The Other Sun: Non-Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Georges Bataille

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In 1914, the nationalist right-wing author and politician Maurice Barrès published *The Great Pity of the Churches of France*, a collection of texts in which he inveighs against the law separating church and state that had been adopted on December 9, 1905. The book was the culmination of a campaign that Barrès had waged since 1910, and included an open letter and a petition as well as three speeches to the Chamber of Deputies. If the state no longer takes care of churches and cathedrals, he argues, the buildings will fall into decay and their treasures will be sold to the highest bidder. He even claims to have already witnessed auctions where sacred icons and Madonna statuettes were wholesaled under the most profane circumstances. Barrès also refuses to participate in efforts to survey the religious art of these churches, noting that whatever is deemed worthy of preservation, and is thereby rescued from sale or destruction, will only end up in a museum, a fate equally dire.[1]

His clarion call to resist secularization is coupled with a strongly felt distrust of the progressive optimism and rationalism of the time. Without rejecting reason outright, Barrès emphasizes the limitations of its reach: Those who hasten the secular future ignore that there are parts of our being that can never be fully explained, regions "where, as Goethe writes, reason cannot reach but where we nevertheless do not wish for unreason to reign."[2] At the heart of Barrès's argument is the existence of a *triton genos* that falls neither under the positivism of reason nor under the superstition of unreason, and the key word in his exposition that reveals something about its role is *orientation.* Some might object that the church's physical building serves no purpose in a village where the Catholic faith has all but died out, he suggests, but then retorts that "the simple fact that these sensitively charged walls *orient,* quite indistinctly and insufficiently, yet still *orient thought,* plays an invaluable part in the philosophy of the village."[3] Just as a magnet causes iron filings to line up according to its magnetic field, so does the church create a sacred field of orientation that envelops the entire village and acts upon all its inhabitants, believers and nonbelievers alike.

1. Maurice Barrès, *La grande pitié des églises de France* (Paris: Émile-Paul Frères, 1914), pp. 2–3.
2. Ibid., p. 92. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own throughout.
3. Ibid., p. 92. My emphasis.

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Barrès was not alone in his opposition to the new law. On August 16, 1904, an article with the ominous title "The Death of Cathedrals" appeared in the pages of *Le Figaro*. Its author, Marcel Proust, invites the reader to imagine for a moment that Catholicism died out centuries ago and that all its traditions were lost, leaving only a few magnificent but empty cathedrals standing as silent witnesses of a bygone era. Would the French government then not support efforts to recreate the mysterious drama of High Mass, just like ancient Greek tragedies were once brought back to life in amphitheaters? Proust does not concern himself with the decline of Christianity, but with the aesthetic existence of its houses of worship, brought to life by the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the religious rites. Like Barrès, however, he warns against the museification of the cathedral or, worse, against the possibility that the government might decide at its discretion to turn disused churches into anything from conference halls to casinos. In the end, Proust as much as Barrès discredits his own argument, as legitimate fears seamlessly transition into hyperbole. But even his exaggerations are essentially secular in nature. They rely not on the notion of a sacred function that is annihilated by the mercantile economy of the museum, but rather on a corporeal relationship between the church and the bodies of the congregation.

The theme of orientation is present in "The Death of Cathedrals" as well. As one travels through the French countryside, steeples rising above every new village outline the visual topography of the landscape. In fact, the importance of the country church as a reference point and its reliability for the purpose of orientation are so fundamental that, in an article published in *Le Figaro* three years later, Proust calls upon them to illustrate the disorienting effect of speed when traveling by automobile. He describes how the steeples of Saint-Étienne, instead of slowly growing larger in his field of vision, seem to stay suspended at an indefinite distance, alternately disappearing behind each other and reappearing, as if they were moving sideways on a two-dimensional plane. The directionality of movement is distorted, substituting lateral displacement for diminishing distance, and the slow, organic progression toward the church is replaced by an apparent immobility followed by a violent jump when the automobile comes to a halt before the church: They have already arrived. As if the steeples had been waiting in ambush, "they jumped out in front of us so suddenly that we barely had time to stop before crashing into the porch."[4]

Despite his emphasis on a purely geographical form of orientation, Proust also argues that the material reality of the church can exert an influence that, regardless of the observer's own faith, seeps into the intellectual and spiritual realm. And far more influential than religious paintings and sculptures are the architectural lines of the building itself, obscurely hinting at unspoken thoughts "and capable both of lifting our imagination in their soaring elevation and of

4. Marcel Proust, "Impressions de route en automobile," *Le Figaro*, November 19, 1907. The article was republished in *Pastiches and Mixtures* with the title "Days in an Automobile." The impressions were also reused in *Swann's Way*.

