

Myth, Society, (A)theogony: from Schelling's Christ to Bataille's Acéphale

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Introduction

This chapter examines mythology as a theogonic process—that is, as the process of the making and unmaking of a succession of gods. The relation of mythology to society, reason and religion in Georges Bataille's writings of the *Acéphale* period (1936–1939), and indeed Bataille's own (a)theogonic activities during this period, are central to the following discussion. I will emphasise the importance of Protestant religious, philosophical and mystical themes in Bataille's thought, particularly the influence of Jacob Boehme, Friedrich Schelling and William Blake. Finally, I will address the issue of temporality and futurity in Bataille's *Acéphale* project (meaning both the activities of the journal and of the secret society) and his utter rejection of utopian or eschatological hope in favour of continual inner struggle and torment.

In his inscribing of a new deity, “Acéphale,” Bataille, like Nietzsche before him, risked being absorbed within the Schellingian succession of gods, from deities personifying natural forces, to the material creator gods, to the moral and spiritual gods. “Acéphale”—the iconic figure drawn by André Masson on Bataille's direction¹—might appear to be but the latest in a long succession of deities, a final form of God supplanting Christ but nevertheless the result of the long and painful process of what Schelling terms the “God-positing consciousness.” Yet Bataille, and his close friends and confidants (numbering no more than a dozen people), were not seeking to found the religion of a new god but to consecrate and enact a new myth: the self-overcoming of Man and God as the disruption and creative annulment of the theogonic process in the experience of suffering and joy before death. What, then, was “myth” for Bataille, and why did it possess such allure at this point in his writings?

¹ See Georges Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, and André Masson, “La Conjuración Sacrada,” special issue, *Acéphale: Religion, Sociologie, Philosophie* 1 (24 June 1936).

The first section of this chapter examines Schelling's philosophy of mythology in some detail, focusing on his notion of the *Ungrund* and his radical temporalisation of consciousness, religion and God. The influence of Boehme on Schelling is discussed, and, briefly, the work of William Blake, Schelling's contemporary and a significant influence on Bataille's understanding of religious experience as fundamentally dualistic. Then I turn to Bataille's Acéphale project, and the accompanying Collège de Sociologie lecture series, drawing out his position on myth, society and the sacred. While there are a number of parallels between Bataille's thinking and influences from German philosophy and French sociology, his position is quite unique and uncompromising.

Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology

Schelling's long-neglected lectures on the philosophy of mythology have enjoyed renewed attention in recent decades.² Schelling sought the most fundamental or essential dimensions of myth, its previously "unthought" yet generative powers, refusing to see the great myths of the ancient world through any of the still standard positions which facilitate the rejection of myth as "lower" than the properly truthful, "real" or historically factual. These standard positions are, in approximate terms: myth seen as self-serving mystification disguising religious or economic imperatives; myth as poetic fancy and fabrication; and, finally, the more sympathetic but unsatisfactory position holding that myth contains under-developed yet over-adorned attempts at properly rational or philosophical reflection (the position of Schelling's one-time room-mate at Tübingen theological seminary, G.W.F. Hegel).³

Schelling's work on myth is remarkable for several reasons: the radical temporalisation of being and culture emphasising the *Ungrund*, the seething energies lying beyond any origin, foundation or reality; the theory of the potencies (*potenzenlehre*), clashing, oscillating and inverting, crawling from a blind, increate, formlessness through many reversals and inversions before reaching full actualisation; the radical incompleteness and insufficiency of the divine and its dependence on nature and humanity; and the intimate co-relation of all gods, from

² See Edward Allen Beach, *The Potencies of God(s)* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1994); Slavoj Žižek and F. W. J. Schelling, *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World*, trans. Judith Norman (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007); Rodolphe Gasché, *Georges Bataille: Phenomenology and Phantasmology* (New York: Stanford University Press, 2012); Sean J. McGrath, "Populism and the Late Schelling on Mythology, Ideology and Revelation," *Analecta Hermeneutica* 9 (2017): 2–20.

³ Schelling and Hegel were roomed together at Tübingen in the early 1790s.

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Cronos to Set, from Apollo to Christ—with Christ, somehow, present within all divinities as they have unfolded through human consciousness and culture.

Schelling's influence reaches deep into psychoanalysis: Jung's archetypes, Freud's notion of repression and the Uncanny and, more recently, Slavoj Žižek's claiming of Schelling as a crucial precursor of critical materialism.⁴ Yet, there are also deep commonalities with Bataille (and Nietzsche), particularly concerning their theogonic or God-making writings; Dionysus, Zarathustra, Acéphale, Dianus, and Edwarda are all dramatic contributions to the long succession of gods and are marked by Schelling's thinking even as they refuse to see divinity as culminating with Christ.

As we will see, Bataille seeks to plunge divinity back into the primeval, formless, dark, and impure, restoring the almost-obliterated duality of the sacred to forge a new figure of the divine.⁵ For Bataille, the divine is located at the limit-point of humanity and animality through the transgressive crossing of limits in extreme suffering, silence, and the experience of the impossible.

