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The Eye and the Flesh: Céline, Bataille, and the Fascination with Death

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Abstract: This paper argues that Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Georges Bataille use voyeurism as a transgressive mechanism to confront death through the female body, a paradoxical site of life and decay. Though Céline's clinical, disenchanted gaze contrasts with Bataille's erotic, metaphysical quest, both employ the act of seeing to reveal death's presence within vitality. In Céline's works, voyeurism shifts from erotic curiosity to cold observation, framing the female body as a sterile emblem of mortality. In Bataille's, it becomes participatory, merging ecstasy with dissolution in a sacred yet destructive form. Drawing on Freud and Sodom motifs, this study shows how their gazes transform the female body into a lens for existential finitude, challenging life–death boundaries in 20th-century French literature.

Keywords: voyeurism; transgression; death; eroticism; female body; Céline; Bataille

1. Introduction

Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894–1961) and Georges Bataille (1897–1962) stand among the most significant authors of their era, a period marked by the societal upheavals following the two world wars. Both writers were profoundly shaped by history. Though differing in style and public reception, they left an indelible mark on 20th-century literature. Céline's works, widely recognized by the general public, and Bataille's, more confined to intellectual circles, are provocative creations that have elicited strong reactions from readers. Though, their personal and artistic paths never directly intersected. Through their writings, they explore universal and controversial themes, including death, sexuality, and the human condition in its darkest dimensions.

What unites them, beyond their shared historical context, is a worldview deeply influenced by violence and suffering—experiences that resonate strongly in their respective writings. The sole tangible connection between these two literary figures lies in a critique Bataille devoted to Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*, his seminal work: “Céline's already celebrated novel can be seen as a description of the relationship between a man and his own death, present in some way in every image of human misery that appears throughout the narrative” (Derval 2004, p. 117).¹

This shared reflection on death serves as a starting point for understanding their works. Death permeates their texts, whether addressed explicitly or implicitly. It emerges as a central theme tied to their personal experiences: Céline, a former soldier gravely wounded during World War I, and Bataille, haunted by guilt for leaving his disabled father in Reims during the 1940 debacle. These traumas, far from being resolved, fuel a tragic vision of life and the human condition.



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The impact of these events also manifests in their behavior and their search for escape. Both frequented Parisian brothels, spaces of debauchery that became arenas for confronting their inner demons. These experiences, far from trivial, resonate in their writings, where sexuality and death intertwine inextricably.

Within this nexus, voyeurism emerges as a pivotal force in Céline and Bataille's works—a transgressive act of looking that confronts death through the female body, a paradoxical site of life and decay. Far from a passive glance, the gaze becomes their tool to probe mortality's immanence, uniting Céline's clinical detachment with Bataille's erotic, metaphysical plunge.

This paper argues that they wield voyeurism to transform the female body into a lens for existential finitude, revealing death's inescapable presence. The analysis unfolds in five parts: first, situating voyeurism within transgression and the female body; second, contrasting Céline and Bataille's gazes on the female form; third, exploring the female sex as a site of life and death; fourth, examining transgression's ecstatic limits; and fifth, analyzing ecstasy as a threshold to mortality's truths. Through this lens, I aim to illuminate a shared literary project that, despite their stylistic divide, harnesses the act of seeing to challenge conventional limits of life and death, offering a profound meditation on mortality in 20th-century French literature.

2. Voyeurism, Transgression, and the Female Body

The term *voyeur* originates from Old French, where it referred to a “watcher” (*veor*, 1138). Initially devoid of any sexual connotation, it simply described a curious desire to observe. Only in the 19th century (1833) did the term take on its modern meaning, designating someone who secretly witnesses erotic scenes (Rey 1998, p. 3692). This semantic evolution reflects a growing fascination with forbidden gazes and the transgression of social norms. This shift parallels the broader cultural fascination with the act of seeing, a theme that has been explored in various theoretical contexts, particularly in the works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, and Maurice Blanchot.

Foucault's analysis of the power of the gaze in *Surveiller et punir* (*Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1995)) critiques the hierarchical function of vision, where surveillance becomes a tool of control. Lacan's *Séminaire VII* (Lacan 1986) and *Séminaire VIII* (Lacan 2001) further develop the psychoanalytic understanding of the gaze as central to identity formation and self-awareness. Lacan's theory of the mirror stage highlights how the subject comes to recognize himself through the eyes of others, establishing a complex relationship between vision, desire, and the construction of the self. However, the gaze described in the context of voyeurism takes on a more insidious dimension—it is not simply about the reflection of the self but about witnessing the transgression of boundaries that define social and sexual norms.