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imprisoning it altogether in the curve of their fall."[5] After World War I, "The Death of Cathedrals" was included, in an abbreviated form, in *Pastiches and Mixtures* together with an addendum from its author describing it as "quite mediocre" and guilelessly noting how much words can sometimes change over time. A far greater threat to the cathedrals of France had emerged in the meantime: The physical destruction wreaked by an external enemy had trumped the fear of creeping internal decay.

Around the time of this republication, Georges Bataille published a text that echoes the sentiment of Proust's note, if not his overarching argument. "Notre-Dame de Rheims" laments the near-death of one cathedral in particular during the war. Of course, having been the coronation church of French kings for eight hundred years, Notre-Dame de Reims is not just any cathedral, and in the article it is scarcely more than a symbol of the religious spirit of the nation, a vessel for the musings of a remarkably pious Bataille, who describes it as "the highest and most magnificent consolation that God left among us."[6] While addressing a very different situation, the tone is reminiscent of the various expostulations about the law of 1905. Juxtaposing the prewar splendor of the cathedral with the devastation brought about by repeated German bombings, the second half of the article describes the return of its author to Reims. Against his earlier conviction that "as long as [the cathedral] lasted, even if in ruins, we would still have a mother to die for,"[7] the actual ruins now strike him not as a living and caring mother but as a ghastly rictus of death.

"Notre-Dame de Rheims" is an anomaly in Bataille's oeuvre. One might even argue that it is not quite part of it at all, and for many years it was not: Never mentioned by the author himself, it was virtually unknown until after his death.[8] It stands apart both stylistically and thematically. Denis Hollier notes that, separated from Bataille's main work by ten years of silence, this early text is not only incongruous but in many ways in direct conflict with his other writings.[9] Beyond its obvious religiosity, it also represents a more general faith in authority and order that is absent from his later works. Nevertheless, traces remain of this moment of youthful adoration. The article portrays Notre-Dame de Reims as the physical body of the Virgin Mother: The stones of the cathedral are her flesh and blood, the desolation of its ruins are the terrifying smile of her skeletal remains. The one-sentence

5. Proust, "La mort des cathédrales: Une conséquence du projet Briand sur la Séparation," *Le Figaro*, August 16, 1904.

6. Georges Bataille, "Notre-Dame de Rheims," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 612.

7. Bataille, "Notre-Dame de Rheims," p. 612.

8. Even after the discovery of "Notre-Dame de Rheims," the first volume of Bataille's complete works published by Gallimard does not begin with this text, which is instead added to the end in a section labeled "Addendum 1973," assigning it a status below that of a literary work but above that of an annotation or a discarded draft.

9. Denis Hollier, "La métaphore architecturale," in *La prise de la concorde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), p. 32.

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paragraph that signals the passage of four years of war reflects this anthropomorphic view: "Today, however, she rises in desolation, mutilated."[10] Two decades later, in one of Bataille's first talks at the College of Sociology, on February 5, 1938, this mutilated body returns in a very similar context. "One might even harbor aggressively anti-Christian sentiments," he writes; "this does not take away from the feeling that the church and the houses surrounding it together establish a vital equilibrium, such that a radical destruction of the church would be a form of *mutilation*."[11] This defense of the church comes from a Bataille who doubtless identifies more with these aggressively anti-Christian sentiments than with the author of "Notre-Dame de Rheims," and yet the argument is again almost identical to those presented in opposition to the separation of church and state: The country church orients life in the village that surrounds it, and its destruction would have implications beyond the immediate effects felt only by the diminishing group of people who regularly attend Mass. Both the sentiment and the choice of words call to mind "Notre-Dame de Rheims," the silent ghost of a text that both is and is not the beginning of Bataille's work.

Story of the Ear

Mutilations abound in Bataille's work. In two articles written in the 1930s, he addresses the famous episode that took place on December 23, 1888, in Arles, when Vincent van Gogh took to his left ear with a razor. In "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh," published in 1930 in *Documents*, he examines the event in conjunction with two other cases of self-mutilation. The first concerns a less illustrious artist, Gaston F., who, as he was walking along Boulevard de Ménilmontant in the vicinity of Père-Lachaise, "*suddenly started staring at the sun and receiving from its rays the imperative order to rip off a finger*, without hesitation, without feeling any pain, bit down on his left index finger, . . . and ripped it off completely."[12] The young artist himself claimed that, in addition to the Sun's orders, the deed was inspired by a biography of Van Gogh, but this literary explanation is rejected entirely by Bataille, who sees no other possible connection between the two painters than their shared dependence on the Sun, making the mutilation the equivalent of a ritual sacrifice.[13]

The second case of self-mutilation referenced by Bataille is perhaps even gorier. A woman, having been committed to an asylum after a delirium of religious hallucinations, is found in her room one morning trying to gouge out her eyes with her bare hands. When asked about her motives, she "claimed to have heard the voice of God and to have seen a few moments later a man of fire: 'Give

10. Bataille, "Notre-Dame de Rheims," p. 612.
11. Georges Bataille, "[5 février 1938]," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 324. My emphasis.
12. Georges Bataille, "La mutilation sacrificielle et l'oreille coupée de Vincent Van Gogh," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 258. Bataille's emphasis.
13. Ibid., p. 259.

