

## Off with his head!

Joseph Fletcher

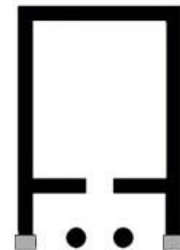
*antae*, Vol. 3, No. 2. (Oct., 2016), 112-123

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*antae*

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## Off with his head!

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We will die, we are not everything. These, Georges Bataille reminds us, are our two certitudes in life. What I want to offer here is a reading of the first of these certitudes, not in order to reaffirm its implacable nature, but to suggest ways in which this certitude opens manners of reading Bataille's sprawling body of work, as well as how an engagement with death might open other ideas for life.

To do this I want to focus upon a knot of material that gathers within Bataille's thought. This knot is built around the name *Acéphale*, which ostensibly designates a complex relationship between a number of structures: a loosely-affiliated secret society, a short-lived publication, a headless mythological figure, and an emblem of the philosophical work of Bataille.

The headless man appears in many guises for Bataille, not least as the guillotined sovereign.<sup>1</sup> But in the *Acéphale* journals we see a stark form take place through an illustrated narrative arc. André Masson illustrates all five issues of *Acéphale*. Each issue begins with an emblematic character that takes the perverted form of a headless Vitruvian man. This is *Acéphale* in its most common form: face on, legs spread, arms held horizontally either side, a stump of neck without head, in the left hand a diamond-shaped blade, in the right a flaming heart clenched, over the groin a skull, over each nipple a star, and in the centre of the body a hole exposing a knot of intestines. This character repeats throughout the journal illustrations. The same, for the most part, but with a peculiarly human kind of inconsistency: sometimes *Acéphale* puts down the blade, sometimes *Acéphale* sits, sometimes *Acéphale* gets a new head.

Each issue begins with *Acéphale*'s defiant stance. The specific traits of this character aren't merely incidental, but are rather articulated around various strands within Bataille's thought. There's a measured and rigorous process to this character that not only comes to operate as an emblem for the journal's practices, but also stands in as a figure for Bataille's philosophical work.

My conjecture is this: the trajectory of the *Acephalic* character operates as a founding myth of Bataille's philosophy, but a myth, and this is crucial, that interrupts itself. In the same manner that Bataille will insist on the ultimate failure of a 'methodology' for inner experience, and again in the same manner that sovereignty always fails when it comes to power and into a system of calculating relations, the mythic structure that *Acéphale* traces through illustrated adventures at the same time provides a primal scene of mythic identity and an already interrupted ground for the operation of myth.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the introduction to Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of George Bataille*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> This also marks Bataille's objections to mysticism: one cannot write a method for that which exceeds the methodical.

Jean-Luc Nancy picks up and carefully articulates this problematic in the text *Myth Interrupted*, an analysis of myth that offers in part readings of Bataille's work.<sup>3</sup> Here Nancy outlines the necessity of interrupting myth, indicating that myth's operation precludes the visibility of its own origin, whilst at the same time this masking covers over the inescapable horizon of myth. We cannot leave myth, and thus, in order to destabilise myth's work, we must interrupt myth by opening up a gap at the heart of myth that cannot be recuperated into its structure. Nancy notes how Bataille characterises his engagement with myth as a gesture of absencing, but for Nancy this gesture is a reading of the conditions of the present world rather than an operation at the basis of myth. Essentially, Bataille's conception of an absence of myth arises from the very interruption of myth that Nancy proposes. Meaning that, for Nancy, Bataille's absencing gesture is diagnostic in its nature: it shows us 'a myth in the process of being interrupted'.<sup>4</sup>

This interruption of myth is not just a philosophical point that aims to uncover the pervasive structure of myth; rather, it is also politically important. For Nancy it is profoundly difficult, if not impossible, to separate myth from the self-fictioning ground of the Nazi *Volk*.

This is the real danger of myth. The Nazi Myth, as Nancy (along with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe) will designate it in other places, demonstrates the apotheosis of myth as deeply problematic.<sup>5</sup> What we find in the *Volk* is the extreme end-point of a mythological thought that has gone too far; or rather, and this is really the point, goes all the way to its end by going too far. The founding myths of the West are drawn out into a stark and terrible form: the camps, the debilitating spectacle of myth realised *in extremis*.

