

The violence of Hiroshima: Hersey, Bataille and Caruth

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Abstract

This article deals first with John Hersey's 1946 *Hiroshima*, one of the earliest literary responses in English to the nuclear bombing of the city of Hiroshima in August 1945 and one of the most destructive acts of military violence in the 20th century. It then focuses on French philosopher's Georges Bataille's singular and disquieting review of Hersey's short book, published the following year in *Critique*. Finally, it discusses the somewhat unexpected return of Bataille's text in Cathy Caruth's 1995 seminal collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, and endeavors to assess Bataille's contemporary relevance to trauma studies. It appears that these three texts operate a process of traumatic transmission and literary actualization of the catastrophe.

Keywords: Hiroshima/ John Hersey/ Georges Bataille/ Cathy Caruth/ Trauma in literature

Résumé:

Cet article est d'abord consacré à l'une des premières réponses écrites à la violence nucléaire ultime du bombardement d'Hiroshima, celle de John Hersey dans son célèbre ouvrage éponyme, publié en 1946. Dans un second temps, il détaille la réception singulière et déstabilisante de ce livre par le philosophe français Georges Bataille en 1947. Enfin, il s'intéresse à la résurgence du texte de Bataille dans le volume collectif *Trauma : Explorations in Memory* publié par Cathy Caruth en 1995, un ouvrage devenu depuis la pierre d'angle des études traumatiques. L'analyse successive de ces trois textes imbriqués permet ainsi de mettre au jour un double processus de transmission et d'actualisation littéraire de la catastrophe.

Mots-clefs: Hiroshima/ John Hersey/ Georges Bataille/ Cathy Caruth/ Trauma et littérature

Introduction

“At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning of August 6 1945, Japanese time” (Hersey 3) occurred one of the most violently destructive events in the whole history of mankind: the dropping of “Little Boy”, the first atomic bomb ever built, over the city of Hiroshima, which, in “a noiseless flash” (Hersey 3), would cause the near-instantaneous death of over 140 000 people, although figures vary, so difficult were they to establish – not to mention the fact that they hardly convey any sense at all, statistics being essentially useless at rendering the human cost of any major catastrophe¹.

The violence of Little Boy – followed, three days later, by that of “Fat Man”, dropped over the industrial city of Nagasaki – also inscribed once and for all the *denouement* of the Second World War in the “catastrophic age” (Caruth 11) that has characterized the post-1945 world. Finally, it cast the ominous shadow of nuclear disaster over humanity as a whole, a dark veil that has not yet been lifted.

One year later, American writer John Hersey (1914-1993), seasoned journalist and war correspondent for *The New Yorker*, published a collection of testimonies by atomic bomb survivors, known in Japan as *hibakushas*, which he would turn into a small book soberly entitled *Hiroshima*. His volume endeavored to engage literally with the act of violence of a near-unimaginable scale perpetrated by US military forces over a civilian population.

The success of Hersey’s book, both at the time of its publication and to this day, more than seventy years after the bombing, gives evidence of the need for new modes of narrative in the face of destruction and violence of the most extreme kind. *Hiroshima*, in its deceptively simple form, provided what is “arguably the most important cultural text in the mid-40s to express nuclear fear” (Halliwell 84). It is also one of the first instances in the English language of what was to become an emblematic narrative form in the second half of the twentieth century, namely the literature of testimony, irremediably bound up in a crisis of truth, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have shown in their landmark volume published 45 years later, *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. In the eyes of some commentators, Hersey’s *Hiroshima* went so far as to “transform the narrative landscape of

America” (Sharp 450), challenging official narratives of the atomic blasts monitored by the US authorities.

Although my intention here is not to play down the intrinsic significance of Hersey’s short book, the main aim of this article is less to discuss Hersey’s collection of testimonies by Hiroshima survivors *per se* than to deal specifically with its reception across the Atlantic, especially in France. To do so, I will focus on the literary and ethical response it triggered in the French writer and philosopher Georges Bataille (1897-1962), who, in January 1947 published a powerfully unsettling review of Hersey’s book in the journal *Critique*. The reason for singling out Bataille’s text among the countless literary and philosophical responses surrounding Hersey’s book is its belated return, half a century later, in a seminal volume for trauma studies. Indeed, Bataille’s review of Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, singularly powerful as it is, might well have been forgotten had it not been unearthed to be included in the collective volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth in 1995, an essential collection that has since been regarded as the cornerstone of trauma studies across the academic world.