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me your ears, crack open your head,' said the ghost."[14] Having failed to deliver her ears, she decides to appease the solar deity's emissary with her eyes instead. Bataille finds this example crucial in that it illustrates the possibility of passing from a less essential form of ablation—the ear—to "the most horrifying form of sacrifice"—Oedipal enucleation.[15] His inclination to emphasize this substitution is easy to understand. The symbolic importance of the eye as an object of self-mutilation is incontestable, and its prominent role in Bataille's own writings needs no further elucidation. But what if one were to challenge his quick affirmation that a mutilated ear would have been any less essential? After all, in two of the three cases mentioned in the article, the ear is the intended object of sacrificial dismemberment. It appears strange, then, to conclude that it would be of lesser importance than the eye.

In "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh," Bataille cites Salomon Reinach's interpretation of the Prometheus myth, a self-referential system where the titan, the eagle feeding on his liver, and the Sun all form one creature who mutilates himself, first by ripping the Sun from its heavenly position and then again by swallowing his own liver only to spew it out through his open bowels, once again forcing himself to eat it. "There is, in fact," Bataille writes, "no reason to separate the ear of Arles or the index finger of Père-Lachaise from Prometheus's famous liver."[16] When he returns to the case of Van Gogh's self-mutilation in 1937, in the article "Van Gogh as Prometheus," published in *Verve*, the point of reference is, once again, as the title suggests, the Prometheus myth, but his comparative reading has shifted in a significant way. While his earlier interpretation focused on the corporeal reflexivity of self-mutilation, he now develops a theme that was only present *in potentia* in the earlier essay. Despite being at the heart of the argument of the previous essay, the importance of the Sun to the Prometheus myth was hardly explored at all. By the time he pens "Van Gogh as Prometheus," however, Bataille seems to have discovered the full potential of this myth as it relates to Van Gogh's self-mutilation: "For it was not only a bloody ear that Van Gogh removed from his own head . . . much more than an ear, Van Gogh who, since 1882, had thought it better to be Prometheus than to be Jupiter, tore from himself nothing less than a SUN."[17] The severed ear no longer represents the autophagy of the Aetos Prometheus but rather the theft of the heavenly fire that precedes it, transposing it from the obscure margins of ritual punishment to the central position of the transgression itself.

Contrary to Bataille's claims, the severed ear is central to the aesthetics of his interwar articles. The immediate implications of the metaphor equating the ear and the Sun are artistic. The Sun transforms Van Gogh's art; there is a before and an after to the incident in Arles. The Sun becomes a mystical force, dictating the

14. Ibid., p. 263.
15. Ibid., pp. 263–64.
16. Ibid., p. 268.
17. Georges Bataille, "Van Gogh Prométhée," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 498.

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rhythm and orientation of his art, a "sorcerer whose dance slowly stirs the crowd and carries it away in his movements."[18] A seemingly banal question might serve as a next step: What is the function of the ear? The outer ear, the cartilage appendage also known as the pinna, which is to say the feather, collects sounds and channels them into the ear canal. But symbolically, as the ear's only immediately visible part, it also represents the ear as a whole. Van Gogh's assault on the outer ear then ripples inward and becomes an aggression directed at the unassailable inner ear as well. These are the regions that house the vestibular system that is the center of our sense of spatial positioning. The ear is the locus of balance and orientation, and Van Gogh's solar-induced self-mutilation, as well as the failed attempt by the woman in the asylum, can be read in light of this fact. The destabilization of Van Gogh's art, when the entire visual field is drawn into the wild disorienting dance of the Sun, is symbolically prefigured by his attack on the center of balance. From that moment on, Van Gogh's painting is "*radiance, explosion, flames.*"[19]

This mutilation is in fact not, and could never be replaced by, an Oedipal enucleation, and the eye is conspicuously absent from "Van Gogh as Prometheus." The chain of associations that is established instead runs between "the ear, the asylum, the sun, the most spectacular of feasts and death."[20] Whereas the eye represents the Sun as a symbol of vision and knowledge—reason as opposed to unreason—what makes it possible for the ear to take its place is that, like the Sun, it is a means of orientation. Slicing the ear results in a complete upheaval of the stability and permanence of this world. It is a fragile balance that Van Gogh's symbolic self-mutilation disrupts, a stability that is guaranteed only by the great distance that separates Earth from the perpetual cataclysms of the Sun, and by the thin layer of the Earth's crust, "for the incandescence of lava is found in the depths of the earth."[21] When Bataille writes about Van Gogh's mutilated art that "the earth undulated like a rapid sea," the image he summons is not that of land turning into water, but of a flood of molten rock surging up from beneath.[22]

