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Laugesen, Martin Hauberg-Lund; Grimm, Jon Auring

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Laure and Bataille as educators: On the useless value of sacred experiences

Martin Hauberg-Lund Laugesen and Jon Auring Grimm

Abstract

Whereas there are potentially many ways to have sacred experiences as part of one's higher education, we show how exam writing as a specific study activity can serve as an occasion for such experiences to occur. Experiences through writing that involve the destruction and creation of worlds, of losing and regaining oneself and of learning profound things along the way. Illustrated through the case of Sofie, an undergraduate philosophy student, we show how experiencing the sacred involves the temporary entrapment of the self by the self, in a demonic fashion. The process of emergence and dissolution of this entrapment ultimately makes up a sacred experience that nourishes a learning-development process that can best be described as an oscillating process of becoming. Our article draws its main philosophical inspiration from Laure and Georges Bataille.

Keywords: the sacred, exam writing, student development, supervision, study engagement

Received 09 January 2023; accepted 12 December 2023. Corresponding author: Martin Hauberg-Lund Laugesen, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark (mhl@sdu.dk).

Introduction

What we want to communicate and share with our readers is the following: There are modes of academic writing involving *the ravishing touch of the sacred* that many, if not most, university students never engage in; this is both sad and regrettable due to the fact that it is exactly those modes of writing that enable and further genuine learning and both the personal and professional development of academic identity. Simply writing one bland and mandatory essay or exam paper after another never got anyone anywhere (interesting), so to speak. But designing written assessments, in our case exams, to be exciting, surprising, challenging, and relatively open-ended—speaking to both the heart and mind of students—will be much more likely to take them places in the realms of academic development. Thus,

our essay is not so much about the sacred as such, but about the necessity for violation of the established and profane order of university writing pedagogy in order to enable students to experience genuine *communication* and, possibly, the entrance into a sacred *community* of true learners.

The vocabulary of the *sacred* and the *profane* in higher education will be introduced in a philosophical sense, but with a constant view to the question of the personal and everyday metaphorical sense of these concepts. We do so by following French surrealist Michel Leiris' lead in his lecture 'The sacred in everyday life,' held at the infamous College of Sociology in 1937-1939 (Leiris, 1937, as cited in Bataille, 1988b, p. 24), who implicitly asks us to consider what the sacred means for us. We aim to answer this question in the context of higher education and academic writing. More specifically, we intend to use the technical understanding of these concepts—the sacred, the profane—as it is developed in the works of Colette 'Laure' Peignot and Georges Bataille, partially in response to Leiris. Thus, we will attempt to perform a *Deleuzian* interpretation of the call for papers for this special issue of the *Journal of Praxis in Higher Education* demonstrating how another meaning is possible than what might have been the editors' intended meaning of the call. What we have in mind is Gilles Deleuze's own reflection on his exegetical practice where interpretation of the works of famous philosophers (be it David Hume, Immanuel Kant or Henri Bergson) is carried out as 'a sort of buggery' involving 'taking an author from behind and giving him a child' (Deleuze, 1995, pp. 5-6). Extending the analogy to our situation, what we have done has been to take the call for papers from behind and conceive a monstrous offspring that the call itself must nonetheless take half the parental responsibility for.

We open the article by elaborating one possible meaning of the conceptual dyad of the sacred and the profane. Subsequently, we show concretely how they can be brought to inform and inspire alternative, progressive writing pedagogies in higher education. By doing so, we are responding directly to the invitation in the call to 'explore and challenge what is seen as sacred and profane in HE.' Ultimately, our article contributes to shedding light on 'everyday practises of HE where the organisational ambivalence between the sacred and the profane is actualised.' More specifically, writing pedagogy in relation to, on the one hand, undergraduate students' exam writing and, on the other, teachers' supervision and feedback practices. Our goal is, thus, to draw on Laure and Bataille and their understanding of the sacred and the profane and the associated concepts they use to illuminate these central concepts in order to investigate pedagogical practices in higher education, such as supervising, examining and giving feedback on students' exam writing. In the closing section of the article, we will return to and sum up what we

ultimately consider to be the useless value of sacred experiences in the context of student exam writing in HE.

The first half of the article consists of a philosophical exposition of Laure's and Bataille's concepts of the sacred and the profane. Laure's writings will serve as our point of departure and Bataille will be drawn upon to further qualify and add nuance and conceptual depth to the descriptions and determinations found in Laure's writings. Laure will thus be our point of departure since her writings accentuate the *experiential* side of the sacred, including the pre-sacred and the 'topical event.' Bataille will naturally be brought in as an historically invaluable co-developer of these concepts, which keep on occupying him even after Laure's all too early death. Laure is answering directly to the end question of Leiris' lecture, referred to above: '[W]hat colour is the sacred for you?' Her writings thus directly engage with the lived, everyday aspects of sacred experiences. The taint of the sacred is to be found all over the writings of Bataille. Choosing Laure and her experiential treatment of the sacred as our point of departure, we impose certain limits on our inspiration from Bataille. Particularly, his emphasis on *waste* and *materiality*—which he takes to be crucial for understanding the sacred—has been downplayed due to our focus on the experiential, lived and everyday sense of the sacred. Thus, we both read Bataille as an illuminating expansion and supplement to Laure and *vice versa*.