The aim of this article is thus threefold. First, it provides some elements of reflection on Hersey’s literary attempt to deal with the violence of the Hiroshima bombing. Second, it discusses Bataille’s response to Hersey’s book. Finally, it seeks to re-assess Georges Bataille’s “unclaimed relevance” to contemporary trauma theory by casting a close critical look at his unsettling stance towards the awe-inspiring violence generated by the bombing of Hiroshima and the testimonies of its survivors conveyed through his digressive review of Hersey’s book.

The humane significance of *Hiroshima*

As explained in the introduction, John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, a 30,000-word piece published in one single issue of *The New Yorker* at the end of August 1946, which was then turned into a book as early as October of that same year, not only stands as a landmark in the literary history of American letters and journalism, it was also an unprecedented way to engage by means of words and narrative with an act of equally unprecedented violence perpetrated on a massive scale.

It must be recalled that in 1946, the still recent nuclear catastrophe had unfolded away from western eyes as images were not as easily available to the general public as they have since become. The gap created by the knowledge of the dropping of an atomic bomb and its invisibility, somehow, had to be filled.

The various scientific and technical reports and detailed accounts of the strategy of the bombing that were provided to the American general public did not suffice, certainly not on an empathic level (Sharp 446). This ethical imperative demanded an account that “could be presented to readers so that they would care about and identify with the victims”, as Werner Sollors puts it (58). This is partly what led Hersey, as well as the editors of the magazine, to undertake his report, bypassing any official form of control and in spite of the utterly Kafkaesque situation Hersey found himself in, to echo the adjective used by psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton to qualify his own situation, some twenty years later, as another compassionate American facing *hibakushas*².

Hiroshima is composed of an intertwined compilation of six survivors’ testimonies: Mr. Kioyshi Tanimoto, a Methodist Reverend; Father Willhem Kleinsorge, a German Jesuit priest who resided in a Hiroshima Catholic mission; Dr. Sasaki, a Red Cross surgeon; Miss Sasaki, an office clerk, unrelated to the surgeon, a tailor’s widow and a mother of three; and yet another physician, Dr. Fujii. Hersey consciously selected these survivors so that the Japanese voices found in the book would differ from the dominant stereotypes of the time. As Patrick Sharp notes, “Hersey decided to focus his narrative on six survivors who would appeal to the pathos of the American audience, and who implicitly undermined the representation of the Japanese as a fanatical, militaristic Shinto horde” (445).

The testimonies, however, are not fully voiced by the selected *hibakushas* within the pages of *Hiroshima*. All traces of orality have been erased from Hersey’s book and the survivors’ accounts have systematically been turned into narrative report. And while Hersey’s presence as a narrator is hardly felt, a distance is constantly maintained between the reader’s experience and the survivors’ testimonies. This is partly due to the chosen narrative mode, but also to Hersey’s stylistic choices. The words of *Hiroshima* are sparse, factual, devoid of emotions. Metaphors are nowhere to be found, and restraint is the main stylistic concern. Hersey himself commented on his singular stylistic approach in an oft-quoted interview:

The flat style was deliberate, and I still think I was right to adopt it. A high literary manner, or a show of passion, would have brought me into the story as a mediator; I

wanted to avoid such mediation, so the reader's experience would be as direct as possible. (qtd in Rothman, par. 7)

It would be difficult also not to feel the influence of Ernest Hemingway's style of writing – like Hersey, he too had been a journalist and had been strongly affected by war – even though it must be recalled that such stylistic restraint in order to depict the horror of modern warfare derives from an older American tradition of pre-war journalists turned novelists, such as Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser.

While the choice of such pared down language was the only possible one for the author, his non-violent, “antiseptic *New Yorker* prose,” as some of his detractors put it³, may be regarded as rather problematic in the face of the horror he was dealing with. As we shall see in the next part of this discussion, Georges Bataille's opted for a very different writing mode in his response to Hersey's book. Yet before moving on to Bataille, some textual evidence from Hersey's *Hiroshima* may at this stage prove useful.

The first excerpt is found at the very end of its first section, entitled “A Noiseless Flash”, referring to the illumination that accompanied the blast. Despite its apparent neutrality, this expression brims with traumatic undertones, echoing the startling lines of Japanese poet Kyokyu Kayenama, who wrote that: “*the flash that covered the city in morning mist was much like an instant dream*” (qtd in Lifton, p. 34).