For Schelling, the essence of myth cannot be located within historical time, rather myth is the pre-condition for the emergence of historical time. It cannot properly be said that myths represent or express the fundamental values of a culture. Myths are not woven from the language and culture of a people; rather, a distinct language and "culture" result from or arrive only through myth and endure as the "faded" or profane remainders of myth.⁶ Myth, then, for Schelling, concerns the primordial "non-ground" (*Ungrund*) of human consciousness and culture. Mythology—the story of god-making, of god-slaying and of new gods coming into being—eventually produces a designate-able "humanity" as divided, multiple, and heterogeneous. That is, human cultures come to be differentiated through competing myths of the loss of primordial commonality and of the "confounding" of tongues, memorably recounted in the Genesis tale

⁴ See Slavoj Žižek, "The Abyss of Freedom," in Žižek and Schelling, *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World*, 14–46.

⁵ The notion of the sacred as dual and ambivalent consisting of pure, benevolent energies and impure, malevolent energies, both equally distinct from the profane realm, has many sources, intellectual and poetic. Emile Durkheim's formulation in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* was particularly influential on Bataille and his inner circle. The ambivalence of the sacred consists in a volatile and reversible topology, Durkheim states: "the pure [sacred] can contaminate while the impure sometimes sanctifies" (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields [New York: The Free Press, 1995], 414–415; see also Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. Rodney and Claudia Needham [London: Routledge, 1960]; William Pawlett, "The Left Pole of the Sacred," in *Georges Bataille and Contemporary Thought*, ed. Will Stronge [London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017], 51–72).

⁶ F.W.J. Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, trans. Richey Mason and Markus Zisselberger (Albany, NY: SUNY 2007), 40.

of the Babel tower (Genesis 11:1–9). “Culture” then concerns confusion, disharmony, and relativity, the polytheistic array of gods jostling for mastery over a nation or people, inseparable from tribal warfare and incipient nationalism, characterised by appropriation and demonisation. Polytheism is understood as a backward step which, nevertheless, provides the antagonistic energies for the final leap towards the “absolute monotheism” of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the final stage of human consciousness: the revelation of Christ and the universal community of the future.

Schelling’s lecture course on mythology elaborates this schematic development from a blind unreflective prehistoric theism (“relative monotheism”), through many competing polytheisms, to the third and final stage consisting in the actualisation and conscious recognition of universal truth through Christian Trinitarianism (“absolute monotheism”). This is not the historicist or teleological scheme it may appear to be: it is a journey of consciousness, of will and of imagination exceeding the scope of rationality and it unfolds not in history but in eternity, within the soul or what might less problematically be termed the unconscious.

Schelling, like Bataille, examines both the non-time before time that is prehistory, and the mediating time between non-time and time proper that will, in time, become history. Myth presents tales of figures not yet of history but no longer of prehistory. For Schelling, the Universal God is present, as inspiration or as inner light, in the earliest formulations of divinity, in the most savage primeval deities, in Set (or Typhon) the destroyer and sworn enemy of Zeus, in Dionysian orgiastics, and in countless trickster gods, here the Universal God has not yet been revealed to human consciousness, but is in the process of becoming.

Bataille inherits this thinking of myth in its strongest sense: myth as the intense *unground* of history, as that which is must be subdued—with the inassimilable banished—as the precondition for the coming of history, reason, and civilisation. Yet banishment can never be complete, the dark figures of myth cannot be eliminated as they concern the deepest passions and yearnings, the primal potencies, and the figures or *phantasma* that will focus or symbolise these passions, giving them a shape that endures even in profane reality.

Schelling derives his notion of *Ungrund* from Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), the untutored peasant leather-worker and cobbler from a village on the Polish-German border. Influenced by Paracelsus (1493–1541, Swiss alchemist and physician), and by gnostic, hermetic and mystical traditions, Boehme is generally regarded as a Christian mystic, subject to divine visions which were “authenticated” by the religious and scientific authorities of the time. *Ungrund* names a radical and inexhaustible plenitude or excess that is neither a ground nor foundation. It is not subject to time, yet contains the possibility of past, present and

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future within itself, as moments of eternity, as moments that are never “lived” empirically but can be glimpsed in their eternity by the visionary.

Boehme was tolerated by the authorities as an “enthusiast,” meaning not only that he had a passion for the divine, untempered by schooling, but more specifically that he exhibited a Dionysian exuberance in his visions and trances, that he was *en-theos* or “in God,” full of God or engodded (Greek *enthousiasmos*). William Blake (1757–1827), the English Romantic, and contemporary of Schelling, cites Boehme with enthusiasm, calling him “a divinely inspired man,”⁷ while revelling in his own state of *enthousiasmos*: “Nothing can withstand the fury of my course among the Stars of God & in the Abysses of the Accuser. My Enthusiasm is still what it was only Enlargd and confirmed.”⁸ Bataille, himself influenced or rather inspired by Blake, was we might say a *sur-enthousiaste*, “furiously religious” and “engodded” rather than seeking an external or transcendent God. Certainly, it seems that during the 1944 “Discussion on Sin,” in the home of Marcel Moré, Bataille was treated as an enthusiast by assembled philosophers and theologians who recognised the authenticity of his experience while disagreeing with many particulars.⁹

For Schelling, deploying philological and etymological analysis, the first Greek deity proper is Nemesis. She is born of Night. Nemesis expresses the “first dislocation,” the vital movement or challenge to which humanity responds by becoming conscious of itself, by becoming “humanity.” There is pain and loss in this becoming, a loss of blissful ignorance, and a sense of reckoning that is no less than a condition for the beginning of history. This is a movement or process which evolves through a succession of gods, from Cronos, to Zeus to Dionysus, onto the unstable duality of Elohim and Yahweh, and eventually to the Christian Trinity, a movement of internal becoming that is contained, *in potentia*, within the figure of Nemesis and is ultimately derived from the formless antagonisms and divine insufficiency of the *Ungrund*.