The need to interrupt, not abandon, is important here. Abandonment is not possible, Nancy tells us, myth's deep and pervasive inscriptions of the world are too persistent. Abandonment allows a forgetting too, a decisive separation, whereas bearing witness to the camps demands continued attention. Thus to interrupt constitutes a break that retains the awareness of an inevitability: things will always have been mythic. Another method, therefore, is required. Nancy will call this interruption the acknowledgement of the originary void at the heart of myth. Designating *mythos* as the 'name for *logos* structuring itself', Nancy renders myth comparable to the fundamental problems of *logos* that something like Bataille's gesture of decapitation would draw attention to: how to speak and think without a head?<sup>6</sup>

Myth poses dangers, too, for the conception of community. The Nazi myth is the myth of a community purifying itself. Blood and soil become the premise for extermination, myth here bearing out its terrible possibilities. This is the community of likeness in a barbaric manner, but is importantly also an extant possibility in a conception of community founded by myth, or upon the forgetting or abandonment of myth. What is left in the end is a community founded on a commonality that can be put to work, a mobilisation or active production of identity. To interrupt myth therefore requires another thinking of community too.

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. by Peter Connor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Nancy, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Nazi Myth', *Critical Inquiry* 16(2) (1990), 291-312.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy, p. 49.

Nancy, following a route in which ontology comes to the fore, indicates that there is ‘no community outside myth’.<sup>7</sup> Whilst Bataille speaks of myth that ‘cannot be separated from the community to which it belongs’.<sup>8</sup>

This redraws the terms of the problem. If myth is inseparable from community, then at issue is precisely the question of how community can be thought without containing the terrible possibility held within the very terms of myth. What is needed, then, is an interrupted myth *and* a community that is able to be structured around such an interruption.

For Bataille, the relation between myth and community offers a parallel form to the sacrificial ritual as an explosive laceration that spreads through the participants. Thus the sacrificial scene can also stand in as a scene in which myth’s contemporary absence is revealed. The arising of Acéphale after the sacrificial laceration opens a response to this absence.

So Bataille’s alternate myth could go something like this: Acéphale, born from death, ventures into another world whilst operating as a sort of vortex, tearing up things in order to pull in parts and decimate others. Following the narrative through Masson’s illustrations, Acéphale engages with shifting accretions of various mythic scenes: the minotaur, Dionysos, the bacchanalian orgy, Medusa.

No coincidence, of course, that Acéphale should roam through foundational mythic scenes of the West. For Nancy, the West takes on the role of originary mything. Through a continual historical revision of the origin of myth, the West becomes not only the origin of humanity itself, but through refinement moves to negate the mythic nature of its foundation too. Nancy: ‘the idea of myth alone perhaps presents the very Idea of the West, with its perpetual representation of the compulsion to return to its own sources in order to re-engage itself from them as the very destiny of humanity’.<sup>9</sup> Thus returning to the essential problem of the absence of myth, in claiming myth no longer persists we would miss the foundation of this absent myth in the matching origination of the West. As such, myth’s own superficial obsolescence is simply just one more myth. Following this, abruptly, Nancy tells us: ‘in this sense, I repeat, we no longer have anything to do with myth.’<sup>10</sup> Which is, essentially, the problem: how to translate this absence to interruption?

This stages a number of problematics. The most difficult of which is to un-entangle Bataille’s gesture of sacrifice from the very logic that it would claim to be challenging: how can a community constituted through a founding act centred around death claim to counter the mythically-founded community that would stand at the heart of a fascism?

In other words, is not Bataille’s Acéphalic community simply a reconstituted form of totalitarianism? Replete, as it could be, with purification and self-constitution.

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<sup>7</sup> Nancy, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-39*, ed. by Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) p. 232.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

Maurice Blanchot, in his engagement with Bataille's work on community, offers a response to this problematic.<sup>11</sup> Indicating the redundancy of the Acéphale group's sacrificial gesture, for Blanchot the death cannot happen precisely because it sets death to work. The mythic community works on itself. This is the pernicious quality of myth mobilised to extreme ends. In Bataille's Acéphalic community, the founding act is death. But not death as a purging of those outside the mythic community, nor death given in service to a greater cause. This death is pure waste. Moreover, this is a model of community predicated upon a mutually wasteful experience of death. Thus blood, death, myth, do no work for Bataille's community. Rather the very principle of unworking operates at the heart of this vision.