At this point, we have been following Miss Sasaki, an employee trapped in her workplace, more than one mile away from the center of the explosion, when the bomb's impact is suddenly felt:

Everything fell, and Miss Sasaki lost consciousness. The ceiling dropped suddenly and the wooden floor above collapsed in splinters and the people there came down and the roof above them gave way; but principally and first of all, the bookcases right behind her swooped forward and the contents threw her down, with her left leg horribly twisted and breaking underneath her. There, in the tin factory, in the first moments of the atomic age, a human being was crushed by books. (Hersey 23)

This rather paltry image of books incongruously conjured up in the midst of nuclear destruction is possibly the only moment in the text when the author's efforts to draw up a symbolic comparison between the violence of the bombing and his act of writing are made explicit. Elsewhere in this passage as in the rest of the book, Hersey always seems intent on neutralizing

his writing and “careful to universalize the locals’ reactions” (Sollors 58). By doing so, he may have been striving to become an agent of “symbolic reconciliation” (Lifton 355) and even present “a model of individual commitment to universal principles” (332).

The second textual example is taken from the second section of the book, entitled “The Fire”. It provides the reader with the image of a devastated universe, one of the first visions of horror of a nuclear apocalypse in the history of literature that seems, somehow, to foreshadow the most spectacular moments of post-nuclear fiction, yet in a highly restrained manner:

Mr. Tanimoto (...) was the only person making his way into the city; he met hundreds and hundreds who were fleeing, and every one of them seemed to be hurt in some way. The eyebrows of some were burned off and skin hung from their faces and hands. Others, because of pain, held their arms up as if carrying something in both hands. Some were vomiting as they walked. Many were naked or in shreds of clothing. On some undressed bodies, the burns had made patterns—of undershirt straps and suspenders and, on the skin of some women (...), the shapes of flowers they had had on their kimonos. Many, although injured themselves, supported relatives who were worse off. Almost all had their heads bowed, looked straight ahead, were silent, and showed no expression whatever. (Hersey 39-40)

The complete absence of expression on the survivors’ faces mentioned in the final line of the excerpt seems to be consciously mirrored in the complete absence of stylistic ornamentation, as though the collective numbing derived from the shock and the devastation of the bomb could translate into self-imposed stylistic numbing. Nevertheless, Hersey’s restraint did not seek to hide the horror of the bomb. *Hiroshima* was the very first book to shed light on the crude reality of nuclear violence, and the few descriptions of utter devastation such as the one quoted above did impact readers’ minds very strongly. As Steve Rothman puts it: “certainly the vivid depictions in the book must have been a strong contributor to a pervasive sense of dread (and guilt) about nuclear weaponry felt by many Americans ever since August 1945⁴”. That same sense of dread and guilt certainly did pervade in Georges Bataille’s reading of Hersey’s text, in which the French philosopher saw a prophetic warning about the gloomy future of mankind:

It is not particularly surprising if Hersey’s book takes on, in this sense, the meaning of a lamp : I imagine for a while it will give intolerable brilliance to the possibilities of human

suffering, whose signal and sign it has even become even as those possibilities exceed it infinitely. (Bataille 1995, 232)⁵

Bataille's violent reader-response

The piece by George Bataille under consideration was originally a review of Hersey's book, published in the French philosophical journal *Critique* at the beginning of the year 1947. *Critique* was founded by Bataille himself in association with the *Editions de Minuit*. He worked there as editor in chief from 1946 to 1962, the year of his death. The article in question, entitled "*A propos des récits d'habitants d'Hiroshima*" can also be found in the eleventh volume of Bataille's *Complete Works* published in 1991. It remains uncertain whether Bataille actually read Hersey's book in the original version of the 1946 Penguin edition, the publications details of which feature in the opening title of the *Critique* review, as all the quotations from *Hiroshima* appear in French in the body of the text. A footnote of the *Oeuvres Complètes* indicates that the French newspaper *France Soir* published a full translation of Hersey's text in installments during the month of September 1946.

As the philosophy and method of *Critique* dictate, Bataille's review soon turns into a fifteen-page essay, which, given Hersey's volume's concision, is considerable – the textual volume of the review amounting to a good third of the book that is under review. Bataille's piece is a challenging and often unsettling piece on humanity's entrance into the "Age of atom", using Hersey's accounts as a springboard for a sweeping reflection that exceeds the conventional metadiscursive exercise of literary criticism. While at first Bataille's words may unsettle and even confuse readers, his essay soon becomes a crucial attempt at intellectualizing and assimilating an experience placed beyond the limits of understanding and witnessing, an experience that could certainly be defined, to use an adjective coined elsewhere by the philosopher himself, as radically "heterological"⁶. In his remarkable biographical study of Bataille, Michel Surya wrote that "all social phenomena characterized by violence, madness, hubris and delirium can be defined as heterogeneous, all of them are impossible to assimilate"⁷. In that respect, the atomic bombing of the city of Hiroshima and the almost immediate death of over one hundred thousand of its inhabitants deserves to be considered as a paragon of heterogeneity, possibly the most radical *clinamen* in the whole history of mankind.

