's intentions – of a purely sexual or of a murderous nature? – is taken seriously by Troppmann, who pushes Xénie out of the room. Sexual violence goes hand in hand with the violence of fights. After making love with Troppmann in the field in Trier, Dirty, whose body and clothes are covered with dirt, resembles the "soldats qui faisaient la guerre dans des tranchées boueuses" (p. 177). To make love is in a sense to make war, since the subject "dies" in the encounter.

In the eyes of the Nazis, war was inextricably linked to manliness. The ideal Nazi man was to be "in touch with the elemental forces of death, blood and soil".²⁹ Nazism, and fascism in general, is viewed as a "masculinist ideology", "with its cult of (masculine) youth, of the soldier-warrior, of virile and most often aggressive and violent athletic values".³⁰ It may therefore be problematic for some to think of Dirty as embodying Nazism, even though she does have an obvious masculine side. Yet, David Carroll, in *French Literary Fascism*, and Alice Kaplan, in *Reproductions of Banality*, have both underscored the contradictory complexity of the question of gender in fascism/Nazism. Nazism is a virile ideology in which one can lose oneself to be part of the whole. This oceanic feeling is traditionally regarded as "feminine". "[W]hat would be taken by most critics today as evidence of an absolute masculine ideology has also frequently been treated as the failure of certain men to be 'men', to live up to even a moderate version of 'maleness'".³¹

In Dirty, Troppmann seems to seek power and virility, both of which he lacks. At the same time, he appears to seek fusion with her, identified with Nature. He is ready to lose himself in her and "die". Hypervirilized by his name – Troppmann

²⁶ Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, I, p. 86.

²⁸ Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, I, p. 231

³⁰ Carroll, p. 147.

²⁷ Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, I, p. 612

²⁹ Mosse, p. 155.

³¹ Carroll, p. 149.

(too much man), also possibly a disguised allusion to the Nietzschean “Super-man” – and by his constant sexual desire, Troppmann is nonetheless impotent, that is, devirilized or feminized: his name has also been read as Trop-peu-man (not enough of man) by Susan Rubin Suleiman.³² The two interpretations of his name may not be as opposed as they at first appear. Theodor Adorno, in *Minima Moralia*, argues that “the total realization of the he-man [the tough guy] in, or as, totalitarianism amounts to the creation of what could be called a ‘she-man,’ a man who is not really a man because he is *too much or too exclusively a man*”.³³ In any case, Carroll warns about the “pitfalls inherent in all attempts to determine *the* gender of fascism”.³⁴ He emphasizes the “instability and ambivalence of masculine/feminine, paternal/maternal distinctions within the ‘virile ideology’ constituted by fascism”, and “the fusion (or confusion) of genders”.³⁵

The connection between Dirty and Nazism that has surfaced in this analysis seems hard to ignore. Ironically, a character so obviously remote from Nazi ideals encapsulates Nazi beliefs. Exhibiting behaviours opposed to all Nazi orthodoxy, Dirty reflects Nazi ideology as well. As we have seen, this political ambivalence is only one of the paradoxes of the character. At once animal *and* divine, debauched *and* pure, earth *and* sun, feminine *and* masculine, womb *and* phallus, sex *and* death, aggressive *and* weak, Dirty has emerged as a paragon of reversibility. Her paradoxical qualities prohibit any unequivocal statement about her and make it impossible to pin her down on one side of an axis of meaning. The axis constantly flips over, and Dirty keeps assuming opposite positions. When it comes to ways of interpreting her, the reader is confronted with a process of endless dialectical reversal. As an embodiment of Nazism, Dirty subverts Troppmann’s communist ideals in the novel; at the same time, as Troppmann’s sick, drunk and debauched lover, she subverts Nazi ideals. Epitomizing reversibility, Dirty can also serve as a powerful metaphor for the whole novel, highly subversive itself, and whose meanings, whether political or other, keep escaping the reader.

Reversibility, paradoxes and subversion are all a function of writing. *Le Bleu du Ciel* subtly points to writing as the matrix for turning things upside down, undoing and redoing codes. One night in Barcelona, while waiting for a friend, Troppmann remembers stabbing himself in the hand with a pen as a bored child:

J’avais saisi mon porte-plume, le tenant [...] comme un couteau, je me donnai de grands coups de plume d’acier sur le dos de la main gauche et sur l’avant-bras [...] Je m’étais fait un certain nombre de blessures sales, moins rouges que noirâtres (à cause de l’encre). Ces petites blessures avaient la forme d’un croissant, qui avait en coupe la forme de la plume. (p. 130)

³² See Noys, p. 89.

³⁴ Carroll, p. 158.

³³ Quoted in Carroll, p. 152 (italics mine).

³⁵ Carroll, p. 159.

In Troppmann's hand, the pen has become a mutilating knife, destroying his flesh while creating new signs. The self-stabbing can be seen as a castrating gesture, feminizing Troppmann by opening him. The "blessures sales" (*dirty wounds*) that the pen inflicts are readily interpreted as writing marks. Commenting on Troppmann's writing, Stoekl states: "his writing is double, involving the mutilation of the writing subject who is both sacrificer and and [*sic*] sacrificed, victim and torturer".³⁶ Writing thus becomes a (self)-destructive-constructive "dirty" practice capable, not only of operating gender reversals, but also of transforming, destroying and rebuilding, of turning everything upside down, *again and again*. Troppmann's sad childhood memory soon recalls a happier one: "quand j'étais petit [...] j'étais certain qu'un jour, *moi*, parce qu'une insolence heureuse me portait, je devrais tout renverser, de toute nécessité *tout renverser*" (p. 132, italics mine). The "renversement" – an etymological and semantic cousin of "réversibilité" – takes place within the writing process. It is by writing his memories and thoughts that Troppmann turned "l'enfant triste aux coups de porte-plume" (p. 132) into one laughing with insolence. "Réversibilité" and "renversement" are achieved by writing, not a "traditional" kind of writing, rational, clear, coherent and one-directional, but what could be called "dirty" writing, a painful and murky practice, opposed to the classical ideal of clarity. A multi-directional mode playing with all established conventions and rules, purposefully confusing them, creating endless ambiguities and a feeling of uneasiness in the reader. This type of writing is part of Bataille's heterological practice, the practice of what is "other", often taken to mean scatology – something "dirty". Heterological or "dirty" writing resists any integration into a system, any classification, any certainty. It is this "dirty" writing that "created" Dirty, a metaphor for heterogeneous violent forces, a paradoxical and equivocal embodiment of Nazi values, and a reflection of the novel and of Bataille's writing practice.

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³⁶ Stoekl, p. 9. The victim-torturer dichotomy played out in the self-stabbing memory is exemplified by the narrator's name. Troppmann is the name of a famous murderer executed in 1871 for the slaughtering of a family of eight, the Kincks, including their son Henri. In the name "Henri Troppmann" converge both the murderer and his victim (see Francis Marmande, *L'Indifférence des ruines. Variations sur l'écriture du "Bleu du ciel"* [Marseille: Parenthèses; Paris: PUF, 1985], pp. 25–26). Stoekl also suggests that we might see in Troppmann an "excess-man ('trop'), a parody of the Nietzschean 'superman' – and indeed, his name even indicates the trope, be it irony or parody. Thus he embodies the excess of not only the lover but that reversal of the lover, the murderer [...] as well as the writing of the literary figure (the trope and the man)" (p. 9). The narrator's name is thereby yet another indication that meanings in the novel are constantly shifting.