In the works of Céline and Bataille, voyeurism is not just a passive act of looking, but an active engagement with the limits of perception, reality, and morality. While Lacan's *Séminaire VII* can be applied to understand the way both authors confront the objectifying gaze, it is Georges Bataille's theory of transgression that resonates most profoundly. For Bataille, transgression is an integral part of the human condition, a necessary passage through which the subject confronts the limits of society, language, and existence. In his essay *L'Érotisme* (Bataille 2017), Bataille argues that eroticism, often bound up with death, is a means of engaging with the forbidden, offering an avenue through which the individual confronts both the excessive impulse of desire and the fatality inherent in life.

Patrick Ffrench's scholarship on Bataille, particularly his work on sacrifice and uncertainty (*The Cut: Reading Bataille's Histoire de l'oeil*, Ffrench 2000; *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community*, Ffrench 2020), further elaborates on the notion of transgression by

situating Bataille's thought within the broader landscape of 20th-century French literature and philosophy. Ffrench's analysis of sacrificial logic and Bataille's engagement with violence and the sacred provides a framework for understanding voyeurism not merely as an act of looking, but as an encounter with the limits of representation and meaning. In this light, voyeurism in both Bataille's and Céline's works can be understood as an engagement with excess, where vision itself becomes destabilized.

This notion of transgression is further elaborated in the works of Maurice Blanchot, a close friend and philosophical interlocutor of Bataille, with whom he shared a concern for the limits of language, perception, and experience. In *L'Entretien infini* (Blanchot 1969) and *Le Pas au-delà* (Blanchot 1973), Blanchot examines transgression not as a mere act of defiance but as a confrontation with the void, where meaning dissolves. His perspective on the "step beyond" (*le pas au-delà*) aligns with Bataille's vision of eroticism as an experience that pushes the subject to the limits of selfhood and language. In this context, voyeurism can be understood as an act of seeing that unsettles rather than affirms, forcing the observer into an encounter with what lies beyond the representable.

This dynamic is evident in both Bataille's and Céline's treatment of the female body, which, in their works, becomes a site not only of sexual pleasure but also of violence, decay, and death. This duality is powerfully illustrated by Sade's *Philosophie dans le boudoir* (Marquis de Sade 1999), in which the female body is depicted as a locus of transgressive sexuality and violence, providing an early model for both authors' exploration of the dark undercurrents of desire. For Sade, the woman's body is not only a site of sexual pleasure but a space where limits are continuously violated, symbolizing the break from societal and moral constraints. Bataille and Céline similarly place the female body at the center of their narratives, but they emphasize its association with death, whether through the cold, clinical gaze of Céline's protagonists or the mystical, sacrificial gaze of Bataille.

Julia Kristeva's work, particularly in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (*Powers of Horror*) (Kristeva 1983), examines themes of abjection and the female body, resonating with Céline's portrayal of decay and sterility. Kristeva argues that the abject, often associated with bodily fluids and decay, represents a breakdown of meaning and identity, a concept evident in Céline's clinical gaze. Simone de Beauvoir, in *Le Deuxième sexe* (*The Second Sex*) (De Beauvoir 2011), critiques the myth of the "feminine mystery", asserting that societal constructs reduce women to objects of male curiosity and desire. This perspective is crucial in understanding how Céline and Bataille depict the female body as a site of both fascination and repulsion.

In this sense, the female body serves as a metaphorical space for the intersection of life and death, where voyeurism becomes both a transgressive act of sexual curiosity and a deeper confrontation with the limitations of perception and reality.

3. Céline and Bataille's Gaze on the Female Body

3.1. Voyeurism in Céline

Attributing voyeuristic tendencies to Céline is hardly surprising. He openly admitted this trait on multiple occasions, as illustrated in an interview with Louis-Albert Zbinden for Radio Lausanne: "God knows I've lived my entire life surrounded by everything one could imagine. But I'm a voyeur, not an exhibitionist. There are two types of men, fundamentally: voyeurs and exhibitionists. I'm a voyeur. So I'm content to observe" (Céline 2011, *Romans—Tome II*, p. 944).² This declaration underscores a key characteristic of his writing: a meticulous, often raw observation of human flaws and the darkest aspects of the human condition.

In his works, Céline bestows upon his main characters, particularly Ferdinand, the same acute faculty of observation. In *Death on the Installment Plan*, Antoine is described as a "peeping tom by instinct" (Céline 1971, p. 199), while Robert is portrayed as a "a

natural-born peeping tom” (p. 207). As for Ferdinand, he declares unequivocally: “I’m a voyeur” (40). This voyeurism permeates the entire novel, manifesting through three particularly striking scenes in which Ferdinand spies on his surroundings. A reflection of the author himself, Ferdinand observes the world with obsessive, at times unhealthy, attention. This voyeurism takes on a transgressive dimension, blending a fascination with the erotic and the scatological. For instance, Ferdinand recounts the following: “He showed me his system of looking into the can to see the women pissing, right on our landing, two holes in the door” (Céline 1971, *Death on the Installment Plan*, p. 199). These scenes highlight a transgressive voyeurism, where excitement arises from the violation of social norms.