The second half of the article consists of an analytical treatment of an example of how one university philosophy student, Sofie, underwent experiences of the sacred when engaged in writing exam papers. The case example is taken from Martin Hauberg-Lund Laugesen's PhD thesis *Written engagement: Towards an empirically grounded phenomenology of the experiential interrelation between undergraduate students' exam writing and study engagement* from 2021. The example demonstrates the relevance of Laure and Bataille for understanding both the actual and potential role(s) of the sacred and profane in 1) students' engagement in and 2) teachers' supervision of exam writing at the university level. It does so by bringing to light some of the crucial aspects of exam writing that are capable of spawning sacred experiences in student writers, disturbing or disrupting the profane order of already established knowledge regarding both self, academic discipline and the world as cosmic, albeit heterogenous, totality. The sacred can strike as lightning from a clear sky with the power to reconfigure one's entire outlook on life and reality and, as we claim, students' engagement in specific kinds of written exam assignments encompasses a particularly strong potential to bring about such strikes of sacred lightning. Thus, it could 'bear the lightning of possible storms' (Foucault, 1988, p. 326), as Michel Foucault has proposed. By designing university students' written exams in certain ways (e.g., exciting, open-ended, theoretically creative and

challenging), teachers, examiners and/or supervisors can heighten the chances that student writers will undergo such transformative events where genuine learning happens and students are never the same again. That is, devising written exam assignments capable of ushering in a before and an after.

To sum up: this article aims to do the following: 1) introduce the concepts of the sacred and profane as relevant for rethinking university pedagogy, 2) use these concepts to analyse student writing, 3) elaborate recommendations for changed university pedagogical practices regarding formulating, supervising and feedbacking students' written exams, and 4) demonstrate the unique learning and development potential of sacred experiences in the realm of exam writing. But before we encounter Laure's and Bataille's conceptions of the sacred and the profane, we would like to make three preliminary disclaimers to avoid counterproductive misunderstandings of the intentions of our article.

First disclaimer: The sacred cannot be *written*

To begin with, it is crucial for us to emphasise that the sacred cannot be represented in writing. The sacred eludes full disclosure and annuls any kind of exhaustion through representational media be they visual, auditive, literary, kinaesthetic or whatever. The sacred is an experience of *liminality* and as such it resides in the hearts, minds, and souls of those who undergo or suffer it. Sacred experiences happen to certain people under certain circumstances and are, therefore, to be understood as a *passion*—something that rolls over those who experience it like a holy wave of transgression, dissolution and (re-)unification. However, it can be revealed as a topical event that exposes and opens up towards experiences of communion, intimacy and community. We will return to the core characteristics of the experience of the sacred through an encounter with an interesting couple of French thinkers not usually evoked in pedagogical philosophy or empirical studies of educational matters, namely prophet-poet Laure (1903-1938) and philosopher Georges Bataille (1897-1962). For now, we just want to make it clear from the very beginning of our article that the relationship between the sacred and writing is such that no kind of writing will ever be able to fully show what the sacred is. It might be alluded to or hinted at, but whether the sacred will actually have been produced in writing cannot be determined by writing itself when we understand writing to be an objective linguistic manifestation in the phenomenal form of signs on surfaces, words spoken, etc. What we delimit ourselves to be doing in the present article is qualifying the claim that certain forms of important academic learning and

development hinge on students experiencing the sacred through their *written engagement* in discipline-specific exam contexts (in our case philosophy).

Second disclaimer: The sacred cannot be *operationalised*

Another important disclaimer to be made is that the sacred cannot, as a logical consequence of what has already been said, be *operationalised* in terms of specific advice for university pedagogy. As a teacher, supervisor, or feedback giver, you cannot perform, say, a sacred university pedagogy. What you can do is let yourself and your pedagogical actions be inspired by a fundamental knowledge about the importance of students' sacred experiences during their written engagement in exams. To claim this amounts to formulating a paradoxical knowledge about university pedagogical practices that ultimately leads to a kind of non-knowledge. As a teacher and supervisor, it is certainly possible to design exam assignments, to carry out supervision and to give feedback in such ways as to make it more probable or likely that students will undergo experiences of the sacred through their written engagement. This distinction is crucial for our article, and we will return to it in the concluding section and elaborate more on what it entails in and for practice.

Third disclaimer: The sacred cannot be *applied*

It is important to unequivocally stress the fact that we are not trying to *apply* Laure and Bataille to university writing pedagogy. Neither of us are of the opinion that such an enterprise would be fruitful or fair towards the poetic and philosophical intentions of Laure and Bataille in their respective attempts to describe and conceptualise the (experience of the) sacred. To do so would be to submit the sacred to the profane order of utility and force it to assume an instrumental, goal-oriented use-value, which, in its essence, it rejects. The inspiration that can legitimately be drawn from Laure and Bataille in the context of exam writing in higher education can only and maximally have an indirect value in terms of relevance for praxis. To put it in another way, one cannot *practice* a Laurean or Bataillean university pedagogy of writing. Claiming to do so would only amount to a performative disclosure of one's radical lack of understanding of the status of their literary and philosophical treatment of the notions of the sacred and profane. Our article will thus carry out a delicate tightrope walk, constantly balancing the way we draw on Laure and Bataille without ever descending to *using* them in the service of university writing pedagogy in any straightforward manner. Should we fail to do

so, we will happily volunteer to be sacrificed at the altar of the useless. With these three disclaimers now out of the way, we will let our text immerse itself in the sacred waters of Laure and Bataille.