Schelling follows Boehme in evoking God’s radical insufficiency, his hunger and longing to grow and to know himself and the world. God becomes “God” only by shaking himself free of Nature, positing nature as that which is beneath Him, experiencing his insufficiency as divine wrath over and above “Nature.” This crisis within God produces the schism by which ground can form from unground, a divine turning in on and against itself, a “contraction” that creates

⁷ William Blake cited in Elizabeth Engell Jessen, “Boehme and the Early English Romantics,” in *An Introduction to Jacob Boehme: Four Centuries of Thought and Reception*, ed. Ariel Hessayon and Sarah Apetrei (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 180.

⁸ William Blake, “Letter to Butts [1802],” cited in Michael Ferber, *The Social Vision of William Blake* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press 1982), 30.

⁹ See Georges Bataille, “Discussion on Sin,” in *The Unfinished System of Non-Knowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 26–74.

the ground of all subsequent development. While Schelling's theory of the divine potencies appears, all too readily, to mirror the Christian trinity: from wrathful God the Father, to loving God the Son to the Universal love of God the Holy Ghost, perhaps more remarkable are the "inverted potencies," the dark deities which must, necessarily, intervene in the theogonic process, in the long and torturous self-realisation of God and Man through Christ. The adversaries and antagonists which drive God's will to perfection are listed by Schelling: the Egyptian Set, the Greek Cronos and the Canaanite Baal, figures associated with trickery, mendacity and ultimately the failure to protect their peoples. Set is subdued by Horus, Cronos is murdered by Zeus, and Baal (associated with Beelzebub or the Lord of the flies or flyers in Christianity) is ousted by the divine fire of Yahweh (in *The Book of Kings*, 1:18). Set, Cronos and Baal clearly play a role in the formation of their opponents as recognisably morally just and protective deities, and in a relatively clear narrative sense that is not dependent on Schellingian metaphysics.

The dark material gods are slowly supplanted by the spiritual, just gods, yet the ungrounded Godhead could not unfold towards spiritual completion without the challenge and dislocation introduced by the dark deities. The figure of Dionysus, for Schelling, is a bridging point from the wrathful material gods to the elevated spiritual ones, he is, in part, protector, he rescues his dead mother—Semele—from the underworld, and, of course, he brings great comfort to humankind in the form of wine.¹⁰

Schelling's inverted potencies are conceived as forces of irrationality, negation and antagonism, opposing the divine from within a "past" that has never been a present, an eternal past of human consciousness that allows consciousness to be. Mythological narratives (myths reduced to narratives) do not capture or express this "primal becoming" in narrative form, but they move within a space produced by the experience of dislocation or over-throwing (Schelling's term is "*katabolē*"). The story of Nemesis, then, does not express the truth of this movement of becoming, for the becoming is "non-mythological," though the reverberations of this movement are given a place in myth. The figures of myth are separated from the conditions of their becoming, their becoming is strictly "unfathomable" within the narrative terms of the myth because in their becoming gods are made, and once they are made the conditions of their making are lost. In this sense, we might glean more about the coming of Nemesis from the story of Nyx or Night, her mother, than from the story of Nemesis herself, or of the coming of Zeus from the story of Cronos, or of the coming of Christ from the story of Job, or, conceivably, the story of Dionysus or Lucifer.

¹⁰ See Beach, *The Potencies of God(s)*, 211–212.

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Schelling's line of argument here is designed to resist the reduction of myth to literary narrative as the process of becoming is, ultimately, the unfolding of the divine in human consciousness: approximately from God as wild force of nature, to God as Judge, to God as provider and protector, to God as universal Love. God's becoming is eternal, not historical, and only when we reach the "completion" of the mythic process in the figure of Christ can the historical properly begin: a moment captured forcefully in William Blake's illustrations to Milton's poetry. In *The Overthrow of Apollo and the Pagan Gods* (1809), Blake's illustration of Milton's Ode "Christ on the Morning of His Nativity," Christ appears fully formed and dominant, and a fearful Apollo takes flight while other Greek deities contort in their confinement, visibly saddened by this confirmation of their irrelevance. Christ appears as a figure of remarkable similarity to Apollo and, from Schelling's perspective, this is only right since Christ realises the light and beauty of Apollo in a higher moral or spiritual form.

By contrast, Apollo, in Nietzsche's audacious reading in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is raised to the founding principle of the Olympian gods, that is, the Olympian pantheon itself is a product of Apollonian thinking. For Nietzsche, Apollo brings light, creating the conditions for image-making and representation, for language and poetry, for illusion, dreams and beauty; for individuation to be soothed by the solace of the arts. Dionysus, in contrast, brings the gifts of intoxication, of deliverance from the pain of individuation and of the ego: he brings rapture, sexual excess, thunderous music and wild dancing in which "[n]ot only is the bond between human beings renewed by the magic of the Dionysian, but nature, alienated, inimical, or subjugated, celebrates once more her festival of reconciliation with her lost son, humankind."¹¹

The Dionysus invoked in the 3–4 issue of *Acéphale* may appear to be a force of intoxication,¹² as he appeared to Walter Otto, for example, yet, Nietzsche suggests, Dionysus also offers a particular kind of protection against the titanic forces of the early deities: he comes as reconciler, where the monster Typhon, for example, comes as destroyer. When the Dionysiac emerges in full force, the Apollonian is forced into a rear-guard action, a hasty fortification against the "Titanic-barbaric nature of the Dionysiac." So, it is vital that the Apollonian is temporarily annulled, but only by Dionysian ecstasy, so that Apollo does not suffer the irreversible annulment that will be wielded by Socratic rationalism.¹³ The Dionysian is a trace of the titanic order, a trace of the mythic time before

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), § 2:1.