A striking example of this transgression occurs in Ferdinand’s relationship with La Gorloge, his boss’s wife. Ferdinand, an employee under her husband’s authority, secretly spies on La Gorloge, peering into her private moments—an act that inverts the expected power structure of their household. Within this domestic hierarchy, where subordinates are typically subject to oversight by those above them, Ferdinand’s voyeurism disrupts the normative flow of observation, turning his superior into the object of his gaze. This inversion recalls Michel Foucault’s analysis in *Discipline and Punish*, where he describes the power of hierarchical surveillance as reliant on “eyes that must see without being seen” (Foucault 1995, p. 171). Here, Ferdinand’s illicit watching heightens the voyeur’s thrill by exposing something meant to remain hidden, veiled by societal norms of propriety and rank. Yet, this excitement fades over time: “Now, we weren’t scared anymore... It didn’t excite us so much either” (Céline 1971, *Death on the Installment Plan*, p. 212). This remark highlights an acclimation to fear and excitement, underscoring the ephemeral nature of transgression.

Céline is an eye that seeks to know. Through Ferdinand Bardamu in *Journey to the End of the Night* (*Voyage au bout de la nuit*) Céline observes. As a suburban doctor, Bardamu examines stripped female bodies. Scenes of abortions, miscarriages, and childbirth are described with clinical detachment. While his position grants him access to these intimate moments of suffering, his gaze is not purely medical. Unlike a healer, he remains a passive spectator, using his privileged position to observe rather than act. His gaze, stripped of therapeutic intent, becomes that of an onlooker contemplating life and death, particularly around the female body. In this sense, his observation is voyeuristic—not in an erotic sense, but in its fixation on witnessing rather than alleviating suffering. As Chauchois and Glacet note (“*Le sang de la mort de Louis-Ferdinand Céline*” (Chauchois and Glacet 2018)), Bardamu is a voyeur in the strictest sense—one who does not act but simply looks and records. Ferdinand’s gaze, for instance, does not just observe but actively dissects, reducing the body to a site of exposure. This echoes the Foucauldian notion of the medical gaze, which turns individuals into objects of scrutiny under the pretense of knowledge (*The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault 1976, chap. 7). The voyeurism gradually sheds its erotic undertones, evolving into a cold, detached examination. Female genitalia become objects of study, marked by blood and suffering. This blood—whether from menstruation (referred to as *le voir* (the seeing)), an outpouring of dead blood, imbued with disappointment when pregnancy is desired or relief in the case of an unwanted pregnancy, as noted by Schaeffer (Schaeffer 2005, p. 42), abortions, or miscarriages—symbolizes an omnipresent death.

Céline no longer looks at sexuality; he observes sex, coldly. He cultivates what Jean-Charles Huchet calls “the art of peeping through the hole at the feminine mystery” (Huchet 1993, p. 28).³ This voyeurism transcends the mere pleasure of observation to become a true quest for knowledge—an obsessive attempt to uncover the secret of the female body. In this sense, the voyeur is no longer a passive spectator but a methodical, almost scientific observer. This posture, as described by Charles Huchet, ties back to the original definition of a voyeur: one who keeps watch, who surveils. The verb *surveiller*, moreover, originally

meant “to watch over a dead person” before taking on the sense of “to monitor people”. Thus, Bardamu’s medical voyeurism appears to seek, within the female body, traces of death itself.

3.2. Voyeurism in Bataille

Bataille’s voyeurism, like Céline’s, often begins with a form of female exhibitionism. In *Death on the Installment Plan*, Céline describes a customer who “shows me her fat legs, her behind, and her clump of hair. Whew! She goes poking around inside with her fingers. . . . [.] She opens it out. Oozing” (p. 68). This same dynamic is at work in Bataille’s texts, but it is pushed to its extreme. Women reveal their bodies, particularly their genitals, without restraint.

In *Madame Edwarda*, the heroine engages in similarly audacious gestures: “She raised her leg to show him her gash” (Bataille 1995, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, p. 150). Later: “she lifted one leg high and wide above her head, and to open her gash still further, used the fingers of both hands to draw the folds of skin apart” (p. 150). Here, the voyeur does not hide. He is invited to look, to observe closely, even encouraged by the person being observed. This reversal of the traditional dynamic of voyeurism highlights a new form of interaction, where the object of the gaze becomes active, and the voyeur is thrust into a direct relationship with what he observes. Voyeurism in Bataille takes a radically different turn from that in Céline. While Céline’s voyeurism is marked by a passive, distant gaze, Bataille explores a participatory voyeurism, where the observer becomes an integral part of the scene.