Laure and Bataille on the sacred and the profane

In 1938, Collette ‘Laure’ Peignot wrote a short text called *The Sacred* inspired by a lecture given by Michel Leiris at the College of Sociology called ‘The Sacred in Everyday Life.’ Leiris ended the lecture by encouraging his audience to consider what colour the sacred assumes for them. Shortly after, Laure reacted to this encouragement in a short, written meditation on the subject with the title: *The Sacred*. She, however, was no stranger to the sacred prior to attending the lecture of Leiris. The sacred had already begun to play a crucial role in her previous writings, most prominently in the manuscript *Story of a little girl*; and, she was partner in crime with Bataille, with whom she established the transgressive, godless yet religious society called Acéphale. Laure’s text *The Sacred* was written in the summer of 1938 just months before she died. In it, she directly describes the sacred and her own, personal experiences thereof:

The sacred is the infinitely rare moment in which the “eternal share” that each being carries within enters life, finds itself carried off in the universal movement, integrated into this movement, realized.

It is what I have felt as weighted with death, sealed by death.

This permanence of the threat of death is the intoxicating absolute that carries life away, lifts it outside of itself, hurls forth the depths of my being like a volcano’s eruption, a meteor’s fall. (Laure, 2001, p. 41)

What is this rare moment? What is the eternal share that we all carry within us? How does it enter life? What is this shared universal movement? And how is it related to the awareness of death?

The writings of Laure are sparse and most of them were not even published in her own lifetime. Bataille and Leiris published a collection of her work posthumously, and gave the collection the title *The Sacred*, alluding to the concept and phenomenon most central to her intellectual undertaking (Laure, 2001). Both Laure and Bataille developed their thoughts in a *community*, and in states of *communication*—crucial concepts for both of them. It is, therefore, necessary to consider their thoughts as (sometimes different) fruits of the same tree.

According to Bataille, Laure is connecting ‘the sacred moments,’ where the isolated individual transgresses its own individuality in states of ‘communication, not only between men [sic], but between man and the universe’ (as cited in Laure, 2001, p. 87). The connection or unification of the sacred moments is realised through the transgression of the individual in its discontinuous being, and implies a loss of ego; that is, a momentary ego death. According to Bataille, we are part of ‘the movement of the whole’ understood as ‘immanent immensity’ (Bataille, 1986, p. 76). The immanence of the whole makes up a *heterogenous continuity*. In both Laure’s and Bataille’s account, cosmos is a monster of energy, where the motions of heavenly bodies and the accumulation of solar energy in the soil of Earth give rise to striving beings, that are subsequently gradually wounded and destroyed in the immanent continuity. Thus, discontinuous beings emerge—among them the paradoxical animal, the human being—who attain some degree of self-consciousness through language and loss. Bataille’s notion of the immanent continuity of the whole equals Laure’s notion of the universal movement. They are, so to speak, conceptually congruent ideas.

However, Bataille asks, how can we ‘identify with the rapture of the heavens, acknowledging itself as a spectacle viewing itself, when the fact of looking presupposes that the viewing subject has somehow escaped from the rapturous movement of the universe?’ (Bataille, 1986, p. 76). It seems to follow that to practically do away with one’s individuality calls for other means than philosophical meditation, because conceptual speculation itself forces a stepping out of the movement of the whole and viewing it as an external spectacle at a distance. This stands at least on a phenomenological level because, ontologically speaking, such a stepping out of the movement of the whole and setting up an observational and rationally reflexive distance to it is not achievable because of the fact that individuality is always already itself a productive part of the universal movement of the heterogenous whole *in* its immanent immensity. However, it tends to be so as a part that denies its own being as part of a moving whole. Individuality thus amounts to an epistemological discrepancy with ontological implications or a phenomenological break within the cosmos as such. That is, individuality is a part of reality that understands itself as *apart* from reality but doing so—and only capable of doing so—as a part of reality itself.

According to Bataille, we step out of the immanent immensity by means of *the tool*. The tool externalises the world, making it an object for our purposes and goals. Thus, we step out of the immediacy that characterises animal life. In contrast to animals who are in the world as the movement of water in water (Bataille, 1992, p. 28), human beings, with their linguistically mediated self-conscious subjectivities can be said to be fish in air; that is, as beings outside of their proper

or natural environment. As a species, humans seemingly lack *naturality* and do not belong in any essential manner to a specific natural environment. Positing the object in the world constitutes a break from the ‘flow of all there is’ (Bataille, 1992, p. 29), but in doing so, in subjugating the world to purposes, use and utility, humans also subjugate themselves to a world order dominated by goal-oriented use-value. This constitutes a break from the continuity of the cosmos, a break which takes place through the rise of the individual. Thus, humans are to be considered as discontinuous beings that have externalised the world that used to be immanent to us, and now we long for states of intimacy, of closeness, of belonging, of community. These desires can also emerge in an unending longing for home, of returning to our source, to originate, to enter the promised land, etc.

Humans are, nonetheless, still completely intertwined with continuity, entangled in matter, and we carry within us an ‘eternal share’ of the immanent immensity, even if the latter has now come to appear somewhat alien, external, and foreign to us moderns. We have become a discontinuity, an open wound, in the immanent continuity of the whole. Now, the sacred, according to Laure, constitutes the rare moment when we are spontaneously carried off by the movement of the whole, implying a sudden loss of self, like the eruption of a volcano or the sudden strike of lightning. This experience of cosmic emergence with the movement of the whole thus foreshadows the event of *death*, finitude’s ultimate crescendo, since death is the irreversible return to the immanent immensity of nature; that is, to the universal movement itself. This movement is artistically visualised by French sculptor Camille Claudel. In her artwork *The Wave or The Bathers* from 1897, we see three small humans under the looming crescent of a wave with the seeming physicality to smash them into nothingness. This annihilating potential of the wave about to crash, captured in Claudel’s sculpture, literally and symbolically communicates the definite or temporary reintegration of heterogeneous beings (the three small figures) into the continuity of the immanent immensity or the movement of the whole (the wave):



Figure 1. *The Wave or The Bathers* (Camille Claudel, 1897), Musée Rodin, Paris, France.