¹² See Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Pierre Klossowski, André Masson, and Jules Monnerot, "Dionysos," special issue, *Acéphale: Religion, Sociologie, Philosophie* 3–4 (July 1937).

¹³ See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, § 12–15.

the securing of human society, a trace of the unspeakable or ineffable, but only a trace. Similarly, Acéphale—the deity—enacts defiance of Socratic rationalism without calling forth the titanic monsters of pre-history; Acéphale should not, then, be seen as a regressive, failed, return to the mythic past but as a continual, living defiance of rationalism and the social and political order built upon it.

For all his conceptual audacity, Schelling remains a philosopher looking at myth from the outside as object, aided by his philological methodology, though always willing to transgress the disciplinary apparatus when intuition seems to demand it. Nietzsche, and then Bataille, attempt to speak from within the world of myth, which to this day prevents their full recognition within the academic discipline of philosophy—the privileged discourse of reason erected on the banishment of mythology.

Bataille and Acéphale

Bataille's 1930 essay "Base Materialism and Gnosticism"¹⁴ demonstrates the extent to which mythological and religious conceptions are central to his philosophical position and his critique of social and political structures. Following Schelling, myth is understood as society's grounding pre-condition, not merely as the symbolic expressions of a pre-existing entity. Yet, rejecting Schelling's eschatology, myths are seen as recording traces of the constitutive violence and arbitrariness of any social order, and hence also a trace of how any order might be overthrown and dismantled. Myth is the *Ungrund* of society because society, ultimately, has no foundation. The sacred is not the ground of society, but an inexhaustible, seething intensity that society must prohibit, banish or channel into restricted forms in order to fashion such "foundations" as may exist, which, nevertheless, remain at the mercy of the sacred.

Modern social order is maintained, ultimately, by the interlocking values of an abstract God, and of abstract matter, which Bataille terms, memorably, "the chief guard and the prison walls."¹⁵ Materialism, then, holds the promise of subversion and a freeing from authority, yet the dominant forms of materialism fail in this task because in positing matter as a designate-able and discrete "thing" they are inherently idealist—and idealist in an incapacitating sense. Base materialism is more radical in that it confronts the formless, and impure, that which lacks, mocks or confounds material "form." Gnosticism is an important

¹⁴ Georges Bataille, "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 45–52.

¹⁵ Bataille, "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," 45.

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inspiration here, as, in Bataille's words, it expresses a "most impure fermentation."¹⁶

Bataille engages with a number of myths and religious systems, not to affiliate with them nor even as major influences upon his thought, but as ways of reopening the mythic non-ground of Western society by focusing on the low and impure—the left pole of the duality of the sacred. Only revolution at the level of myth can effect a fundamental transformation of society: a theogonic, or rather atheogonic, process in which a new myth would bring about a new community—the people to come constituted in and through their ritual enactments of the myth.

Bataille's text entitled *The Pineal Eye* (1930)¹⁷ offers fascinating assertions concerning the relations between myth and reason, with mysticism playing a vital mediating role. For Bataille, science (reason) is, ultimately, a form of mysticism in that it understands the "formless" universe as, in principle, orderly, explicable, and governed by logic. Science is able to achieve this semblance of order only through its self-constituting act of rejecting all that is formless, impure, and so inassimilable. Science becomes possible through a movement of rejection, expulsion, and division, while "myth" appears as the terrain of that which cannot be allotted a place within science. It is not simply that science rejects all foreign bodies, but that the mania to reject impurities is written into the foundation of science and continually conditions its becoming, whether consciously or not. As both science and myth are underpinned by mystical thinking, Bataille does not place them in opposition. Any ultimate origin conferring priority to one of the three terms cannot be located, there is only an always accomplished movement of self-constitution through separation or division, akin to the Schellingian *katabole*.¹⁸ Bataille will not pit myth against science, nor will he seek to flee reason for a solipsistic exploration of mysticism, as Sartre and others charged. Rather, Bataille examines limits, with the inassimilable pushed beyond yet still inhabiting, tainting or investing those limits. Science banishes myth and religion from its calculations, yet can only ground or secure its restricted domain through its ultimately mystical assertions of universal explanation and order. Once these expulsions are enacted, science, of course, achieves undeniably remarkable results, it is a deeply productive mysticism. Bataille's general economic methodology seeks to exploit and master science, yet to redirect its gaze at the limit-points of its self-constituting movements of banishment. Mythic figures, forces, and horrors stalk these limits, inhabiting all attempts to secure boundaries and barriers.

¹⁶ Bataille, "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," 46.

¹⁷ Georges Bataille, "The Pineal Eye," in *Visions of Excess*, 79–90.

¹⁸ See Gasché, *Georges Bataille*, 52–77.