Bataille’s work introduces a metaphorical and symbolic dimension to voyeurism. In *Madame Edwarda*, the sexual organ becomes an eye that, in turn, observes the voyeur, creating a mise en abyme of voyeurism akin to a hall of mirrors: “Madame Edwarda’s ‘rags’ looked at me, hairy and pink, and as full of life as some loathsome squid” (p. 150). This image, both grotesque and fascinating, suggests a reversal of roles: the observer becomes the observed, trapped by the gaze of the object they contemplate.

Roland Barthes (1963), in “*La métaphore de l’œil*”, explores how the eye serves as a powerful metaphor in Bataille’s *Histoire de l’œil*, symbolizing both vision and transgression. Barthes’s analysis underscores the dual nature of the gaze, which not only observes but also participates in the erotic and destructive dynamics central to Bataille’s narrative.

This theme is further developed in *Story of the Eye* (*Histoire de l’œil*) (Bataille 1967), where the eye becomes a fetish object, symbolizing both vision and sexuality. Simone, the heroine, manipulates the eye as though it were a phallus: “she had a long climax, virtually drinking my left eye between her lips” (Bataille 2013, *Story of the Eye*, p. 61). The “sucked eye” (p. 62), removed from its anatomical context, transforms into a polymorphic object, shifting from the ocular globe to testicles during the bullfight, when Simone is presented with the bull’s genitals: “two peeled balls, glands the size and shape of eggs, and of a pearly whiteness, faintly bloodshot, like the globe of an eye” (p. 94). From the eye to the testicle to the egg, the connection is established. This metaphorical shift illustrates Bataille’s obsession with the transformation and transgression of bodily boundaries.

Voyeurism in Bataille’s work reaches its zenith when the eye becomes a sexual attribute, detached from the body and endowed with an erotic function. The eye, a witnessing organ, is placed in direct proximity to the sexual organ. In a striking scene from *Story of the Eye*, Simone inserts an eye into her sex: “Simone [...] grabbed the beautiful eyeball from the hands of the tall Englishman [Sir Edmond] and with a staid and regular pressure from her hands, she slid it into her slobbery flesh” (Bataille 2001, p. 124). This disconcerting and transgressive act symbolizes a complete fusion between the voyeur and the object of voyeurism.

This distortion culminates in a horrifying vision: “in Simone’s hairy vagina, I saw the wan blue eye of Marcelle, gazing at me through tears of urine” (Bataille 2013, *Story of the Eye*, p. 124). The eye, degraded and defiled, embodies a vision of sexuality where pleasure is inseparable from decay and death. This image recalls the blind gaze of Bataille’s father, whose eyes turned white like eggs during urination (Bataille 2013, *Story of the Eye*, p. 134).

In Bataille’s work, voyeurism is not mere curiosity but an existential quest. By seeking to see as closely as possible, to push the boundaries of the visible, the voyeur ultimately loses their vision. This paradox reflects a fundamental tension in Bataille’s writing: the desire to understand and possess the object of the gaze leads to self-dissolution, an annihilation of perception.

This tension between vision and blindness lies at the heart of Bataille’s voyeurism, transforming the act of looking into an experience of ultimate transgression. Thus, voyeurism in Bataille’s work extends far beyond the erotic dimension to become a metaphor for the human condition. By exploring the limits of sight, Bataille questions humanity’s ability to comprehend reality, to possess what it observes, and to confront the consequences of its own desires.

4. The Female Sex: A Paradoxical Site of Life and Death

Céline seeks to gaze upon the female sex because it represents a profound mystery, a hidden reality. Unlike the penis, visible and external, the female sex is perceived as a secret that men strive to uncover. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, captures this notion: “Of all these myths, none is more anchored in masculine hearts than the feminine ‘mystery’” (De Beauvoir 2011, p. 277). This perception is reinforced by Freudian theories, which, as Monique Schneider notes, fail to deeply explore female anatomy. Schneider argues that “Freud prefers to situate his research in the wake of Charcot’s, confining women within the photographic apparatus”, (Schneider 2004, pp. 35–53)⁴ thereby reducing his approach to a purely visual dimension. Céline and Bataille, however, move beyond this superficiality by voyeuristically exploring the female sex through physical, symbolic, and existential lenses.