Note. Retrieved from https://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/musee/collections/oeuvres/wave-or-bathers#group_1457-1

As Bataille succinctly explains, experiencing the sacred stands in stark contrast to any attempt to force the sacred to manifest itself in experience: ‘I attain experience contrary to the project I had of having it’ (Bataille, 1988a, p. 54). The sacred cannot be guaranteed, it cannot be ordered, and its emergence cannot be predicted, even if the probability of experiencing it can be heightened under certain circumstances and with the aid of certain means. In other words, there are occasions, locations and activities that make it more probable for the sacred to be experienced compared to other occasions, locations, and activities.¹ Ultimately, the sacred is experienced as a wave that spontaneously rolls over you and temporarily suspends your individual being, implicating you in the universal movement of the unbroken continuity that ontologically defines reality in its core.

¹ Contemporary critical theorist Hartmut Rosa has described his central notion of *resonance* in similar terms, but we will not pursue any further comparison between Laure’s and Bataille’s conception of the sacred and Rosa’s conception of resonance at the present moment. See Rosa’s *The Uncontrollability of the World* from 2020.

To recapitulate: The sacred is tainted by an awareness of death and an experience of loss. The sacred undresses the individual and exposes it to a movement other than herself. The ‘threat of death’ together with the experience of loss constitutes what Laure calls the ‘intoxicating absolute’ (Laure, 2001, p. 41), which can carry everything away and, therefore, also evoke terror and anxiety. Like the three small, powerless figures in Claudel’s sculpture, we constantly potentially stand under the crest of a cosmic wave of the sacred. In such moments of threat and loss where we ‘regain the free movement of the universe,’ we are, as Bataille notes, ‘breathing in the power of death’ (Bataille, 1986, p. 78). This constitutes what Bataille would later describe as *eroticism* par excellence: ‘ascending to life up to the point of death’ (Bataille, 2012, p. 11).

Thus, the experience of the sacred implies a transgression of the profane order, which is erotic, since eroticism is precisely constituted by the longing for lost intimacy, which is momentarily attained in the exuberant expenditure of self in states of excess. It is a negation of the profane order, but since the profane order itself is a negation, it is a negation of a negation (Bataille, 2023a, p. 209) and, ultimately, an affirmation of the immanence and intimacy of being. However, such transgressions rely on ‘topical events’ (Laure, 2001, p. 45) taking place, such as sacrifices, festivals or poetry, which instigate the threshold toward the sacred that can be transgressed.

Experiencing the sacred: Community, sacrifice, oscillation

We will now move on and go a bit more into detail about the experiential content of Laure’s treatment of the sacred. In the autobiographical and unfinished novel *Story of a Little Girl*, Laure describes pre-sacred conditions as a sense of eternity in the idea of the sky beyond the sky, the eternity revealed by opposed mirrors or her experience of vanishing ‘between the wall and the ivy,’ immersed in nature, becoming ‘a spider, a daddy-longlegs, a centipede, a hedgehog, everything imaginable and perhaps even animal to God’ (Laure, 2001, p. 15). These experiences are her first premonitions of the sacred, her first attempts at grasping the ungraspable and a sense of the eternal share of herself, which partakes in the universal movement. Even though death was a common visitor in Laure’s childhood home, these experiences lack the awareness of death and loss, which constitutes the sacred proper. Not until the loss of a small child, two years of age, with whom she had formed a close attachment, does she fully understand death. After a short illness, the child dies, and as the ‘little box was lowered into the ditch’ (Laure, 2001, p. 18), Laure finally understands the gravity of death. And with this

newly gained understanding of the gravity of death, she tangibly perceives her own death lurking in the shadows of the wings in the theatre we call life.

She also describes a premonition of death she had when her father left to fight in the war. But as he left, she felt *exalted*. The soldiers took off to the sound of cheers and song. And even if she participated in the celebration, she sensed a ‘sacrifice consented to ahead of time’ (Laure, 2001, p. 44). Taken together, this exalted condition, this felt presence of a sacrifice and consent to future death, plays a crucial part in Laure’s understanding of the sacred and contributes to the conditions for it to emerge.

Besides an awareness of death, the sacred is tied to *shared* experience. The sacred itself is a state of ‘communion with others’ (Laure, 2001, p. 45), beyond the discontinuous limits of individual beings. An early and significant experience of communion for Laure was the presence of God, who followed her even into the attic, where she would explore her genitals and newly awoken sexuality, immediately followed by shame and terror. Soon after, life would oscillate between the poles ‘sacred, venerated, which must be exhibited’ and ‘dirty, shameful, which must not be named’ (Laure, 2001, p. 11). Thus she ‘would oscillate between the foul and the sublime, in the course of which real life would always be absent’ (Laure, 2001, p.11). This oscillating movement is beautifully expressed in the poem 8:

I find myself
trapped
as in a circle

which I escape
by this other
which brings me back
[...]
The infernal 8 came back to lasso me
(Laure, 2001, p. 48)

Both the venerated and the dirty are part of the sacred in Bataille’s view since they disturb and go against the profane order of work and utility. Bataille notes that Laure’s representation of the sacred ‘attests to lived experience’ (as cited in Laure, 2001, p. 87) of fusion with others and the universe itself. The problem with communion is that it cannot be communicated discursively by means of ordinary, representative language. We can, however, seek to create ‘topical’ events (Laure, 2001, p. 45), such as poetry, music, dance, etc., aesthetically embodying their own

inability to communicate their meaning in language. Bataille writes: 'Language cannot express an extremely simple notion, that is, the notion of a good that would be an expenditure – a loss pure and simple [...]. One is forced to open notions beyond themselves' (Bataille, 1973). If such a topical event is created, it is experienced as *nakedness*, to use Laure's term (Laure, 2001, p. 45).