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Science, proceeding on the basis of a mystical conception of the Universe, has separated the constituent elements of the universe into two profoundly distinct classes: it has elaborated, through assimilation, the necessary and practical parts. . . . [a]t the same time it has had to brush aside the delirious parts of the old religious constructions, in order to destroy them.¹⁹

Gnosticism, and some aspects of Christian symbolism, embody just such “delirious parts” and offer a fundamental subversion of idealism, of the values and procedures of separation, elevation and abstraction upon which scientific method depends. Deriving its dualism from Zoroastrianism, Gnosticism views matter as darkness and evil, not as the absence or privation of light and goodness (which would produce a binary account), but as independent, not indebted, tainted or fallen in relation to light. Darkness and light exist as radical duality, they are of different worlds. Evil never has to answer to Good in the material world. Gnosticism ultimately seeks the pure and exalted, but it also produces a wide array of images of the low and the base—for Schelling, inverted potencies. Fallen angels, and animal-headed demons are, of course, resolutely divine, they partake of the same divinity as Christ, but exist in a different relation or topology: falling from high to low, rather than elevated (through torture and death) from low to high. Many variants of Christianity retain traces of Zoroastrian and Gnostic dualism, and the symbolism of material suffering is, of course, central to the Christian faith.²⁰ In Bataille’s words, by “associating social ignominy and the cadaveric degradation of the torture victim with divine splendour,” Christianity contributes to “the historic struggle of the ignoble against the noble, of the impure against the pure.”²¹ Images of material suffering are contagious, in the same way that the sacred and the erotic are contagious, preventing isolated, ideal conceptual categories from functioning properly. This argument is expanded forcefully in Bataille’s improvised lecture “Power,” based on Roger Caillois’s notes with extensive extemporisation, delivered to the *Collège de Sociologie* on February 19 1938. Bataille asserts:

¹⁹ Bataille, “The Pineal Eye,” 82. Cf. Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes, t. II, Écrits posthumes, 1922–1940*, ed. Denis Hollier (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 21–35.

²⁰ The sovereignty of wretchedness, sickness and self-degradation, as practiced by Teresa of Avila in the 16th century and Simone Weil in the 20th, are amongst the greatest achievements attached to organised religion. See Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), and Alexander Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

²¹ Georges Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” in *Visions of Excess*, 127.

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Jesus let himself be treated like a criminal and reduced to the condition of a tortured body, thus identifying himself with the left and immediately repulsive form of the sacred.²²

The repulsive, criminal tragedy of the crucifixion is transformed into “the object of an ecstatic seduction” and the Eucharist endlessly repeats in symbolic form this stunning act of regicide (*Jesus Narareus Rex Iudaeorum*): “Christianity offers identification with the victim, the slain king.”²³ Bataille’s account uncovers the violence implicit in Schelling’s movement of the final overcoming of mythology—it cannot be a bloodless affair as Christ comes to dominate, to usurp power from God the Father. A transition of this magnitude demands a cataclysmic sacrifice: the death of God through the sacrifice and resurrection of God. Any social expression of the sacred, any institutionalisation, involves an “alteration and alienation of the free sacred activity from which it took its force.”²⁴ Acéphale, as deity, seems to enact the duality of attraction and repulsion in its “raw” form, the movements of sacred horror and repulsion are not to be anchored to a political party or institutional power, that “institutional merging of the sacred force and military strength in a single person,” which for Bataille defines power. Rather, Acéphale appears as the continual auto-mutilating self-sacrifice of the head/reason/God-positing consciousness, a new, intensified sense of horror and joy.

The Acéphale group practised a Dionysian religion, of sorts. Issue two of the journal²⁵ was devoted to discussions of Dionysus, drawing heavily on Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* and other influential texts, such as the then recent studies of Greek religion by Walter Otto.²⁶ Revolutionary politics is rejected in favour of revolutionary religion. Politics, for Bataille, cannot answer to “the fundamental aspirations of humanity,” indeed, fundamentals are banished in advance of the formulation of all political programmes: politics concerns the restricted economic management of society. Bataille’s notion of the sacred con-

²² See Georges Bataille, “Power,” in Georges Bataille, et alia, *The College of Sociology 1937–39*, ed. Denis Hollier and trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 133–134. Cf. Bataille, *Œuvres complètes, t. II*, 344.

²³ Bataille “Power,” in *The College of Sociology*, 135.

²⁴ Bataille, “Power,” 134.

²⁵ See Georges Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, André Masson, Jean Rollin, and Jean Wahl, “Nietzsche et la Fascistes: Une Réparation,” special issue, *Acéphale: Religion, Sociologie, Philosophie* 2 (January 21 1937).

²⁶ See “Dionysus [Extracts from *Dionysus* by Walter Otto, apart from the final citation],” in *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*, ed. Marina Galletti and Alastair Brotchie, trans. Natasha Lehrer, John Harman, and Meyer Barash (London: Atlas Books, 2017), 187–192. See also Walter Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1965).

cerns those banished or disavowed fundamentals, which, nevertheless, remain immanent and active in all social relations. The dark and “delirious” aspects of the sacred are removed to the mythic realm, often demonised or condemned as abhorrent but never entirely forgotten.

The dominant political ideologies of modernity either disavow violence (Liberalism, Conservatism), or subordinate violence to a dialectical movement of progress (Socialism, Communism). Bataille rejects the dominant forms of socialist politics, as something which follow from Christianity but lacks its intensity and lucidity. The immense mythic forces of violence, horror, and aggression are, at least, fully recognised by Christianity, yet it seeks to blame humanity and hold it to account for these as sin. Christianity esteems the lowly, downtrodden, and abject, making torture by crucifixion its central symbol of a triumphant overcoming of the human in the divine. With the act of crucifixion, the whole of humanity, and even God himself, is judged guilty.