Bataille's review opens with a somewhat ambivalent stance, mingling a general sense of ontological unease and anxiety in the immediate post-war years with a more biting tone. He begins his piece with a brutally provocative comment on the near-uselessness of lamenting the war victims, given the natural cycle of life and death in the whole universe. This is followed by a no less striking comparison of the inhabitants of Hiroshima with termites, helpless victims of a vast operation of eradication, submitted to "the unintelligible destruction of [their] nest[s]" (227). At that point, that is to say after five pages out of fourteen, and while some readers may have felt tempted to dismiss Bataille's words as a near-nonsensical and heartless rant, there occurs a major articulation in his tonality and argumentation.

It soon appears that Bataille's initial provocative stance is to be read as evidence of an intimately felt outrage linked to the painful, sudden realization that such destruction underscores the terrible reality of the atomic age. He writes on:

I can at this point explain myself. What struck me on first reading *Hiroshima* was that, if I had not had any other reason, the isolated view of horror would have left me, as it were, indifferent. If, however, I read in anguish, feeling the contact with the most oppressive reality, it was because I knew: right away I related all the banal reactions to the consciousness and possibilities opened up by the manufacturing of atomic bombs. I understood then that the annual death of fifty million human beings had no humane meaning. (...) But the death of sixty thousand is charged with meaning, in that it depended on their fellow men to kill them or let them live. The atom bomb draws its meaning from its human origin; it is the possibility that the hands of man deliberately hang suspended over the future. (226)

From that point onwards, Bataille's discussion of Hersey's book turns into a sharp diatribe against "the man of sovereign sensibility"⁸, which he also calls, in a noticeable footnote, the man of the atom since "the Greek word 'atom' served to designate the instant in Aristotle's and St Paul's writings" (235).

In that sense, "the multiplication of details, monstrous and minute" (227) in Hersey's book matters less to Bataille than the appalling awareness of the new age that the bombing of Hiroshima has inaugurated.

Eventually, in a third and final articulation in the last part of the essay, Bataille infuses his text with an unexpected and rather destabilizing religious dimension, calling up – seemingly

incongruously – the crucial and near-ecstatic meditation of “the Christian on the Cross or the Buddhist on the boneheap” (230). He writes:

Both these meditations, far from plunging the spirit into the depth of depression, create a rapid movement of “communicating vessels” from extreme anguish to “joy that transcend joy”. (231)

While such a radical narrowing of scale may surprise some readers, those familiar with Bataille will recognize here the author’s singular merging of the transcendental and the horrible wrapped up in an almost mystical experience. It may be right to state that the reading of Hersey’s *Hiroshima* placed Bataille beside himself, in a state of *ec-stasy* that his digressive and disquieting review literalized. Besides, this sudden religious, even mystical turn of the text also connects the plight of the survivors in Hersey’s *Hiroshima* with Bataille’s own intimate traumatic image, that of the *Supplice des cent morceaux*, a photograph representing a Chinese prisoner tied to a pole and being skinned alive, piece by piece. This infamous picture was given to him by his psychoanalyst in 1925. It never ceased to haunt Bataille throughout his whole writing career, and beyond⁹.

Ultimately, Bataille’s review ends with a dreadful existential categorical imperative: to remain on the surface of “the old sponge of anxiety that is the world of activity, whose movement leads to destruction” (234) and live up to the catastrophe of Hiroshima.