A topical event can open us up and expose us to the sacred, where we can lose ourselves in and through the experience of the sacred. However, no direct knowledge of the sacred is possible since knowledge implies the imposition of a subject-object divide constitutive of consciousness in a state of discontinuous perception of the world. There is no absolute knowledge to be attained of the sacred. We can only oscillate between, on the one hand, states of knowledge perceiving the sacred realm from afar and, on the other, states of non-knowledge, where we transgress the ontological gap installed by the discontinuous being of individuals and experience the sacred as communion, communication, and loss qua ego death. Because of its radical non-communicability, the sacred also appears as *nonsensical*. As Bataille states: '[W]hen communication itself appears to me as nonsense, I attain the height of anguish; in surge of despair, I abandon myself and communication is once again given to me - rapture and joy' (Bataille, 1988a, p. 54). When we re-exit this emerged state of communion, communication and loss, we once again plunge into the exile of individuality, like a 'bewildered child' once again enters 'into the night' (Bataille, 1988a, p. 54). Ultimately, what Laure and Bataille philosophically describe is the non-dialectical oscillation between knowing and not-knowing in the experience of the sacred understood as two radically distinct states that are, nonetheless, each other's condition of possibility. They thus reverse our normal, everyday, and taken-for-granted conception of a steady binary relation between light/truth/knowledge on the one hand and darkness/falsity/ignorance on the other. Whereas the realm of the profane order of things (i.e., the world of consciousness, of homogeneity) allows for knowledge to arise because of the discontinuity analytically installed into the world by individual beings and the subject-object divide, the realm of the sacred absolutely resists knowledge and rejects discursive representation. Whereas the profane realm has to do with the lifeworld of human beings in their 'average everydayness' (to use Martin Heidegger's expression; Heidegger, 1996, p. 41), the sacred realm has to do with the 'the hidden attunement' of 'opposite tensions' (to borrow a phrase from Heraclitus; B51 in Burnet, 1892). Whereas things and events in the profane realm can, for the most part, be easily known and named, the heterogenous continuity constitutive of the sacred cannot be known and named. It can, however, be experienced and it can be artistically alluded to, even if never exhausted. Whereas knowledge prevails in the realm of the profane, non-knowledge permeates the realm of the sacred.

Experiencing the sacred through written engagement

We will now move on to introduce undergraduate philosophy student Sofie, whose witness account will be used to illustrate the relevance of Laure and Bataille for understanding the (experience of the) sacred in the context of university students' engagement in and teachers' supervision of written exam assignments. It is crucial to note that Laure and Bataille sought the sacred at the summit of existence and experience, which doesn't necessarily resonate fully with the touch of the sacred in, say, exam writing. However, we will show that the oscillating movement between knowledge and non-knowledge, the oscillation between the venerated/holy and the dirty/accursed states of nakedness and communion, communication, and loss, the emergence of topical events and the shared experience of the sacred (even if the one with whom it is shared is the internalised Other understood as Laure's God in the attic), can be found to some degree in the experiences of our case student Sofie, even if she is not necessarily venturing to the summit of existence during her engagement in her written exam.

NON-KNOWLEDGE COMMUNICATES ECSTASY. Non-knowledge is ANGUISH before all else.

In anguish, there appears a nudity which puts one into ecstasy.
(Bataille, 1988a, p. 52)

As part of Laugesen's PhD research, he conducted two lengthy, semi-structured interviews with undergraduate philosophy student Sofie. Amongst other things, the two interviews focused on Sofie's thoughts and feelings about writing exam assignments. As a point of departure for both interviews, Sofie had chosen two of her own written exam assignments and sent them to Laugesen as examples of 1) one assignment that she had experienced as particularly engaging for her and 2) one that she had experienced as particularly disengaging for her. Early on in the first of the two interviews, it became clear to Laugesen that Sofie had an existentially intense relation to her exam writing and that there was a deep, psychological history to it.

In what follows, we will show how Laure's and Bataille's philosophical thinking about the sacred is relevant to understanding what is at stake in Sofie's exam writing. Throughout our exposition, we will employ Laure's and Bataille's technical terminology accounted for above, thereby showing their analytical, albeit subversive, value for teachers who supervise university students' written exams and who would like to know more about what might unfold behind the scenes of the exam papers that students hand in as more or less seamless and polished products

of their written engagement. As it turns out, for some students, exam writing can be experienced as a crushing matter of life and death, of being and nothingness, of the sacred and the profane.