Bataille’s 1938 essay “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” returns to the theme of myth in a heartfelt condemnation of the state of being in modern society: “The greatest harm that strikes men is perhaps the reduction of their existence to the state of a servile organ.”²⁷ Humanity is mutilated by utilitarian and instrumentalist thinking, reduced to a state of “half-death,” yet this deep suffering, rooted in the very foundations of society, is not even recognised by those who claim to be working to alleviate suffering. Bataille roundly condemns the professions of scientist, artist and politician: science is predicated on denying the totality to better see elements of the particular; artists substitute the immediacy of suffering for flights of fancy and imagination; politics operates at only the most meagre and impoverished level, after the will to transform society has already been stifled by the weight of existing structures and adaptation to “reality.” Indeed, Bataille condemns action in and of itself, not just particular actions defined by particular motives or ends. Action and necessity are in themselves enslaving, fragmenting being into dissociated strands: academic disciplines, professions, vocations, roles, and any attempt to combine them would constitute only a multiplication of “infirmities.” *Acéphale*, as we shall see, enacted an immediate religious revolution, not a political insurrection supposedly to be achieved in the near future or in an eschatological “to come.”

Religion and mysticism are clearly positioned by Bataille as mutilated and fragmented by the forces of homogeneity, as offering only flights from experience into the imagination. In contrast, Bataille’s concerns are the nature of the sacred, and of sacred myth, not as they are administered and ultimately betrayed by religious institutions, but as collective experiential intensities. Myth, for Ba-

²⁷ Georges Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” in *Visions of Excess*, 223. Cf. Georges Bataille, “L’apprenti sorcier,” in *Œuvre complètes, t. I, Premiers Écrits, 1922–1940*, ed. Michel Foucault (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 524.

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taille, is understood in general economic terms, as surpassing the separated institutions of science (reason), art and politics:

Myth alone returns . . . the image of a plenitude extended to the community where men gather. Myth alone enters the bodies of those it binds and it expects from them the same receptiveness. It is the frenzy of every dance; it takes existence “to its boiling point”: it communicates to it the tragic emotion that makes its sacred intimacy possible.²⁸

The living experience of myth is akin to contagious erotic experience (it “enters the bodies”), yet it ranges more widely than eroticism is apt to do, since it can sweep up larger groups of people, and avoids the tendency of eroticism to devolve into a pair or couple. Bataille continually uses erotic terminology to characterise the operation of myth: “Ritually lived myth reveals nothing less than true being; in it life appears no less terrible or beautiful than the loved woman, nude on a bed.”²⁹ Further, myth surpasses fiction or art because, as Bataille puts it, in very Schellingian terms, myth engenders a “people.” Myth must not be seen reductively as a set of ideas concerning origins or gods, it must be collectively enacted and re-enacted through ritual. Myth as narrative or literary form is only myth in deep decline, in a state of senility. Myth made to live through ritual enactments parallels the sacred in that “inferior reality” is swept away or suspended: Dionysus comes alive through the ritual enactments of his frenzied enthusiasts, as the “spirit” of collective abandon. “Acéphale” is a being who has lost its head yet lives. Not merely an animal or merely a human, but a creature able to use abstract reasoning against itself.

An obvious objection to Bataille’s line of argument, made by his allies as well as his enemies, is that myth, once lost, cannot be artificially resurrected. That is, the (non)time of myth is over, we now live in history, governed by reason. Schelling had already challenged this simplistic thinking, and Bataille follows Schelling in insisting upon the socio-genic, as well as (a)theogonic force of myth. At the end of history, or even after the end of history, in a world about to be shaken by the Nazi nightmare, Bataille sought a new, post-historical myth, not a new time or a “new order,” but access to “the depths of worlds”³⁰ where

²⁸ Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” 232. Cf. Bataille, “L’apprenti sorcier,” in *Œuvre complètes*, t. I, 535.

²⁹ Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” 232; Bataille, “L’apprenti sorcier,” 536.

³⁰ Bataille’s phrase “le fond des mondes” appears in “La pratique de la joie devant la mort,” in “Folie, Guerre et Mort,” special issue, *Acéphale: Religion, Sociologie, Philosophie* 5 (June 1939), 16. Cf. Georges Bataille, “The Practice of Joy Before Death,” in *Visions of Excess*, 237.

the meaning of time and order are fundamentally altered by their being confined to the profane realm, so having no bearing or claims on the realm of the sacred.

For Bataille, the requirements for the creation of a new mythology are not dissimilar from those required for the creation of literary or imaginary worlds, though they are more rigorous, more exacting: “[M]yth is born in ritual acts hidden from the vulgarity of a disintegrating society.”³¹ Collective-binding secrecy is vital, and Bataille absolutely insisted upon the maintaining of secrecy in the activities of Acéphale. The importance of sworn secrecy and inviolable rules must be emphasised; there was no “internal” reason preventing Bataille’s community from growing and flourishing. The conditions of acceptance into the community consisted only in taking its rules and aims absolutely seriously. There were no formal principles of exclusion at work, such as those concerning gender, race, class or even religious faith. Might Acéphale have become, given more favourable circumstances, a global community? The eve of the Second World War could hardly be less favourable time for the growth of such a community.³²

The figure of Acéphale, then, is, in a sense, one figure in the Schellingian mythological process, leading from the pre-historic deities such as Gaia and Uranos, through to the properly mythological deities of Nemesis, Zeus, and Apollo, then becoming protective with Jehovah, and eventually ethical with Christ. This succession of gods leaves an array of unresolved or inassimilable remainders in its wake: the exiled Typhon, a decapitated Medusa, the dismembered Dionysus, a fallen Lucifer, and so on until the triumph of the ethical Man-God Christ who delivers the end of mythology and provides the conditions for the beginning of human history.³³ Bataille’s, and Masson’s use of Christian symbolism for the Acéphale icon—the Sacred Heart turned hand grenade, the bringing of a dagger or sword in the left hand (Matthew 10:34)—suggest that Acéphale can be seen as a necessary step or succession beyond Christ, a step both anticipated and, also, inconceivable for Schelling.