Because of its mazelike structure, the vestibular system of the inner ear is also frequently referred to as the labyrinth. It is therefore, as Hollier remarks, the center not only of orientation but also of disorientation. The ambiguity is reflected in Bataille's reversal of the labyrinth's metaphorical value, denouncing the Icarian aspirations of philosophy to escape on the wings of rational thought.[23] Indeed, it is after the incident in Arles that the Sun assumes its dominant position in Van Gogh's paintings, orienting the visual field through its rays, dictating every move

18. Ibid., p. 499.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., p. 498. The same preoccupation with an underground layer of lava, upon which the solid ground rests, can be found in an article by Michel Leiris entitled "Civilization," published in *Documents* almost a decade earlier. See Michel Leiris, "Civilisation," in *Brisées* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966, 1992), pp. 31–32.
22. Bataille, "Van Gogh Prométhée," p. 499.
23. Denis Hollier, "Le labyrinthe et la pyramide," in *La prise de la concorde*, p. 114.

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in the wild dance it incites. Rosalind Krauss speaks of two mythic cycles that dominate Bataille's aesthetics: on the one hand the "chthonic obscurity of the cave," the labyrinth where terror and blindness reign, and on the other the Sun, "that embodiment of the zenith and of light," which symbolizes the ideal of elevation but also the madness that ensues if one stares at it fixedly.[24] The labyrinth and the Sun embody opposite aspects of the sacred: the repulsive horrors of the sacred left and the elevated attraction of the sacred right. Yet the cycles of the Sun and the labyrinth are one and the same, Krauss writes, and artistic creation occurs "at the limit: where light turns to darkness, where life surrenders an image of death, where sight is extinguished in a revelatory moment which is the same as blindness."[25]

The limit where sight equals blindness—this is the goal of Icarus's flight. But the impossibility of an Icarian flight contained in the story of Van Gogh's severed ear differs from the myth. The assault on the labyrinth of the ear is not simply an attempt to escape its prison by laying it in ruins, nor is it a rejection of the orientational system of the Sun-labyrinth in favor of limitless chaos. One is not possible without the other, since the immediate target of the sacrificial gesture is never the labyrinth itself, which remains out of reach, but the pinna, the feather that lifts Icarus toward the sky. The labyrinth and the feather come together to form the ear, creating an inextricable unit of *errance* and escape, and any violence is by necessity directed at both. The severed ear is Bataille's answer to the call of the labyrinthine underworld, but the double bind of the ear's labyrinth-feather structure turns the descent into an ascent and vice versa.[26] Not only is Icarus's flight followed by the inevitable fall, but "the height of elevation in fact coincides with a sudden fall of unheard violence."[27] This is what constitutes the artistic condition. The flight is also the fall that splits the Sun in two—the one that lures Icarus to fly ever closer and the one that throws him back down to the ground.

The Sun of the ear is the Sun of balance and imbalance, the Sun that must not be seen, lest the observer be struck to the ground, for "staring at the sun relates to mental ejaculation, foaming at the mouth and epileptic fits."[28] It is the Sun of sudden and brutal falls. There is one other mention of epilepsy, the falling sickness, in Bataille's early work. It occurs in *Story of the Eye*, when Simone abruptly collapses, "her clothes all messed up, her ass in the air, as if she suffered from epilepsy."[29] Simone, of course, is situated squarely within the main thematic order

24. Rosalind Krauss, "Antivision," *October* 36 (Spring 1986), pp. 149–50.
25. Ibid., p. 150.
26. An inadvertent illustration of this reversal is provided when Denis Hollier cites the title of Gaëtan Picon's *The Fall of Icarus by Picasso* as *The Flight of Icarus by Picasso.* (Hollier, "Le labyrinthe et la pyramide," p. 108.) It belongs in that rare category of misquotes that enhance our understanding rather than diminish it, by drawing attention to the true nature of Bataille's Icarus, namely, that his flight and his fall are one and the same.
27. Georges Bataille, "Soleil pourri," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 232.
28. Ibid., p. 231.
29. Georges Bataille, "Histoire de l'oeil," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 20.

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of this story, which is that of the eye, so it is hardly surprising that her fall should appear to be nothing more than an act. She falls to the ground in spasms in order to create a moment of disruption. Her fall reads like a parody of another fall that occurs earlier in the story, when the pious and naive Marcelle makes her appearance and surprises Simone and the narrator in a compromising situation. Marcelle's fall, unlike Simone's imitation, is authentic and unprovoked. It is a genuine loss of balance, a failure of the ear.