Starting out our analytical exposition, we reach back to Laure's notion of *pre-sacred conditions*. When Laugesen talked to Sofie about her state of mind during the last days before handing in one of her written exam assignments, Sofie makes use of a wailing, self-parodying voice: 'No, but I cannot do it, I do not understand anything, and the only... I understand nothing!' When further questioned about whether her engagement in exam writing can be said to occasion a heightened sense of self-doubt and a fundamental loss of meaning, she answers emphatically: 'Yes, most definitely!' What Sofie describes here is not as such an experience of the sacred itself, but important conditions, *pre-sacred premonitions*, enabling her to eventually experience the sacred. And she does. Once her exam assignment has been handed in and a few days have gone by, things start to change for Sofie. The whole experience suddenly appears *to have been* transformative for her in ways that she is retrospectively able to appreciate and articulate. An important, positive outcome of some of the written exams that have had a significant impact on Sofie is, she says, that 'my world is being opened up.' Sofie further describes how this experience of world-opening through exam writing also has existential implications: 'But I have also discovered some new sides of myself that I did not know I had,' referring to both personal insights and novel academic interests, specifically regarding political theory. These statements indicate that Sofie had gone through an experience of the sacred in the element of non-knowledge. Based on the pre-sacred conditions of anxious trembling in the face of perceived ignorance and lack of competence in written exam contexts, Sofie undergoes a real experience of the sacred with transformative implications for both herself and the world she experiences around her, insofar as the 'world being opened up' constitutes an order-disrupting experience of communion, communication, and loss qua ego death. The fact that Sofie affectively *felt* this experience of the sacred in terms of *fear and trembling* makes sense if we follow Bataille:

[A]nguish is the horror of surrender and the moment comes when, in audacity, surrender is loved, when I give myself to surrender: it is therefore the nudity which puts one into ecstasy. Then knowledge returns, satisfaction, once again anguish, I begin again, more quickly, right up to exhaustion. (Bataille, 1988a, p. 53)

Dissolving into the universal movement of the whole, constitutive of sacred experiences, accompanied by the state of non-knowledge, Sofie qua individual must find a way out again to reunify with discontinuous being, but at the cost of satisfaction: it hurts to birth a new order and it always entails the negation of the womb; that is, the sacred itself. Sofie names this audacious moment in which she embraces her own surrender, and through which the world is destroyed and subsequently created anew, as ‘the pressurer.’ She describes it as follows:

And then it is only when ‘the pressurer’ comes [når ‘presseren’ kommer] right at the last minute, then there is nothing to do, so I simply have to hand it in, so then I have to jump up in the helicopter and say: “Okay, what have you understood now? This is what you have understood, all right, down with the shit [ned med lortet], off with it.”

Sofie metaphorically characterises her own writing as ‘excrement’ and thus almost as pure waste and as a byproduct of the very process of oscillating between knowledge, non-knowledge and knowledge once again. In the vocabulary of Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva (1982), Sofie undergoes *abjection* during her intense engagement with writing her exam paper. She is both repelled by and identifies with her writing and she feels (partially) estranged from the end product: like excrement that she does not want others to see, smell or touch, Sofie’s fingers strike the keyboard on her computer forming the words that, in the end, make up her written exam assignment. She understands the text she ends up handing in is her own, an unmistakable testament to her deliberate efforts, and that it is she who has written the words composing the assignment’s body of text, yet she also despises what she has written and feels radically nervous for the verdict of her teachers and examiners. Her engagement in writing thus constitutes a journey into the terrible lands of non-knowledge in which she horribly, worldlessly trembles in anguish. As Bataille puts it: ‘[C]ommunication pulls the rug out from under the object as well as from under the subject’ (Bataille, 1988a, p. 54). Given over to address the big Other of the Discourse of her discipline (philosophy), Sofie enters a state of communion with big thinkers that have gone before her as well as with the teachers who have to assess her work. These serve the same function as Laure’s God in the attic. Sofie often perceives her finalised exam manuscripts as ‘shit.’ She has devoured and digested the allusive contents of her former knowledge (now appearing as nonsense), undergone the world-and-self-dissolving acid bath of non-knowledge and reemerged in a world in the satisfying element of new knowledge. Or as Sofie herself puts it:

What is nice about it has been that it actually went well, because then I have then been confirmed: “Okay, I have, then, understood it in the end.” But where I have totally been in the middle of: “I do not get it at all. Oh well, I hope it will pass,” and then I get A+, right? And I am kind of like: “Ohhh, okay, it did pass, then.” [Laughs], right? So, I think that I might not have a real sense of judgement of when I have understood something and when I have not understood it.

This analogy is not unlike Laure’s oscillation between the two poles of the ‘sacred, venerated, which must be exhibited’ and the ‘dirty, shameful, which must not be named,’ (Laure, 2001, p. 11) the cursed and blessed 8. And all because of her engagement in exam writing! Sofie’s sacred experience of written engagement also demonstrates the oscillating process through non-knowledge towards the reacquisition of knowledge that Bataille describes as follows, when we understand *ipse* to mean the individuating movement beyond subject and object, by which the individual being participates in and is emerged in the movement of the whole²:

As long as *ipse* perseveres in its will to know and to be *ipse*, anguish lasts, but if *ipse* abandons itself and knowledge with it, if it gives itself up to non-knowledge in this abandon, then rapture begins. In rapture, my existence finds a sense once again, but the sense is referred immediately to *ipse*; it becomes my rapture, a rapture which I *ipse* possess, giving satisfaction to my will to be everything. As soon as I emerge from it, communication, the loss of myself cease; I have ceased to abandon myself - I remain there, but with a new knowledge. (Bataille, 1988a, p. 53)

The experience of the sacred is associated with states of rapture, ecstasy, anguish, volcanic eruptions, and lightning. It entails a loss of objective world as well as a loss of self, of individuality, of ego, of discontinuity. The experience of the profane installs a novel order, it recreates a world and reestablishes a stable sense of self. At least for a while, until the sacred suddenly kicks in one's door again and anguish, ecstasy and rapture take one for a ride once more.