In *Madame Edwarda*, Bataille’s narrator follows a peculiar trajectory. He first consumes the female sex and later becomes a voyeur, observing Madame Edwarda and the taxi driver making love. The reverse occurs in Céline’s *Death on the Installment Plan*. Here, Céline describes a scene where Ferdinand transitions from passive voyeurism to forced participation. La Gorloge, a figure of dominance, grabs him forcefully and plunges his face into her sex, a gesture reminiscent of Simone inserting the eye. This extreme proximity transcends mere observation, compelling Ferdinand to confront a raw reality. He sees up close—too close, in fact—to the point where he ceases to see and instead experiences the physicality of the sex, where: “in deep... it smells like eggs and shit... [...] She pulls me out of the pit⁵... I come up for air...⁶” (Céline 1971, *Death on the Installment Plan*, p. 216). The image of the egg, often associated with birth and creation, here becomes a symbol of putrefaction and death. It is linked to the excremental, that which is expelled from the body and deemed toxic. The rotten egg illustrates an inability to generate life or, alternatively, a life that is corrupt and already contaminated, transforming the female sex into a site of destruction.

This vision is further reinforced by the description of the female sex as “wreckage”, evoking the remnants of total destruction. Jacqueline Schaeffer explains that sex and “the excremental converge in this place designated as a ‘cloaca,’ corresponding to the visceral impurity where the site of procreation and the site of ejection merge” (Schaeffer 2005, p. 43).⁷ This zone of confusion, both fascinating and terrifying, reflects the danger of dissolution into formlessness. For Céline, the female sex is intriguing precisely because

it is sterile, incapable of giving birth to anything other than death (*"Le sang de la mort de Louis-Ferdinand Céline"* (Chauchois and Glacet 2018, p. 422)).

In Bataille's work, the female sex is similarly stripped of its reproductive function. In *Story of the Eye*, it is often associated with the egg, but this egg is destroyed or defiled. Simone attains pleasure by "breaking eggs with her ass" (p. 23), an act symbolizing the destruction of any potential for creation. The egg, ordinarily a symbol of life, here becomes an object of excretion, both toxic and devoid of value.

This association between the egg and excrement recurs throughout the text: "'she soon delighted in having me throw eggs into the toilet bowl" (p. 59); "She would ease herself fully on those eggs" (p. 63); and "Another game was to crack a fresh egg on the edge of the bidet and emptying it under her; sometimes she would piss on it, sometimes she made me strip naked and swallow the raw egg from the bottom of the bidet" (p. 59). Bataille even specifies, "that explains the almost regular appearance of urine every time eyes or eggs occur in the story" (p. 135). These provocative descriptions demonstrate that in Bataille's work, the female sex loses all utilitarian function, becoming instead a passage, a site of transgression. The egg, meant to symbolize life, is here emptied of meaning and reduced to a scatological object.

The association of the female sex with death is pervasive in the works of both Céline and Bataille. The idea that life and death coexist within the female body echoes the Latin phrase *Inter urinas et faeces nascimur*,⁸ often cited by the Church Fathers. In Bataille's work, this tension is heightened by a surrealist approach⁹—a movement he was briefly associated with—where objects acquire multiple meanings. Thus, the eye and the egg become interchangeable: "She played gaily with words, speaking about *broken eggs*, and then *broken eyes*" (Bataille 2013, *Story of the Eye*, p. 63). This symbolic confusion reflects a nihilistic view of sexuality, where creation is systematically annulled by destruction.

From this perspective, the female sex is not a site of reconciliation between life and death but a space where death prevails. In Céline's work, proximity to the female sex allows for a symbolic rebirth ("to rise back to the light" (Céline 1971, *Death on the Installment Plan*, p. 216)), whereas in Bataille's, it leads to a dissolution into formlessness. Though these visions differ, they share an obsession with the limits of the body and existence.

5. Transgression, Ecstasy, and the Limits of Knowing

In his correspondence, Céline offers a pragmatic approach to sexuality, reflecting a logic of transgression and the circumvention of prohibitions. He notably advocates sodomy as an alternative to reproductive sexuality: "Learn to make love 'from behind.' It helps enormously to satisfy men without any risk. From the front, it's a wound. Beware! A thousand times beware!" (Céline 2014, *Lettres à des amies*, p. 388).¹⁰ This practice, described as a substitute for reproduction, avoids any procreative implications, distancing sexuality from its traditional function and transforming it into a purely hedonistic act. In another letter, he states: "No love without a condom or ELSE FROM BEHIND" (Céline 2014, *Lettres à des amies*, p. 235).¹¹ This insistence highlights a deliberate effort to dissociate sexuality from reproduction, aligning with a logic of transgression.