As a whole, it may be said that Bataille’s review does not seek to engage dialectically with Hersey’s small book. Rather, it proceeds differentially, turning the rather toned-down accounts of the survivors compiled by the American writer into a springboard for indignation and illumination, made possible by the geographical and philosophical standpoint that severs him from the “sovereign sensibility” he repeatedly denounces throughout his essay. Bataille, from his privileged vantage point as an external observer, feels somehow able to intellectualize the catastrophe that occurred at Hiroshima and to which Hersey’s book bears witness. His review thus becomes an instance of nuclear violence become scriptural. Bataille’s reader-response actualizes itself in an act of writing of a particular intensity, becoming itself *catastrophic* and echoing lines written a decade earlier in *Sacrifices* in which the philosopher had already envisaged the possibility of such catastrophic mental actualization:

Positing the object as a catastrophe, human thought experiences the annihilation that constitutes it as a vertiginous, endless fall. Thus thought does not only hold catastrophe

as its object: its very structure is catastrophic. Something enormous breaks out from all quarters with the might of a vertiginous cascade; it issues forth from the unreal regions of infinity and yet falls back there in a swoop of inconceivable power.¹⁰

In spite of its sheer pessimism, Bataille's response, which somehow "atomizes" Hersey's book, is radically opposed to an act of resignation. His review is to be read as a negative epiphany, combining indignation and illumination, two words which, incidentally, share the same etymology in Japanese:

It is significant to note that the Japanese word for resignation (*akirame*) is derived from a verb (*akiramu*) one of whose early meanings is "to probe or illuminate", and conveys the idea of *active confrontation* of powerful forces, rather than the more or less passive submission now generally associated with the concept of resignation. (Lifton 371)

Bataille's relevance to contemporary trauma theory

While it has been shown that George Bataille's reading of Hersey's *Hiroshima* does raise a number of complex and intricate issues such as compassion for the victims and ethics, his inclusion in Caruth's celebrated 1995 volume also raises some others, mostly retrospective, which I will now endeavour to address by way of conclusion. In Cathy Caruth's authoritative collection of essays, the presence of George Bataille's text is intriguing in more ways than one. Not only is he the sole philosopher in the collection (all the other authors come from the fields of psychiatry, history, sociology or the arts) he is also the only contributor to have been dead for over thirty years at the time when the volume was published. This makes Bataille the only voice from beyond the grave to resound within the pages of Caruth's seminal volume, and very possibly one that is rather out-of-tune with the general euphony of the collection. It is also the only translated piece in the whole volume. Bataille's text, as it features in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, was translated in its entirety, and for the first time, by Alan Keenan, then a member of staff at the University of California and a specialist in political theory¹¹. Bataille's original text, extremely dense, often verbose and bordering on the agrammatical, does not provide its readers with a comfortable reading experience. The English translation of the text strives to achieve great accuracy combined with that same degree of opacity and does so rather successfully.

Furthermore, the very first pages of Caruth's introduction make no secret of her psychoanalytically-oriented approach to the intricacies of trauma. In that respect, Georges Bataille is far from being the most likely figure to be summoned up from the past. His own relationship with psychoanalysis was a short-lived and troublesome one. His analysis, which he undertook with Adrien Borel in 1925 when Bataille was involved in the Surrealist circles, was rather abruptly ended in 1927. As a rule, psychoanalysis is not granted much consideration in Bataille's writings. The author favored an excessive mode of being and writing, inspired notably by Nietzschean philosophy, mysticism, as well as an ever-renewed inclination towards a writing of excess, a combination perhaps best illustrated in Bataille's own philosophical manifesto, *L'expérience intérieure*, published in 1943.

Moreover, the piece included in Caruth's volume is far from being Bataille's best-known. So much secondary literature and criticism was produced in the aftermath of Hersey's *Hiroshima* that the choice of including that little-known review by a French author is definitely intriguing. The question therefore somehow remains to fully validate Bataille's presence in a collection otherwise composed exclusively of contemporary thinkers or artists involved in the weaving of what was then becoming the interdisciplinary field of trauma studies, all alive twenty years ago.

In the context of 1995, closer to us than the days of Hiroshima, how does the French philosopher add elements of reflection to the potential violence of the man of the atom on the one hand, and on the trauma of the survivors on the other? Does his scandalized urge to confront the cataclysm of Hiroshima still hold today? Or could it be precisely the temporal dislocation at the heart of our contemporary reception of the piece that makes it an essential contribution to Caruth's reflection on trauma and history? In 2016, reading Caruth reading Bataille reading Hersey makes the reader feel both involved in a complex process of transmission and part of a chain reaction. Chronology also matters. While Bataille's reading of Hersey's *Hiroshima* occurred within a relatively short lapse of time – just over two years between the explosion of the A-bomb over Hiroshima and Bataille's infuriated review – our contemporary reading of his review takes place some fifty – even seventy – years later. Consequently, we read belatedly, adopting a belatedness that is inherent to the history of trauma (Caruth 11). Thrice removed from the testimonies of the *hibakushas* in Hersey's *Hiroshima*, the reader of Bataille's piece in Cathy Caruth's 1995 volume is placed in a finely calibrated ethical position, as one who *must*, indirectly and belatedly, “understand the past of others (...) within the traumas of contemporary history” (Caruth 11).