In the context of our focus on university students’ exam writing, the sacred can be understood as a liminal, threshold experience that entails the crucial confrontation with the fundamental nonsense of the sense that one has come to take for granted as the cornerstones of one’s world. Through students’ engagement in

² For a further elaboration of *ipse*, see the forthcoming publication (Grimm, 2024) ‘The movement of the whole and the stationary earth - Ecological and planetary thinking in Georges Bataille.’

writing, the individual student invariably formulates a knowledge of the nonsense of his/her sense (understanding of academic content and the way in which it co-regulates the student's worldview) and it is this essentially *deconstructive* dimension of exam writing that potentially prompts the experience of the sacred in academic settings.

Put concretely, formulating knowledge of the nonsense of one's sense means engaging in writing, formulating draft after draft, trying to get the right words down on paper, and looking for the proper wording of what one strives to say. The gradually developing yardstick for assessing what actually counts as *the right words* is the student's growing knowledge of the Discourse or genre demands pertaining to the discipline or sub-discipline that the student studies (a whole education/degree or a specific course; Laugesen, 2021, pp. 166-174; Gee, 2015). The important thing to notice is that the oscillating process described up until the present point in our article does not possess a natural or logical end point. It is, as already shown, an interminable journey of learning and continuous transformation. Therefore, it is not uncommon to see students writing an exam paper on a certain topic and through the sacred experience that might occur during written engagement in that exam suddenly wanting to study a whole other thing. For example, philosophy students may jump from German moral philosophy in the late 18th century to poststructural critiques of the autonomous subject in 20th century French thought in the same assessment.

In *The Inner Experience* (1988a), under the rubric of 'Non-knowledge lays bare,' Bataille characterises the oscillating force emanating from the tension between the sacred and the profane as an interplay of nonsense and sense. He states: '[I]f nonsense is sense, the sense which is nonsense, becomes nonsense once again (without possible end)' (Bataille, 1988a, p. 52). The important thing is the remark in parenthesis: 'without possible end.' It is an endless process of oscillation between the sacred and the profane, constituting the travel of a subject through life in the wilderness of the cosmos in the vessel of writing. Like Laure's 'infernal 8,' a Möbius strip of learning, with a never-ending surface to traverse, the student develops on and on and on and on.

In contrast to the teleological order of Hegelian dialectics, Bataille envisions a developmental process of change without final destination. Writing thus becomes a slippery activity that never allows the writer to achieve full exhaustion or presence of the phenomena written about—as if writing itself prompted the need for more writing *ad infinitum* (van Manen, 2006). Writers engage in a process akin to that of the infamous *Übermensch* in the writings of Nietzsche—also a tightrope dancer or simply a bridge. This is beautifully captured by the Danish poet Inger Christensen when she describes how language is both a continuation of the forces of nature and

fracture, which can make bridge and abyss grow at the same time (Christensen, 1982, p. 68). The possible co-existence or simultaneity of the vessel of discursive knowledge and meaning at a distance, and the erotic carrier of the topical event that instigates the loss and sacrifice of meaning. In his poem “Byzantium” from 1930, Willam Butler Yeats praises the Nietzschean ideal of ethical self-overcoming with explicit poetic reference to the kind of life-death-life oscillation characteristic of the experience of the sacred in the works of Laure and Bataille:

I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.
[...]
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve. (Yeats, 1997, pp. 68-69)

Here you have the dance of writing entailing death leading into the agony of trance (Bataille’s ecstasy and anguish of non-knowledge) made up of flame—not the physical, concrete fire, but the metaphysical world-fire celebrated by the likes of Heraclitus and the subsequent Stoics (*ekpyrosis*), wherefore the flames do not ‘singe a sleeve,’ as the poem goes, or anything else for that matter, in the realm the profane, phenomenal order of things.

Sofie, at the sacred end of the spectrum of the oscillation of learning, has become objectless in the guise of a subject spinning in a void and, therefore, anguish prevails. And, at the other end of the spectrum of learning, the end of the profane she has once again re-acquired a world of objects standing opposite and meeting her as a subject in the world populated with non-subject objects as well as other subjects under (more or less) well-ordered circumstances. Chaos first, order then, but always an order germinating in its core a novel chaos to come—or to quote Yeats’ poem “Byzantium” once again: ‘Those images that yet / Fresh images beget’ (Yeats, 1997, p. 69). And thus, it is: cycling back and forth between the poles of bountiful satisfaction (order of knowledge) and disillusioned anguish (chaos of non-knowledge), Sofie engages in her written exams to the pulse of passing semesters. As Bataille puts it, stressing the cyclical or oscillating nature of experiencing the sacred through writing: ‘The movement begins again starting from there: I can formulate new knowledge’ (Bataille, 1988a, p. 54). This is not the *dialectics of spirit*, but the *oscillation of becoming*. What this means is that the inner experience of written engagement encompasses the writer in his/her whole being and not just in the element of rational thought or cognitive learning from the neck up.