Sodomy, as referenced by Céline, has historically been associated with the biblical city of Sodom, a symbol of debauchery and excess. Religious doctrine later categorized sodomy (representing various sexual practices, not exclusively anal) as a sin punishable by death. According to the Genesis narrative, Sodom is destroyed by God to punish its inhabitants for their sins. This story underscores the transgressive dimension of sexuality, where the desire for knowledge and possession collides with divinely imposed limits.

The men of the city, demanding the two angels who visited Lot so they might "know them" (*Genesis* 19:5), illustrate this quest for forbidden knowledge. The term "know",

derived from the Hebrew verb *yada'*, can be understood as a euphemism for sexual relations. This usage persists in the phrase “to know someone biblically”, meaning to have sexual intercourse. In response to this demand, which implies the intent of collective rape, Lot offers his two virgin daughters instead. However, the men persist in their desire to transgress. The angels then strike the men with blindness, symbolizing the punishment for attempting to exceed the boundaries of permitted knowledge.

The destruction of Sodom goes further, signifying the annihilation of all life within the city, leaving only ruins. Lot, spared for obeying divine commandments, contrasts with his wife, who, by looking back, transgresses the prohibition and is turned into a pillar of salt. This biblical narrative highlights the relationship between vision, the desire for knowledge, and transgression—a theme Bataille explores extensively in his works.

Bataille’s work can be seen as a rewriting of the biblical episode in which proximity to sex renders sight impossible. This reinterpretation is unsurprising given Bataille’s early attraction to a pious and Christian life between 1914 and 1920. His eventual shift toward atheism was influenced by his attraction to women and his reading of Bergson’s *Le Rire*. For Bataille, transgression becomes an existential and metaphysical quest. This biblical parallel is evident in *Madame Edwarda*, where the heroine reveals her sex to the narrator, and it is God whom he perceives. God commands him to look, not to avert his gaze: “Madame Edwarda’s ‘rags’ looked at me, hairy and pink, and as full of life as some loathsome squid. I stammered softly: ‘Why are you doing that?’ ‘You can see,’ she said, ‘I am GOD.’ ‘I’m going crazy.’ ‘Oh no you’re not, you’ve got to see: look!’” (p. 150). This act overturns religious and social conventions, transforming the female sex into the locus of divinity and ultimate knowledge. The narrator, petrified by this revelation as Lot’s wife was in the biblical tale, is confronted with an unbearable tension between the desire for knowledge and the fear of annihilation: “The sight of this woman whose appearance petrified me now [...] And yet, I still wanted to know” (p. 152).

The quest for knowledge, symbolized by the fixed gaze on the female sex, leads the narrator to a form of symbolic death. He acknowledges that his desire to uncover the mystery condemns him: “I ‘knew’ that a season of agony had begun for me. I accepted it, I wanted to suffer—to go further, to go, even though I should be struck down, to the ‘void’ itself. I knew, I wanted to know, lusting for her secret, without doubting for an instant that it was death’s kingdom” (p. 153). This tension between knowledge and destruction reflects Bataille’s obsession with transgression, where sex becomes a space of confrontation with the absolute.

The theme of the gaze, central to Bataille’s work, reflects a dialectic between vision and blindness. As in the biblical episode of Sodom, where the men lose their sight for attempting to transgress divine boundaries, the narrator of *Madame Edwarda* experiences a symbolic loss of vision. By gazing at the female sex, he is drawn into an existential void where knowledge becomes inseparable from suffering and annihilation. This tension between the gaze and loss pervades Bataille’s oeuvre, where transgressing the boundaries imposed by society and religion leads to an exploration of the abyss of human existence. In this sense, Bataille rewrites the episode of Sodom by shifting divine punishment to an internal confrontation, where the subject becomes lost in their own quest for knowledge.

6. Ecstasy, the *Little Death*, and the Threshold of Consciousness

The concept of death is intrinsically linked to that of sex, particularly through the experience of orgasm, commonly referred to as *la petite mort* (the little death). This term, often attributed to Georges Bataille, finds a striking illustration in *Madame Edwarda*. During ecstasy, the individual reaches a liminal state: eyes roll back, the body convulses, and consciousness wavers. In this moment, the individual no longer belongs to himself. He is

projected beyond reason and awareness into a state of extremity, an experience bordering on the ineffable.

For Bataille, this experience is associated with an excremental and corporeal metaphor. The father's eyes, turning white during the act of urination, symbolize the fusion of ecstasy, physiological act, and death. This image underscores the tension between life and dissolution, where every vital impulse also represents a step toward finitude. This dialectic is also present in Céline's work, where sexuality is often imbued with metaphysical ambiguity.