Metaphorical Taxonomy

Roland Barthes speaks of two metaphorical chains that make up Bataille's *Story of the Eye*. On the one hand, there are the globular objects: the eye, the testicle, and the Sun; on the other, intertwined with these, there are the liquids: tears, urine, and sunlight.[30] If these individual metaphors are grouped together in what could be classified as the globular and the liquid families, the taxonomy can also be extended to two different metaphorical orders, both of which include their own versions of the Sun. There is the order of the eye, to which both of Barthes's metaphorical chains belong, and there is the order of the ear. Each order is defined by a different set of characteristics: The order of the eye relates to knowledge and reason, and the order of the ear to balance and orientation.

The metaphorical order that unites the Sun and the ear is most explicit in the essays on Van Gogh, but the Sun as a metaphor for a general principle of orientation can also be found elsewhere. In the 1938 article "The Obelisk," published in *Mesures*, Bataille reproduces almost verbatim Nietzsche's parable from *The Gay Science* about the madman in the town square. He abruptly cuts the parable short, however, erasing what is arguably the most compelling part of Nietzsche's argument. For what is truly noteworthy is not the madman's announcement that God is dead, but his sudden realization that he has spoken too soon and that the townspeople surrounding him cannot yet perceive the absence of the Sun, but instead continue to go about their business in its warm morning glow.

All of this is left out. In fact, Bataille makes a claim that amounts to the opposite. The disorientation that the madman speaks of already appears to be established truth. Human beings, he writes, exist in a state of individuality that reduces them to specks of dust, and what they fail to see is not the absence of a sacred center but, on the contrary, its invisible presence, the gravitational pull of an ordering principle that has not yet disappeared and that controls the orbital movements of each individual particle. It is as if the townspeople in Nietzsche's parable already believed that they were hurtling through space, away from all Suns, plunging continuously in every direction. They are all in a sense madmen. Instead it is the town square, where the announcement is made, that inherently contradicts their beliefs. "The Place de la Concorde is where the death of God must be announced and

30. Roland Barthes, "La métaphore de l'oeil," *Critique* 195–196 (1963), p. 772.

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shouted out, precisely because the obelisk is its calmest negation. A turbulent and empty human dust gravitates around it as far as the eye can see."[31] Just like Proust's steeples, the vertical directionality of the obelisk pulls the human imagination upwards "in [its] soaring elevation." The false sense of order becomes a false sense of disorder.

The madman's announcement is negated by the sacred topography of the town square, and Van Gogh's self-mutilation does not eliminate the pull of the sacred Sun. If anything, the Sun asserts its attraction with even more force, stringing out the artist's works along its rays. But the severed ear is also the incident that reveals the inaccessibility of the Sun. The intensified attraction is matched by an equally strong repulsion. The result of the assault on the labyrinth-feather of the ear is an interruption of the artist's ascendant trajectory, preventing him from ever reaching the gravitational core, including its outer limits, where the light of the Sun meets the darkness of the labyrinth. The artist still desires the sacred, but is forced to abandon the path that leads to it. It is reminiscent of Giorgio Agamben's description of acedia, an "anguished sadness and desperation" that results from the sense of awe that the intense contemplation of God inspires.[32] This in turn brings about a withdrawal from the divine; "it is the perversion of a will that wants the object, but not the way that leads to it, and which simultaneously desires and bars the path to his or her own desire."[33] Not only is there no weakening or extinction of desire, but, just like van Gogh's sacred Sun, its intensity appears only to increase. The attitude of the melancholic is a way to seize an unobtainable object of desire by feigning a loss when in fact nothing has been lost at all, either because the object was never in the possession of the melancholic to begin with or simply because the object never existed.

Van Gogh's self-mutilation symbolically and corporeally illustrates the withdrawal from the object of desire that is the cause of melancholia. Through the violent destruction of the ear that is the locus of both disorientation and orientation, of *errance* and escape, all forms of movement toward the sacred are rendered impossible. If the mutilation of the eye is a rejection of the primacy of sight, belonging to a paradigm of vision and blindness, where the true space of artistic creation is the limit where one turns into the other, the mutilation of the ear abolishes this limit altogether. The story of the ear thus reveals a different aspect of Bataille's thought, a metaphorical order based on refusal rather than experience. It is an attempt to grasp the ungraspable by embracing it in its absence, akin to the belief found in apophatic theology that the ineffable can only be approached through silence.

31. Georges Bataille, "L'obélisque," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 503.
32. Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 5.
33. Ibid., p. 6. Similarly, Barthes points to the difference between loss of faith and disinvestment in a note on acedia. See Roland Barthes, *Comment vivre ensemble: Simulations romanesques de quelques espaces quotidiens: Notes de cours et de séminaires au Collège de France, 1976–1977*, ed. Claude Coste (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 53.