According to Sofie herself, she has always had a lot of doubt regarding her ability to perform satisfactorily in written exam contexts. Commenting on the way she feels, physiologically as well as psychologically, during the days of despair understood as the affectively intense limbo that exam writing ushers in for her, Sofie says the following: ‘I ended up on beta blockers [...] because I got, like, heart palpitations, I could not sleep. And even in the night, there the heart raced also, you know, it was like, I could not relax at all.’ Thus, hovering in the intermediate realm between knowing and non-knowing, Sofie undergoes an experience of the sacred that *takes her places*, so to speak. To begin with, it silences her. She becomes mute and unable to write down anything at all. Her written engagement is impeded, and she feels stuck without making any progress. Once her writing block evaporates due to the emergence of *the pressurer*, she is, finally, able to execute and get the job done. But only ‘in the 11th hour,’ as she herself puts it. French pundit and psycho-social observer La Rochefoucauld thus seems right in his observation when he once stated that: ‘Silence is the safest policy if you are unsure of yourself’ (La Rochefoucauld, 1967, p. 45).

(In)conclusive remarks: Towards a writing pedagogy of the sacred

Respecting the preliminary disclaimers of our article—that we do not find it meaningful to seek to *operationalise* or *apply* Laure and Bataille on the practice of university writing pedagogy—we will end our article by spelling out what we consider to be the useless value of the concept of the sacred for teachers that supervise and give feedback to university students’ written exam assignments. As educators, what we can aim for is to create the space for topical events that might expose the student (and the supervisor or others involved) to states of communion, communication, and loss *qua ego* death, understood as core elements of experiencing the sacred. This would include a willingness to allow the project to die, its inherent meaning to collapse, an awareness of death so to speak, and to allow oneself and the student to oscillate between states of knowledge and non-knowledge, even encourage it and embrace it as a meaningful academic *rite of passage*.

Based on our exposition of the experience of the sacred through Laure and Bataille and of philosophy student Sofie’s actual sacred experiences during her engagement in exam writing, we argue that there are good reasons to claim that philosophy is a *special* discipline to engage through writing. As such, Sofie’s experiences cannot be generalised to represent all students across disciplines, but they do teach an important lesson about the sacred drama that is actually involved

in some students' written engagement with philosophical exam assignments. Other disciplines that might entail similar experiential dimensions of written engagement could be psychology, comparative literature, cultural studies, gender studies, history, sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines central to the humanities and social sciences. Common to (at least some) written exam assignments in all these fields of study is a fundamental self-reflexivity of existential significance for the writing student. In other words, by engaging the theoretical and empirical substance of one of the above fields of study—but perhaps paradigmatically philosophy—through exam writing, the student writer also engages themselves qua subject of continuous becoming.³ Because of this double aspect of engaging oneself through engaging the academic content of one's discipline, the limit of one's knowledge (the substance of one's field of study) also makes up the limit of one's non-knowledge (the void at the core of human existence). Encountering the latter through engaging the former, written engagement can throw students into the dizzying abyss of sacred experiences where the usual coordinates of reality are fundamentally questioned and changed. There is, thus, an inner Möbius bond, in the shape of the 8, between the following three components: 1) void of existence, 2) content of discipline and 3) experience of the sacred. A bond revealed (implicitly or explicitly) to students through their written engagement.

How, then, can one stage such topical events enabling experiences of the sacred, in the context of writing university exam assignments? Through experiencing the sacred during writing their exam assignments, university students are offered the chance to shed their temporary hides and assume new shapes of knowing and becoming. And as teachers, examiners, and feedback providers we have a unique opportunity, if not simply a responsibility, to act to further the chances that our students will suffer the transformative strikes of sacred lightning during their written exams. Through our introduction to Laure, Bataille and their conception of the sacred and the profane, its oblique relevance for university writing pedagogy, and our analytical exposition of the case of Sofie, we hope that our readers will have been inspired to try out new, experimental university writing pedagogical practices of their own devising.

³ Counterexamples outside of the humanities do, of course, exist, and one could mention fields of study such as biology and astrophysics that are obviously also existentially significant fields of study. Just think about how often Jacob Bronowski, Carl Sagan, David Attenborough and Neil deGrasse Tyson make observations about what the natural sciences teach us about humankind and civilization in their respective popular science documentary series (i.e., *The Ascent of Man* [1973], *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage* [1980], *Planet Earth* [2006], *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* [2014]).

Author biographies

Martin Hauberg-Lund Laugesen is a postdoc at the University of Southern Denmark. His research focus is wide and covers a large array of topics: Speculative realism, new literacy studies, dark pedagogy, German Idealism, psychoanalysis, modern sociology, Capitalocene/Anthropocene, cosmic pessimism, and more. Martin practices a proud nomadic life as a brutally curious scholar and tends to think of the breadth of one's knowledge as the central source of academic profundity. His PhD thesis, *Written Engagement* from 2021, focuses on emotional, psychological, and existential aspects of the relationship between undergraduate students' exam writing and their learning and disciplinary identity development.

Jon Auring Grimm is a PhD student at Aarhus University and Johns Hopkins. Building on Georges Bataille and Inger Christensen, his research is centred around 'general ecology,' nature, and poetry. His current work is a natural extension of his published mag.art thesis on Nietzsche and Heraclitus. He has published on topics such as eroticism, nature, ecology, and poetry, and wrote respectively the afterword and foreword to the translation of Colette 'Laure' Peignot's *Le Sacré* and a collection of Bataille's texts on general economy. He was one of the forces behind the international BatailleNow conference held in Athens in September 2023. He has been a consultant on numerous theatre productions, notably *Story of the Eye* by the avant-garde ensemble LOGEN in 2016. He is the co-founder of Eksistensfilosofisk Akademi (The Academy of Existential Philosophy).

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