Wasteful expenditure, luxuriance, excess. These thoughts exist in the heart of Bataille's vision of general economy. These propositions too can be found within the mythic entanglement of the Acéphalic offering. Protestations against work, refusing the productive for a moment of separation from the calculating world. These proposals animate the very action of the human sacrifice. It is such that we see the centre of the sacrificial community as focused upon an active negation of work, an active negation of operative and repeatable practices.

The Acéphalic myth, arising in a world that no longer wishes to know myth, approximates to an essential refusal of the world of calculation as Bataille knows it. But we can take this, too, as a mythological underpinning of the necessity of Bataille's work, and much like Martin Heidegger's fascination with that "other beginning" for Western thought, Bataille propounds one more possibility. A possibility where life appears after death, a possibility without the tyrannical rule of the head, and crucially, a possibility where calculated dominion falters when the mythical being exposes the mythic nature of foundation. Bataille then, through his Acéphale project, proposes another possible beginning, but a beginning founded on sacrifice re-appropriated and death let loose in the world.

I would like to suggest, alongside the proposition of an alternate founding myth, another reading of the story of the sacrificial offering. In a relatively straightforward manner, one can read the correlations between a sacrificial act and Bataille's philosophy. All the components are there: death, community, the sacred, communication, heterogeneity, night, experience and so on. In its most basic sense, the scene stands as an attempt to produce (although this word is deeply problematic for Bataille) an event of the sacred in the world that would correspond to an ecstatic state of inner experience. Roger Caillois affirms as much, stating that Bataille wanted to 'provide the initial kindling for the irresistible expansion of the sacred'.<sup>12</sup> The act would have, in a sense, embodied the very forms of experience that Bataille narrates and then uses to elucidate a critical position in *Inner Experience*. From this sacrificial act, killing, death, ecstatic joy and tears, communication all come in an anticipated 'epidemic contagion'.<sup>13</sup> This is then another world appearing inside the rationalised world of calculation.

The beheading of the victim would be like a sarcastic joke, a punchline after the fact that serves merely to emphasise the point crudely. But the beheaded being we are left with, roaming

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<sup>11</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. by Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Roger Caillois 'The College de Sociologie: Paradox of an Active Sociology', *SubStance* 11-12 (1975) p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

through the journals and the mythic world, as well as this legacy, forms a possible alternate reading of the scene. Not in order to reject the possibility of the sacred coming into this world and everything else that thus follows, but rather a sort of extended modulation of the scene. A shift of register in which the predominant logic of the sacrifice is captured in the Acéphale journals, and more specifically, the trajectory of Masson's Acéphale character as it ventures through the celestial sphere on a cosmic adventure.

The premise is simple: Bataille proposed the sacrifice not just in order to render the sacred in this world once again, but to give it a persistence in creating the being that Acéphale is. Bataille wanted to birth Acéphale into the world. Thus, rendering death the generative act of a new world founded on a new, but already interrupted myth.

Acéphale confounds the work of death, confounds myth, confounds the profane. But all this only through arising after death. The sacrifice can only go so far; the real work starts when Acéphale stands once again: headless and imperious.

The arising of the dead being marks the slippage of the boundary between the calculable world of the worked community and the incalculable excess of the night of non-knowledge that resides somewhere within the now-defunct sacred. The reactivation, then, needs to be one which at the same time is aware of the problem of myth historically as a worked identification and, for Bataille, the contemporary condition of an absence of myth. The sacrifice confounds the absence of myth Bataille notes by rendering a new mythic form. But then Acéphale gets up, and the living transmutation further disrupts the sacrificial process. Acéphale vacillates between the world of the living and the world of the dead, between an absence deposed and an interruption of this process.

The human sacrifice would have articulated all those problems of the communal in a single, dying figure. The wasted life (to whom is the offering made in this world without gods?) as a non-productive centre, the experience of finitude, the mutual ecstasy of the participants. What's missing from this event however is the giving of consistency to mythic interruption. The purposeless offering demonstrates community without operative centre, but the mythic function of the scene seems to hold fast as a story of lost, ancient worlds and misunderstood rituals newly rendered in this world.