The headless deity has no reason, no consciousness, no reality, nor ideality. It is lacking that through which reason and God are manifest to humanity, yet it has survived death; not a force of nature, not a primal potency, and lacking the organ of generation. There is no space for an exterior, transcendent deity, and none for an interior, immanent deity either. It would be hard to conceive of an image of God that more completely ruptures the tradition of German idealism

³¹ Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” 233.

³² See Georges Bataille, “Prohibitions Regarding the Forest of Acéphale,” and the “Instructions for the ‘Encounter’ in the Forest,” in *The Sacred Conspiracy*, 175–179.

³³ Beach, *Potencies of God(s)*, 231–250; Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, 159–175.

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in its absolutist guises, as presented by Schelling (and later Hegel). It is as if the violent measure of decapitation is necessary to prevent Reason and God—Reason as God, and God as Reason—from flowing back into consciousness.

Yet Schelling (and Hegel) are not so easily dispatched. Bataille himself presents a succession of deities: Christ (not only the Christ of Bataille's youth, but the Christ of "The Notion of Expenditure" and the "Power" lecture), Laure, Dianus, Edwarda. It can look very much like Acéphale—the being—is a further antagonist, a continuation of the process of inverted potency, a dark other necessary to complete the theogonic process by restoring that which the Christian church has betrayed, the figure of the suffering, dying, criminal Christ.

We can speculate on what Schelling's response to the Acéphale project might be by examining the following quotation from his lecture course on the Philosophy of Mythology:

This teaching of the immediate positing of God would be fanatical if one—after man had made the great step into reality—wanted to make the positing of God into the exclusive rule of his current life, as happens with the mediators, the Yogis of India or the Persian Sufis, who, internally torn apart by the contradictions of their faith in the gods . . . want to strive back to that disappearance into God—that is, like the mystics of all ages who find only the way backward, not however forward into true knowledge.³⁴

Yet, for Bataille, as for Blake, knowledge is a backward step, or rather there must be a further step beyond true knowledge, the embracing of loss, the joyous and tragic expenditure of energy, the moment of non-knowledge. Knowledge of the truth is still bound energy, not free energy. Acéphale, then, is God in a permanent state of sovereign expenditure. For Bataille, in this phase of his activities, there is no consolation of hope for a better future, an improved politics or society, only a state of immediate ecstasy, a revolutionary religion which does not register on the scale of a conceivable politics.

The Acéphalic joyous monster interrupts the theogonic process at both origin and end—even Set, Cronos and Baal had heads, were whole and unified (though Set is often depicted with the head of a jackal or donkey, and certainly had animal forms). The headless one feels, in part, an inversion of the earliest cultic practices of head burial, referenced by Bataille in *Erotism* and his essay "Prehistoric Religion."³⁵ Rather than considering the head to be the most sa-

³⁴ Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, 129–130.

³⁵ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (New York: Marion Boyars, 1986), 43, and Georges Bataille, "Prehistoric Religion," in *The Cradle of Hu-*

cred part of the body, as it seems to have been for the earliest hominids, the head is figured as that which compromises and desacralises human experience. The Acéphale, then, is a being before and beyond theogony, and before and beyond historical time. It seems that Acéphale has learnt the necessity of violence and has brought with it a dagger or short sword, more likely for self-mutilation than attack—if its head were ever to grow, it must be hacked off again. Acéphale is a figure of defiance—a figure of a religion or cultic practice that is “only true when in revolt,” as Bataille wrote of Blake’s violent poetry,³⁶ a sentiment Bataille surely held for politics and religion too. Is the Acéphale one of those “portions of eternity too great for the eye of man,” as Blake wrote in *Proverbs of Hell*?³⁷ Here it is important to distinguish between eternity—time without beginning or end—conceived by the Romantics to be accessible through the human imagination, and what Bataille terms in “Propositions” (*Acéphale* 2, 1937): “Le temps extatique.”³⁸ This is a time which defies profane temporality, moments of ecstatic experience provoked by visions of death and eroticism rending the psyche and, fleetingly, revealing the “infinite improbability” of existence.

A projected issue of *Acéphale*, to be entitled “The Crucified Christ,” never materialised, though notes and fragments have survived. These indicate a form of meditation on the image of the suffering Christ, a practice of great seriousness in which any sense of irony, indifference or irreverence must be avoided. The sacrificial escalation of death must be confronted in its horror and magnificence, felt without hope of salvation, redemption or transcendence. In this exposure of the self to its limits in horror, dread and the erotic, death itself emerges from beneath the paraphernalia of organised, state religion. This meditation on the suffering endured by Christ’s material body is a further disruption of the Schellingian theogony, since it reverses or inverts the summation of the Godhead in the figure of the Holy Ghost: it is not the community of believers which matters, but a covenant of death and horror, of the left pole of the sacred. In this way, Bataille sought “to snatch back [Christianity’s] final treasures by violent means.”³⁹

manity, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (New York: Zone, 2009), 125.