In *Death on the Installment Plan*, Gorloge articulates this tension when she addresses Ferdinand: "Swoon good, little pet! Oh, swoon. . . We'll die together! . . ." (p. 217). Here, the female sex, typically associated with birth and the perpetuation of the species, paradoxically becomes the site of a symbolic experience of death. Yet, this death is never final. Sexual ecstasy allows an approach to non-being, a temporary confrontation with the idea of death, but the individual always returns to life. As Vladimir Jankélévitch explains, the experience of death itself remains unique and ineffable, beyond all linguistic representation (Jankélévitch 2008).

J. H. Matthews, in his book *The Inner Dream: Céline as Novelist* (Matthews 1978, p. 77), identifies several episodes in Céline's works that underscore the notion that sex offers no consolation or release. Instead, Matthews argues that sex is depicted as a heightened form of terror, with Ferdinand's sexual encounters reinforcing the idea of sex as a form of death, likening the ecstasy of orgasm to dying. This perspective resonates with the way Céline portrays sexuality as an inescapable confrontation with human finitude, further aligning his vision with Bataille's preoccupation with transgression and the limits of experience.

In *Madame Edwarda*, Bataille explores the idea that death is present in the sexual act, like a silent guest at a forbidden feast. During the encounter between the narrator and the prostitute, the sexual experience is described as a confrontation with death: "death itself was present at the feast in the guise of what is called, in the nakedness of the brothel, 'the butcher's cut'. . . ." (Bataille 1995, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, p. 151). However, the experience of death, even in its symbolic form, eludes any attempt at narration. The ellipsis that follows this phrase ("") signifies the impossibility of putting into words a reality that transcends the limits of language.

The narrative resumes with the presence of mirrors, which are ubiquitous in the brothel's rooms. These mirrors function as thresholds, passages between life and death. They enable reflection in both senses of the word: the reflection of the image and an invitation to reflect, to return to reason after the blind excess of pleasure. The mirror thus becomes a point of rupture, a reminder of consciousness in a moment when the self-seemed lost in the absolute of ecstasy.

For Bataille, the orgasm is a liminal experience, situated between life and death. In this moment, the self is simultaneously present and absent, conscious and unconscious. This tension between dissolution and rebirth lies at the heart of the sexual experience as described by Bataille. The mirrors, by reflecting the image of the self, offer a form of return to oneself, a symbolic rebirth after the trial of the *petite mort*.

This dialectic between death and rebirth also resonates in Céline's work. In *Death on the Installment Plan*, sexuality is often associated with images of destruction and decay, yet it also holds the promise of a return to life, a symbolic regeneration. This ambivalence reflects a tragic and complex vision of the human condition, where every vital impulse is inseparably linked to finitude and death.

By exploring these themes, Bataille and Céline probe the limits of consciousness and human experience, placing sexuality at the center of an existential quest to understand the absolute.

7. Conclusions: Death at the Heart of Life—A Shared Quest

Death, omnipresent in the works of Céline and Bataille, finds its most striking expression in their exploration of the feminine sex. This locus of birth and life paradoxically becomes a space where death reveals itself, where it is glimpsed. Céline and Bataille, each in their own way, relentlessly pursue this elusive presence through voyeurism.

In Céline's work, voyeurism undergoes a profound transformation: what begins as a fascination with the body as a site of eroticism gradually morphs into a cold, clinical scrutiny. This shift parallels the broader disillusionment present in his work, where life's excesses—sexuality, pleasure, and vitality—are ultimately exposed as futile against the inevitability of decay. The feminine sex, stripped of its sensual dimension, is reduced to a site of decay and death, as evidenced by the descriptions of abortions and miscarriages in *Journey to the End of the Night*. This medical and pragmatic vision underscores a fascination with death as an intrinsic element of life.

Céline's doctor-figure, rather than healing, becomes a mere recorder of death's progression, as if seeking to capture the moment when life fades entirely. This transformation reflects a deeper existential crisis, where the act of observing becomes a desperate attempt to understand and control the inexorable march toward mortality. Through this clinical gaze, Céline's voyeurism loses its erotic charge, revealing instead the stark reality of human fragility and the omnipresence of death.

In contrast, Bataille transforms voyeurism into a purely erotic quest, where the feminine sex is imbued with sacred and destructive power. In *Madame Edwarda*, the sex becomes both a site of divine revelation and a gateway to the void—an abyss that irresistibly draws the narrator. This tension between desire and annihilation reflects an obsession with death as the ultimate boundary to be crossed.