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Agamben juxtaposes his elaborations on melancholia with a reading of Freud's 1927 article on fetishism, observing that what unites the fetishist and the melancholic is that they both succeed in surreptitiously appropriating the absent or unobtainable object by blocking the path that would force them to accept the impossibility of their desire, which is instead transferred to another object. The threat of castration that weighs heavily on the fetishist is also, according to C. F. B. Miller, at the heart of Bataille's account of van Gogh's self-mutilation. It represents a double bind, a desire to perfectly resemble the solar father who both demands this resemblance and forbids it.[34] But this is where the order of the ear comes into play. It becomes, as it were, an Alexandrian cut that promptly does away with the Gordian double bind of castration. Subordination is no longer the only alternative. Instead the desire can be projected onto a different object, creating a new trajectory that is no longer aimed at the Sun. The same function can be discerned in religious fetishes. William Pietz distinguishes a number of "basic themes that recur throughout the history of fetish discourse," one of which is "a fixed power to repeat an original event."[35] Part of the attractive power specific to the fetish object is that it provides a material manifestation of an event that is unrepeatable and no longer present. The fetish becomes a space of infinite repeatability, a space of presence through absence.

What emerges, then, is an undercurrent in Bataille's work, a silent mourning whose symbolic manifestation is the ear as opposed to the eye. The current has its origin in "Notre-Dame de Rheims," a text that was conceived under the sign of the mother, as Hollier notes, contrasting it against a later recollection of the same events of August 1914—when Bataille left Reims together with his mother, leaving his father and brother behind—this time recounted under the sign of the father in *The Little One*, from 1943.[36] The intimate connection between the enucleated eye and the memory of the blind father is addressed by the author himself in "Coincidences" at the end of *Story of the Eye*.[37] Analogously, it could be said that the silence of the severed ear recalls the silence enveloping "Notre-Dame de Rheims," the motherly cathedral for whom soldiers marched toward their deaths. The labyrinthine cathedral, with its nave and its aisles, with its ambulatory and its apse, towers over the city of Reims like the deaf ear of a giant.

34. "To cross the limit is to undergo castration; not to do so is to remain subordinate." (C. F. B. Miller, "Rotten Sun," *Art History* 34, no. 2 [2011], p. 408.) As it happens, one of the texts that Bataille planned to write, but never did, would also have dealt with the castration complex. See Denis Hollier, "About Some Books Which Bataille Did Not Write," trans. Boris Belay, *Parallax* 3, no. 1 (1997), p. 75. It is also worth noting that the sacred and the unconscious are brought together by Bataille as different forms of the *heterogenous*. See Georges Bataille, "La structure psychologique du fascisme," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, pp. 345–47. Needless to say, as the symbol of useless expenditure par excellence in Bataille's writings, the Sun—the object of the disavowed sacred desire—is also a manifestation of the heterogenous.

35. William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (1985), p. 10.

36. Hollier, "La métaphore architecturale," pp. 48–52.

37. Bataille, "Histoire de l'oeil," pp. 73–78.

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"You have heard [*ouï-dire*] of Reims, which was a great city on the plains of Champagne."[38] We now know that the author's first words were not about the eye of the father in *Story of the Eye*, but about the ear of the mother, and we know that with this *ouï-dire*, hearing was the first of the five senses to appear in his work. As if to signal the inevitability of the shift of focus toward vision, the same text ends in the domain of sight when the author declares that he "will never see a more splendid youth."[39] Yet hearing continues to be associated with the mother. It dominates the first pages of *My Mother*, which take place in a world entirely made of sound, rolling back and forth between silence and unintelligible speech, be it the father's muddled ramblings at the dinner table or the muffled voices of his parents' fighting that penetrate the bedroom wall. When sight is eventually restored, it is not the mother who appears but the father.[40]

The ear is the focal point of a series of attributes of the mother: the fetishism that Freud ascribes to the fear of castration, the melancholia that afflicted Bataille's own mother,[41] the loss of balance and the fall of Marcelle, whose piety is a rare glimpse of the mother in a story so overwhelmingly charged with the symbolism of the father. The ear is also the receptacle of the mother tongue, as Jacques Derrida notes when he sets up Nietzsche's German, the living mother tongue, against Latin, the dead language of the father. Whereas the father tongue is no longer spoken or heard and can only be acquired by means of the eyes, the mother tongue almost unnoticeably enters the mind through the ear.[42]

Hubris/Melancholia

"He walked onward," Georg Büchner writes about Lenz in his eponymous novella, "caring little one way or another, to him the path mattered not, now up, now down. He felt no fatigue, except sometimes it annoyed him that he could not walk on his head."[43] This is also the desire that drives Bataille: to wander aimlessly, not caring about the direction of his path. Disorientation equals orientation. On the horizontal plane, there is no escaping the labyrinth, and as it becomes the prison of its creator and his son Icarus, their only possibility of escape is along the vertical axis. As for Bataille, he shows no desire to leave the labyrinth at all. He is no Theseus; he does not seek to retrace his steps back to the exit. Nor is he interested in taking flight. When the Icarus myth appears in Bataille's writings on art and literature, its moral lesson has been subverted. It is an indictment of timidity and restraint, but, more importantly, it is a call to seek not the triumphant flight