Whereas Georges Bataille's violent reading of Hersey's *Hiroshima* may at first sight appear startling and somehow out of place in *Explorations in Memory*, it nevertheless provides us first and foremost with a very powerful moment of "witnessing, precisely, of *impossibility*" (Caruth 10). More specifically, it seems to come up with an answer to Caruth's question about how exactly one does listen to what is impossible (10). Bataille's piece presents a listening that does not seek to cure nor to offer any explicit compassion for the victims. Rather, it illustrates the way a traumatic catastrophe can be turned into a literary act, and as such it becomes a rather unique instance of intercultural traumatic circulation and repercussion. To quote the final lines of Cathy Caruth's introduction to her 1995 volume, the transmission and working through of trauma "can only take place through the listening of another" and "in our catastrophic age, [it] may provide the very link between cultures" (11). In that sense, with Bataille's review, we are invited not only to listen to the survivors of Hiroshima and register the heterological violence and aftershock of the first atomic bombing, we are also taking an ethical path that must be regarded as an urge to live up to the dimension of the catastrophe, and to respond to it individually, with dignified indignity:

Certainly it is better to live up to Hiroshima than to lament to it, unable to bear the idea of it (...); we must confront man, [who] is equal to all possibilities, or rather, whose only measure is impossibility¹². (Bataille 232).

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¹ It has often been pointed out that statistics related either to the power of the blast or the number of people killed in Hiroshima convey no sense of the human loss at the heart of the catastrophe, if only because "statistics don't bleed", as psychiatrist Robert J Lifton caustically put it (13).

² A delicate – **even Kafkaesque** – position as an American psychiatrist approaching people about their feelings concerning the bomb. (7, my emphasis)

³ See Dwight MacDonald, in Sollors, 59.

⁴ <http://www.herseyhiroshima.com/hiro.php>

⁵ « Le livre de Hersey prend en ce sens valeur de lampe : j'imagine qu'il donnera pour un temps leur intolérable éclat à des possibilités de douleur humaine dont il est le symbole et le signe qui l'excèdent infiniment » (Bataille 185). The English translation used in the following pages is that published in Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. More information about the specificities and history of this translation is provided in the opening lines of the final part of the article.

⁶ Bataille coined the word « heterology » in relationship to the writings of the Marquis de Sade. The word first appears in "La Valeur d'usage de D.A.F. de Sade" (in *Œuvres Complètes* vol. II, pp. 63-70.) For an in-depth discussion of that operative concept, see *Hétérologies. Pour une dé-neutralisation de la critique littéraire* by Groupe H3, Perpignan: Presses universitaires de Perpignan, 2006.

⁷ « Sont *hétérogènes* tous les phénomènes sociaux caractérisés par la violence, la folie, la démesure et le délire, phénomènes qui ont tous en commun d'être inassimilables » (My translation).

⁸ "*L'homme de la sensibilité souveraine*" (180), an expression used repeatedly by Bataille and that raises a number of questions as to its exact definition. In the English version of the text found in Caruth's volume, the translator notes that "a full understanding of the text would require attention to the differing uses of these words and their resonances with each other" (Keenan in Caruth 235).

⁹ See Arnaud Tellier (30-42).

¹⁰ « Dans la position de l'objet comme *catastrophe*, la pensée vit l'anéantissement qui la constitue comme une chute vertigineuse et infinie ; ainsi n'a-t-elle pas seulement la *catastrophe* en tant qu'objet : sa structure même est

la *catastrophe*. Quelque chose d'immense se libère de toutes parts avec l'ampleur d'une cataracte, surgit des régions irréelles de l'infini et cependant y sombre dans un mouvement d'une force inconcevable. » Georges Bataille, *Sacrifices*, 1936. Quoted in Tellier (42). Many thanks to Jonathan Pollock for his help with the translation.

¹¹ Anecdotally, Mr Keenan now works as a senior analyst for the International Crisis Group, possibly a concrete example of how trauma studies find themselves at the crossroads of many fields of knowledge and action.

¹² « Il vaut mieux vivre à la hauteur d'Hiroshima que gémir et n'en pouvoir supporter l'idée (...) l'homme est à la mesure du tout possible, ou plutôt l'impossible est sa seule mesure » (185).