³⁶ Georges Bataille, “William Blake,” in *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (New York: Marion Boyars, 1985), 86.

³⁷ William Blake, “Proverbs of Hell,” in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, ed. Sir Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), lines 29–31.

³⁸ Georges Bataille, “Propositions,” in *Acéphale* 2: 17–20; 20. Cf. Georges Bataille, “Propositions,” in *Œuvres complètes, t. I*, 471.

³⁹ Georges Bataille, “The Crucified Christ [11 September 1937],” in *The Sacred Conspiracy*, 229–230; 230.

Concluding Discussion

Schelling's theogonic process reaches completion with the revelation of Christ, the transition from *Mythos* to *Logos* and the communion of the Holy Ghost, yet this is only the condition for the beginning of the historical process. In the historical era, there can be no new gods, and no new inverted potencies, but the true universal community of humanity in Christ is yet to unfold. For Schelling, the process of secularisation should be embraced as it will, in time, lead to a rational, universal, spiritual community with no need for the trappings of institutional religion. For Bataille, by contrast, demythologisation attempts to banish the violent energies which are the *Ungrund* of human experience. This banishment will always fail, and even where it is seemingly successful it produces only the empty, brittle, servile existence of life in modernity. Indeed, modernity blocks the kenotic emptying out of the self in the divine, not through a raising of life to a higher level of freedom, as Schelling hoped, but through the stuffing full of the self, gorged on consumerist nihilism.

The cultural processes of secularisation and profanation lead to an impoverishing of existence which, far from achieving freedom, now labours under new power structures which hypocritically draw upon an attenuated and internally modified form of the sacred, shorn of its left or impure pole. In the age of authoritarian populism, the shabby trappings of nationalist mythology make a return, but ideologies of this kind could not be further removed from Bataille's conspiratorial community, which sought to embrace the formless intensity of the left pole of the sacred, that which can never be made to serve religious or national institutions.

Acéphale was not a return to primal, lusty, or innocent beginnings, but to an impossible space before the beginning of the theogonic process; a return to the *Ungrund*, to the seething, undifferentiated non-ground of society, to a timeless moment, a moment, that is, which cannot be made to appear within the (dis)course of history. The Acéphale divinity short-circuits the developmental course of history as conceived in Schelling's philosophy. The bounding figure of Acéphale seems to evoke both an impossible moment "before" the primal contraction by which Schelling's God recognised himself as God, and, also, suggests an inconceivable futurity for the divine "after" the supposed conclusion of history in humanity's achievement of a universal community of reason.

Yet the Acéphale project is more than a strategic outflanking of German idealism. For Bataille, the concept of "God" is already a profanation; the theogonic process is a process of profanation, not a process by which the human experience of the divine is successively enhanced. The Greek gods do indeed occupy a pivotal position: sacrifice and monstrosity are consistent features of Greek religion—the minotaur and the labyrinth in which it dwells and devours sacrificial offerings are important symbols for Bataille—yet Greek civilisation

dramatises the defeat of monstrosity, the overcoming of the titanic forces and the triumph of rationalism. For Bataille, by contrast, “[t]he Earth as mother has remained the old chthonian deity, but with the human multitudes she also tears down the God of the sky in an endless uproar.”⁴⁰

For Bataille, following Nietzsche, the mythic process is not completed in Christianity, nor by science and reason. Indeed, the mythic process can never be completed: a new, post-historical community would still require myth. Without myth there is only enslavement to reality and its stifling routines. Schelling’s self-overcoming of myth through the Man-God, becomes for Bataille, more akin to an overcoming of this Man-God through new myth. Nevertheless, the remarkable proximity of Schelling, Nietzsche and Bataille on myth must be emphasised. All three demonstrate an intellectual over-ambition that would not be tolerated today; all three seemed to fail in their principal aims by overstepping that which was considered proper in the disciplines of philosophy, philology and sociology respectively, yet these “failures” remain vital sources of inspiration both within and beyond these disciplines. All three are clearly inspired by Christian themes, while finding them deeply insufficient. If Schelling remained a philosopher, seeking to grasp the truth of the mythic process, Nietzsche employed literary-poetic devices to express his truths, before finally losing his mind and becoming one with Dionysus and the Crucified Christ in the Piazza Carlo Alberto in Turin in 1889. Bataille, abandoning political interventionism sought to generate a new mythic community through carefully defined and enforced ritual practices. Perhaps the secret society of *Acéphale* was too focused on the enactment of ritual, at the expense of generating myth from ritual practice. Perhaps the sacrificing of Bataille himself by the assembled adepts would have forged a new myth. In any case, the *Acéphale* experiment did not fail, rather it was interrupted, as dominant rationality—harnessed to a sub-mythological ideology of racial purity—unleashed a scale and intensity of horror unprecedented in human history.

Coda

Acéphale, as the defiance of a rational, useful God, and of a decayed, mutilated society, is still alive today. The past is not set, stable or complete; the mythic *ungrund* can never be isolated, sealed or transcended. Stillness and silence remain occasion for visions, and myth is reborn in ritual acts of sacrifice.

⁴⁰ Bataille, “Propositions” in *Acéphale* 2, 1937. Cf. Bataille, “Propositions,” in *Œuvres complètes, t. I*, 472, and Bataille, “Propositions,” in *Visions of Excess*, 201.

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