38. Bataille, "Notre-Dame de Rheims," p. 611.
39. Ibid., p. 616.
40. Georges Bataille, "Ma mère," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 180.
41. See Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille, la mort à l'œuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 21.
42. This distinction can be found in *Otobiographies*, which fittingly revolves around the two main symbols of the ear and the Sun, focusing mainly on Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, which the philosopher, in Derrida's words, wrote in "the noontime of life," when the Sun is at its highest point. Like Bataille, Nietzsche also emphasizes the cohabitation in his own persona of the solar rise and fall.
43. Georg Büchner, *Lenz*, trans. Richard Sieburth (New York: Archipelago Books, 2004), p. 3.

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but the fall that inevitably follows. Against a naive belief in the existence of purity and truth, he presents the ambiguity and duality of the Cretan Sun.

When Bataille denounces André Breton's Icarian disposition in the polemical essay "The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* and *Surrealist*," Icarus lends himself to this insult only insofar as he incarnates an escapist sense of superiority more in line with the traditional reading of the myth. Yet it is clear that this tragic figure is not Bataille's Icarus. Later in the essay, he returns to an Icarus who, like Picasso in "Rotten Sun," secretly desires the punishment more than the deed, a mirror image of the mythological character.[44] Icarus's flight only makes sense to Bataille if the vectors of desire are reversed, and Breton's surrealism is objectionable precisely because this is not the case. Against the moral interpretation of the myth, Bataille paints a portrait of Icarus as a melancholic fetishist.[45] Contrary to his mythological namesake, this melancholy Icarus knows that the Sun is unobtainable and no longer aspires to reach it. His solar fetish is a desire to be violently struck down.

The emphasis on *errance* is then not the only reason to turn to Büchner's Lenz. Paul Celan remarks in his speech upon receiving the Georg Büchner Prize that "whoever walks on his head has heaven as an abyss beneath him."[46] And what is Bataille's reading of the myth if not a representation of Icarus on his head? What was above him is now below him. Instead of soaring into the heavens, supported by feathers and wax, this Icarus falls into the sky, precipitating toward an unobtainable Sun that is now at the bottom of an abyss, struggling to make his way back up to the ground.[47]

As the desire of the event is reversed and the morality of the Icarus myth is subverted, the flight is also detached from the notion of hubris. Walter Benjamin notes the incompatibility of melancholia and hubris in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, as he explores a turn toward melancholia and mourning that is concurrent with a transition between two philosophical paradigms, embodied by two different dramatic forms: the ancient Greek tragedy and the German *Trauerspiel*. The former is governed by a necessity of defiance that reveals itself in the agonistic structure of the play. Faced with the imminence of his death, the hero pleads his case,

44. Georges Bataille, "La 'vieille taupe' et le préfixe *sur* dans les mots *surhomme* et *surréaliste*," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 100.

45. The kinship between Icarus and the melancholic can also be sensed in the following words by Jean Starobinski: "A melancholic is one who, with more ease than others, rises to the highest thoughts; but if the black bile, despite its intensity, is consumed and cools down, it becomes glacial and is converted, in the words of Baudelaire, into 'black poison.'" (Jean Starobinski, *La mélancolie au miroir: Trois lectures de Baudelaire* [Paris: Julliard, 1989], p. 47.)

46. Paul Celan, "The Meridian: Speech on the Occasion of the Award of the Georg Büchner Prize," *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 407.

47. The reversal of the Icarus myth in Bataille's work is also noted by Jonathan Strauss. Although not addressed directly, his argument supports the analogy between Bataille's Icarus and the concept of acedia as examined by Agamben. Just like the medieval monks, whose affliction arises out of their contemplation of the divine, Bataille's sense of abjection is, according to Strauss, directly related to the overwhelming splendor of the sky. (Jonathan Strauss, "The Inverted Icarus," *Yale French Studies* 78 [1990], p. 121.)

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all while recognizing that death is already inherent in his person. This is the context in which Benjamin places hubris. "Only antiquity could know tragic *hubris*," he writes, "which pays for the right to be silent with the hero's life."[48] More specifically, the person who pays this price is Socrates, who announces the departure from the tragic in the moment of his death by renouncing the power of *logos*—fundamental to the tragic drama—and accepting his death sentence with silent equanimity. In tragic terms Socrates's resignation can only be understood as an instance of hubris, a scornful refusal to justify himself before the gods. But in this very same act Benjamin sees the inauguration of a post-tragic paradigm of mourning where terms like hubris have lost all meaning. The same silence that would be framed as tragic hubris is reinterpreted as an expression of melancholia.