For both authors, death exerts an irresistible, almost paradoxical attraction. It is both repellent and alluring, terrifying and fascinating. Céline and Bataille confront death directly, driven by an insatiable curiosity that compels them to push ever further, even at the risk of losing their sight. This obsession resonates with Freud's observation: "The great Mother-goddesses of the oriental peoples, however, all seem to have been both creators and destroyers—both goddesses of life and fertility and goddesses of death" (Freud 1958, "The Theme of the Three Caskets", p. 299). This duality, inscribed in the feminine sex, reflects the complexity of the human condition, where life and death are inextricably intertwined.

Their confrontation with death is not purely abstract or philosophical; it is deeply personal, rooted in their lived experiences of war. Céline's depiction of the decaying female body reflects the horror of human fragility he witnessed as a soldier, while Bataille's sacred eroticism mirrors his existential grappling with death's omnipresence. Both authors use voyeurism as a way to reassert control over mortality, a response to the chaotic destruction they endured.

The exploration of voyeurism in Céline and Bataille offers a unique perspective on their vision of life and death. By juxtaposing their works, it becomes evident that, despite their differing approaches, they share a common quest: to understand the absolute by looking beyond appearances, by probing the depths of the body and the soul. This quest, however, remains unfinished. Neither Céline nor Bataille fully grasp what they seek. Their voyeurism, though extreme, encounters the ineffable, that which lies beyond the limits of perception and language.

This study opens avenues for a broader exploration of the connections between sexuality, death, and transgression in 20th-century literature. It invites reflection on how other authors, such as Jean Genet or Marguerite Duras, address these themes. Finally, it raises questions about the representation of death and sexuality in contemporary literature: To what extent do these themes continue to fascinate and provoke inquiry? How does the

quest for the absolute, as pursued by Céline and Bataille, resonate in our current world, marked by questions of finitude and transcendence?

In conclusion, voyeurism in Céline and Bataille, far from being mere curiosity, becomes a mechanism, a means of probing the mysteries of life and death. This quest, both fascinating and tragic, reveals a complex and profound vision of the human condition, where eroticism and destruction, life and death, coexist in an uneasy yet mesmerizing equilibrium.

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Notes

- ¹ My translation: «Le roman déjà célèbre de Céline peut être considéré comme la description des rapports qu'un homme entretient avec sa propre mort, en quelque sorte présente dans chaque image de la misère humaine qui apparaît au cours du récit» (*70 critiques de Voyage au bout de la nuit 1932–1935*, Derval 2004, p. 117).
- ² My translation: «Dieu sait pourtant si j'ai vécu toute ma vie au milieu de tout ce qu'on peut imaginer. Mais je suis voyeur, je ne suis pas exhibitionniste. Il y a deux races d'hommes au fond: les voyeurs et les exhibitionnistes. Moi je suis voyeur. Donc je me contente de regarder» (Céline 2011, *Romans—Tome II*, p. 944).
- ³ My translation: «l'art de guetter au trou le mystère féminin» (Huchet 1993, p. 28).
- ⁴ My translation: «Freud préfère inscrire sa recherche dans le sillage de celle qu'a conduite Charcot, enfermant la femme dans l'appareillage photographique» (Schneider 2004, pp. 35–53).
- ⁵ Note that the exact French term used by Céline is 'décombre,' which translates to 'wreckage' in English. The analysis presented here is based on this original term.
- ⁶ Note that the exact French expression used by Céline is 'je remonte au jour' which translates to 'I rise back to the light' in English. The analysis presented here is based on this original expression.
- ⁷ My translation: «l'excrémentiel se rejoignent dans ce lieu désigné par 'cloaque', qui correspond à l'impureté viscérale où se confondent le lieu de procréation et le lieu d'éjection» (Schaeffer 2005, p. 43).
- ⁸ Translation "We are born between urine and feces".
- ⁹ The surrealist movement, with its emphasis on the unconscious and the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated objects, greatly influenced Bataille's exploration of transgression and the limits of human experience. Artists like Dalí often used the eye as a recurring motif to explore themes of perception, desire, and the subconscious. This fascination with the eye as a symbol of both vision and inner reality resonates with Bataille's use of the eye in works like *Histoire de l'œil*, where it becomes a fetish object, symbolizing both sexuality and the limits of perception. The surrealist approach allowed Bataille to imbue everyday objects with layers of meaning, reflecting the complexity of the human experience and the blurred boundaries between life and death, reality and illusion.
- ¹⁰ My translation: «Apprenez à faire l'amour "par derrière". Cela aide énormément à contenter les hommes sans risques aucun. Devant c'est une plaie. Attention! Mille fois attention!» (Céline 2014, *Lettres à des amies*, p. 388).
- ¹¹ My translation: «Pas d'amour sans préservatif ou ALORS PAR DERRIÈRE» (Céline 2014, *Lettres à des amies*, p. 235).

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