The interruption must come from elsewhere: from Acéphale arising once again. The mythological quality of the ritual has a rupture, and this is the rupture of the mythic centre standing back up after being sacrificed and striding off into the world. This is also the rupture between two worlds, the world of the living and the world of the dead. Thus the interrupted myth can be seen marching through other mythic scenes, pulling in other mythic figures and destabilising their existence. Interruption figurally embodied and therefore able to do work in the world of myth. But this pattern is circuitous too, ending finally in the illustrated narrative as subject to a second beheading, proposing therefore that everything simply starts again. This is the rupture at the heart of myth that Acéphale comes to embody.

To get to this position, two steps: sacrifice, then off with his head.

What we see in Acéphale is thus the very embodiment of interrupted myth. A founding myth re-staged but already interrupted, a myth that originates and interrupts mythic scenes, and a myth that also renders presuppositions of mythic foundation absurd. Thus Acéphale's birth isn't solely a by-product of the sacrificial gesture, but offers an important figure for the reading of myth and the reading of community in relation to presuppositions that can have brutal consequences for the world.

Acéphale, wandering as mythic figure, embodies a number of features of Bataille's philosophy. The predominant image of the headless body shows the contrived role of the head in Bataille's image of the world: at once necessary for the sensorial dependence of inner experience—from where else to laugh and cry?—and representative of that intellectually and politically suspect notion of calculation that is a predominant character of the world that Bataille doesn't really believe in.<sup>14</sup> Execution plays a double symbolic role in Bataille's work, offering at once the image of primitive sacrifice—Bataille will elucidate the speculative role of sacrificial offerings in Aztec civilisation—and an abiding image of revolutionary France (the people are in the streets, the king's head falls).

On Acéphale too we see exposed intestines, a parallel form of Bataille's exploration of the labyrinth, as well as an exposed process of the production of bodily excess.<sup>15</sup> Then the stars, pulled down from the celestial sphere, then the skull, possible remnant of execution, then the flaming heart, redolent of Aztec sacrifice, torn out of the chest still beating, both spent life force and divine offering. Finally, the blade, emblem of calculated rationality *par excellence*, not rudimentary weapon, but abstract killing machine, calculation of flesh-piercing strike condensed into razor sharp point.

All these traits come together into a figural approximation of Bataille's work: the Acéphalic being following a pathway through the heavens. Moreover, a work of death defining the possibility of an other world. From this static point, Acéphale sets forth on an adventure that plays out in the narrative images within the pages of the Acéphale journal. The scenes are as follows:

1. Perverted Vitruvian man: emblematic of the work of the Acéphale group and Bataille in particular.
2. Acéphale seated atop mountain, legs fall either side, clutching flaming heart with both hands. Dagger, become sword, on the ground, gripped at either end by the feet. Volcano erupts in background. Accompanying caption: '*Le glaive, c'est la passerelle.*'
3. Acéphale standing on right leg atop mountain. The left leg raised to one side, body tipped, foot lost in cloud. Arms still held out rigidly either side, hands still gripping flaming heart and blade.
4. Acéphale, superman. Shooting upwards into vortex of skies. Arms held aloft, still bearing flaming heart and blade.

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<sup>14</sup> Bataille's early writings offer an explanation for the 'buccal cavity' as a space of intellection whilst also taking on the functions of the horizontal animal's anus. See 'Pineal Eye' in Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, pp. 79-90.

<sup>15</sup> See 'The Labyrinth' in Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, pp. 171-7

5. Acéphale strides across torrid seas. A broad gait, flaming heart held aloft in one hand, blade held out behind the body. In the background, a volcano spews mass of clouds.
6. Acéphale-Dionysos. Squatting down on one knee. In left hand, a grape vine held aloft; in right hand blade is incising chest, blood spills. In crook of elbow, crumbling stone pillar. Groin skull has become Medusa head, whilst snake wraps around left leg and reaches towards grape vine. Background, three temples of diminishing size. In the distance, glow arises from black skies.
7. Acéphale charges, head on. No longer headless, a bull's head appears on sliced neck. Maniacal run, dead-eye stare. Blade held to skies in left hand, right arm clutches distorted naked woman. Behind, armoured figure spears naked man whilst terrific, dark skies gather around temple.
8. More heads! Not only one, but now two bull heads arise from neck. Left hand, flaming heart, held aloft; right hand, held lower, arms forming diagonal line, holds blade. Out of body sprouts growing grape vine. Behind, maelstrom. Volcano erupts from below. Snakes arise from ground and landscape all around an orgy of barely discernible bodies. In the distance, explosion from volcano sends rocks into the sky. Distant centre, a temple, sitting below sun blazing into clear skies.
9. Severed bulls head on ground, flames rise from underneath. Between points of horns, skull pinched, as if torn from Acéphale's groin.

So we see, on this celestial adventure, Acéphale moving from the solitude of the immediate aftermath of the sacrificial gesture, into ever-more populous realms. Engaging, on this journey, with transplanted mythical scenes, at times simply supporting environments, at others props for Acéphale's continued adventure. Finally, in the end, a new head. Then dividing into two heads. Ending abruptly with another decapitation. And thus opening again the beginning of a circuitous adventure in the heavens.

Acéphale as interrupted myth, composes and recomposes mythic forms. Roaming freely throughout a mythic realm, engaging with mythic characters and situations. A great flexibility to this character, as it shifts bodily form, and marches steadfastly across the celestial sphere. Acéphale's being is the culmination of Bataille's sacrificial project, a kind of heavenly incandescence, partially illuminating mythic propositions whilst painting heavy shadows across other parts. Simultaneously occlusive and revelatory, Acéphale has a sort of meta quality. Like a knot or short-circuit of meaning, which is of course to be expected without a head. But if it is this headless quality that is important, lacking the calculative and rational impetus, the body and its existence is destabilised too. Meaning, of course, that in this mythic realm, other, absurd things, can occur: dagger becomes sword, heart becomes grape vine, bull's head grows on neck, Acéphale flies, strides across mountain tops and stormy seas. But of course, nothing is more absurd than the proposed origination: Acéphale arrives after a being is sacrificed. This most excessive, most luxuriant expenditure, produces after its ecstatic moment a new being and an interrupted myth.

Arising after death, Acéphale might just be one possible form of the sovereign. The sovereign, to realise its form, must be able to accede to the liberation of death. This is all tied to a simple



equation of sovereignty for Bataille. The animal possesses sovereignty, untainted as it is by the demands of the servitude of work; the human, in contrast, cannot ordinarily accede to sovereignty because the calculating world subordinates. Bataille puts it thus:

Humanity, oriented by prohibitions and the law of work since the beginning, is unable to be at once human, in the sense of being opposed to the animal, and authentically sovereign: for humanity, sovereignty has been forever reserved, as a measure of savagery.<sup>16</sup>

Bataille continues to elucidate a series of relations from this: savagery and sin, the sovereign acceding to the realm of the eternal, then the conflicted God as image of man and thus subordinated to work in the same manner. Savagery of sacrifice, savagery of death. These are transgressions in the world, transgressions that have a certain animal quality. Bataille's animal, however, doesn't know death. Thus death is a peculiarly human construct, but one that through its differential quality allows a relation of sovereignty (similar to the animal) and humanity (distinct from the animal). This kind of accession to sovereignty is absurd, but this absurdity is precisely what raises it from the realm of the calculated into the realm of the sovereign operation. Bataille identifies similar characteristics in laughter, as a form of liberation from the world of subordinated things. This does not mean that death and laughter are equivalent, but simply that they offer openings within the calculated world.

Sovereignty, to be recognised as true power in this world must necessarily enter into measured relations of subordination. This is the point at which sovereignty loses its potency and tips over into the realm of relations of force; it loses, just as it reaches its desired form, everything that made it sovereign in the first instance. Bataille: 'Sovereignty can only exist on the condition that it should never assume power, which is action, the primacy of the future over the present moment'.<sup>17</sup> This makes sovereignty, for Bataille, a peculiar instance, an ambition without prospect, but it is the very nature of sovereign ambition that is of importance. Sovereignty here is not an exercise of ends, but a process of means. Thus for Bataille the emphasis on the sovereignty of the instant and the preponderance of caprice. Bataille's formulation of sovereignty=death shows a path towards the realised sovereign, but a path once again ensconced in that problematic of denial at the point of realisation. Sovereignty 'survives either by denying itself [...] or else in the durable moment of death'.<sup>18</sup>

The curious character of this situation, however, is that Acéphale surpasses this point of denial only to rise again, thus confounding the mechanism of sovereign ambition. Acéphale is at once dead and living as pure caprice. This in essence re-writes the rules of death and the rules of sovereignty. It is no accident that in this arising after death the head is missing. Decapitation, the severe removal of the classical seat of reason, is a necessary condition for the post-mortem arising. Of course, after death, the being can no longer really be of this world (corpse remains to be sure, but something is missing too), and so the arising covers the curious transition from

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<sup>16</sup> Georges Bataille, *Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, trans. & ed. by Stuart Kendall & Michelle Kendall (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) p. 194.

<sup>17</sup> Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. by Alastair Hamilton (London & New York, NY: Marion Boyars, 1973), p. 159.

<sup>18</sup> Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, p. 160.

the profane world, via the laceration that the sacred is, into the mythic, where a new order of thinking can begin to unfold. This is the transitional and amorphous thought of the headless being: irascible, chaotic, debauched.

Two things must be grasped from this sacrifice from which Acéphale arises. First, the sacrifice itself: what it is and what it does. Second, the group's relation to this moment, what happens, and the outcome of such an event.

Sacrifice leads to Acéphale. This is the basic premise. A sacrifice is performed, later Acéphale arises before embarking on a celestial adventure.

The sacrificial process for Bataille embodies a mode of thinking that runs throughout his work. Sacrifice frees. It free the victim, frees the one who sacrifices, frees death, frees the heterogeneous, and it releases life as an excess into the world.

These claims in turn. Sacrifice releases the offering from the bonds of profane life, although dead, the sacrificial victim participates in the sacred world. Sacrifice releases too the one who gives the offering. Bataille opens this question when writing of Van Gogh's automutilation, the one who sacrifices is 'free to throw himself outside of himself'.<sup>19</sup> This is the ecstatic project, a liberation from the consensual, rationalised world into a world of excess and a world of ecstasy. This 'outside oneself' has obvious ontological resonances. Bataille picks up some of these vibratory parallels when moving to explicate concomitant notions of communication and community in relation to being. Refusing the simple, calculable and subordinating notion of individuated beings in favour of a complex multiplicity.

Ecstasy in Bataille follows a procedure that opens this realm to thought by a projection beyond the cloying and benign confines of the individual. This realm serves too as a counterpoint to the general rationalisation of existence into discrete and measureable entities, a kind of thing-world in which subject-object engagements are parcelled out in limited points of contact. This is an overtly measured world, through which the ecstatic freedom of sacrifice drives an appalling, bloodied blade. Horrific, of course, but the abrupt violence of such an offering destabilises the whole edifice of calculation, mobilising the horror of the barbaric and unknown that denies simple measure.

Barbarism thus pulls the sacred into the profane world. The release of death and consensual violence into the world opens up the simple equivalency in Bataille of profane/homogeneous. The sacred/heterogeneous, the oppressed dimension of the rational world, spills through the laceration in the world that sacrifice is, and destabilises the relatively placid world of homogeneous relation. It is thus that the spilling of life into the world through the wound of sacrifice pulls in death. This spilling embraces a component of Bataille's conception of general economy.<sup>20</sup> In simple terms, Bataille aims to elucidate an economic model of the world in which excess or luxuriant expenditure is the motive force. For Bataille, the predominant feature of the industrialised, capitalist world is accumulation of energy into improvement of productive force. Bataille understands this process as one in which progressively diminishing returns are

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<sup>19</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share Vol. 1*, trans. by Robert Huxley (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

made. Within this process is built the necessity of rupture, the need for expenditure that isn't directly invested in production. We see this in a world of geometricised delineations of nation states with centrifugally focused forces of production leading to continual refinement, the excess manifests itself as explosive energetic expenditures focused outwards towards other geometric refinements. War is the result, but this expenditure, although excessive, is recuperated into the world of productive investment via the gamble of winning. Domination increases the productive base and so on.

For Bataille, sacrifice offers an alternate form of this operation, the historical role of which Bataille develops in many of his anthropologically inflected texts.<sup>21</sup> In the modern, industrial world, sacrifice has become partitioned off into an acceptable form of excess consumption and hedonism. This is the festival or the celebration. The festival, whilst manifesting correspondences to prior practices of excess, is however a specific kind of regulated hedonism: it falls on this day, in this place, and lasts for this long. Festival operates as a kind of geometrically originated void. A regulated aberrancy in a strictly calculated world.

Sacrifice reactivates the legacy of excess of which the festival is the banal result, disrupting the homogenised bounds. Thus sacrifice spills further into the world. It is a great laceration of excess that can serve, in its spilling, to disrupt the simple economic regulation of productive investment. Liberation of energy, pure excess of consumption (sacrificial death as willed consumption of life), is the economic principle of existence. To comprehend this one must break, in sovereign moments, the simplification of the rational. Sacrifice, resulting in an ecstatic moment, is one such possibility.

The group then, possibly perform such a sacrifice. And then what? The components so far: sacrificed, sacrificer, laceration, spilling. To pull more than one into this relation between sacrificed and sacrificer opens out the ecstatic relation to a multiplicity. This means not just one outside of himself, but all outside themselves and thus posed in a complex relation to one another as outside each other at the same time.

A whole lot of insides and outsides, but the premise is ostensibly the same. It is not the privilege of the relation of sacrificer to sacrificed, but rather the embodiment of the sacred, excess, and heterogeneity that provides this ecstatic impulse. Thus the inclinations outside rely on a sharing of the laceration of the profane world. This is the point at which we can encounter Bataille's work of laughter and tears, those moments of projection that traverse beings, that grip and convulse, that at times turn us inside out. Exposed beings then, sharing in common, for better or for worse. For Bataille, communication, true communication, relies on just such an impulse of turning inside out.<sup>22</sup>

All these propositions unfold from death. From that act of sacrifice that draws the sacred into the profane world once again. From death, the sacred. From the sacred laceration, Acéphale. From Acéphale, mythic and celestial conquest. It is to this latter consequence that I now wish

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<sup>21</sup> See in particular Georges Bataille, *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, trans. & ed. by Stuart Kendall & Michelle Kendall (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> For a particularly clear exposition of this, see the final few pages of Bataille's essay on Genet in Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, pp. 173-204.

to turn in conclusion. The confrontation with death offers an opening of another world. We see this mode exposed in Bataille, and we see this mode exposed in Jean-Luc Nancy. The experience of death is proclaimed as an experience of finitude, a moment of encountering a limit, a limit of thought and of life, a limit that poses a radical outside. It is to this radical outside that Bataille believed attention must be paid. This is, in a way, the driving ambition of Bataille's *Somme Atheologique* project: to develop an a-theology that traces the operations of this outside. Bataille speaks of his confrontations with this outside as of the manner of an inner or mystical experience. Indeed, Bataille's book *Inner Experience* maps out the process of this form of experience, its antecedents, and the consequences of such an approach. This all amounts to an extended narration of the conception of inner experience rather than a methodologically rigorous analysis. Bataille guards against this, and at times expresses his general malaise at running up against the tendency of project to swallow up all of his elaborations into a programmatic form. We encounter, at the beginning of *Inner Experience*, unfinished propositions, abandoned sentences, plans and so on, all running up against the problematic dominion of project. From the preface: 'My book finished, I see its detestable sides, its inadequacy.'<sup>23</sup> Project here amounts to the extended rationalisations of the profane world, and Bataille's frustrations and evasions amount to an attempt to escape this whilst providing something like an authentic catalyst for another world experience.

Radical outside acknowledged, one must deal with the consequences. For Bataille, this outside indicates the limit-point of knowledge, where he is keen to point out that absolute knowledge and non-knowledge have equivalent values. Bataille's conception of non-knowledge indicates the epistemological condition of this outside. He calls it night, and non-knowledge indeed takes on occlusive characteristics. But, most of all, points to the conditions of this outside that escapes a rationalised and knowable existence.

So Acéphale ventures forth into the celestial realm where knowledge gives way to non-knowledge, and the simple homogeneity of the religious beyond decomposes into a tattered mythology. In this way death enacted within the body of Bataille's philosophy opens a number of channels: the mythological, the political, the epistemological, even, at base, the ontological. All opened to question, presuppositions illuminated, at times through absurd gestures, to be sure. Extremes, even: human sacrifice, decapitation, exploration of the heavens, exaltation of waste. But these absurdities undo this simple designation of absurdness, insisting rather on their equal validity in a world that is no more than a delimited abstraction.

This isn't really a call for another mysticism, but a proposition for a way of approaching the world through the lens of death rather than life. Not as a particularly morbid or violent principle, but as a liberated point of view. Seeing from the beyond, approaching the possible of an other world by imagining what might exceed the possible of this world. Thus Bataille's basic assumption: the infinite richness of this world. But a richness that must be released through a refusal of confinement, much as Acéphale continues to stride through the heavens.

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<sup>23</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt (New York, NY: SUNY, 1988) p. xxxii.

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