The tragic hero resists death because he knows that his life "unfolds from death, which is not its end but its form."[49] Socrates, on the other hand, perceives death as something that he must endure but that remains alien to him. His resignation is therefore not absolute, but limited to the temporal world, and it implies a belief in a continued immortal existence. The new ideal that he represents cleaves more closely to the self-sacrificial forbearance that would later become a cornerstone of Christian virtue than to the belligerence of the tragic hero. Unlike the Christian martyr, however, the immortality that awaits Socrates is not in a heavenly afterlife but in the dissemination of his work, and for his work to survive it has to be written down. The promise of immortality that allows the regime of melancholia to supersede the tragic is thus already predicated on the impossibility of real survival, announcing the necessity to abandon speech in favor of writing. Survival can only take place in the substitute, the pharmakon; it relies on the infinite repeatability of the text as fetish. And whereas the Greek drama is presented as a singular "decisive cosmic achievement," the German *Trauerspiel* relies precisely on the fetishistic idea of infinite reiteration.[50]

Circumventing the tragic *agon* also means skirting the crucial moment of ritualized passing from the realm of the living to that of the dead, placing the martyr both in life and in the afterlife but never at the limit between them. It is the same silence that Plotinus advocates as the only means to approach what resists language, the same resignation that Agamben places at the origin of acedia. They all denounce the failure of *logos*, the inability of speech and reason to grasp the ineffable and the futility of engaging in the back-and-forth of dialogue. Silence and resignation form the melancholy unit of disengagement and immobility that shuns the moment of traversing the limit. It might seem strange to place Bataille in this tradition of disregard for transgression, but as Michel Foucault reminds us, the transgression that is of interest to Bataille does not rely on an opposition of terms.[51] It is not a violent triumph over the limitations of our being; it is not even a

48. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), p. 115. Emphasis in translation.
49. Ibid., p. 114.
50. Ibid., p. 119.
51. Michel Foucault, "Préface à la transgression," *Critique* 195–196 (1963), p. 756.

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challenge to these limits. Indeed, Bataille develops his concept of transgression against the idea of dialectical negation and goes out of his way to point to the interdependence of the limit and its transgression. "Transgression is not a negation of the taboo," he affirms, "but rather exceeds it and completes it."[52] The dismissal of *logos* that is the foundation of Bataille's search for non-knowledge is at the heart of the only form of transgression he acknowledges, which should be understood in the context of "a *negative* theology, founded on mystical experience," or in other words an adherence to the *via negativa* that ultimately reveals the absence of the object of desire.[53]

Oscillations

It is fitting that this melancholy transgression should be represented by the ear. Pascal Quignard writes in *The Hatred of Music* that "ears have no eyelids," and the immediacy and inevitability of sound remain unequaled in the visual domain.[54] We can close our eyes or avert our gaze, but we are exposed to sound like no other sensory stimulus. Perhaps this is also why, as Jean-Luc Nancy points out, the auditory is traditionally associated with esoteric and mystic knowledge, while vision symbolizes clarity and rational thought.[55] It represents the inescapability of our primordial fears. Sound passes through obstacles in a way that light does not. This is why, in *My Mother*, Pierre, who is hiding in his room after dinner, can hear his parents' fighting, although they are hidden from sight. The sound inexorably penetrates, first the walls of the room, then the tympanum of his ears. But it is a penetration without penetration. The immediacy of sound is illusory. When our eyes are open they are like wide-open vessels into which light is constantly poured. The ears, on the other hand, receive sound only through the mediation of the eardrum. "Listening means being *at the same time* both outside and inside."[56]

Hearing is therefore the sense of melancholia par excellence. Vision ruptures the limit between our being and the world as light punctures the eye and penetrates our body through the pupil. Hearing, however, is a transgression of the limit without rupture. The tympanum, "this strange limit, which is not a limit,"[57] remains whole

52. Georges Bataille, "L'érotisme," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 10 (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 66.

53. Ibid., p. 28.

54. Pascal Quignard, *La haine de la musique* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1996), p. 118. This observation is also made by Adorno in *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, contrasting the passivity of hearing against the necessary volition of sight. The notion of an entirely passive ear is rejected by Roland Barthes in "Écoute" and by Peter Szendy, who writes that "just because the ear has no eyelids, it is not reduced to simple exposure, to a mere panic opening before everything that happens to it." (Peter Szendy, *Sur écoute: Esthétique de l'espionnage* [Paris: Minuit, 2007], p. 48.) The fact that listening can also take the form of an activity does not, however, change the reversal of mediacy and immediacy that remains a fundamental difference between the eye and the ear.

55. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Être à l'écoute," in *L'écoute*, ed. Peter Szendy (Paris: Harmattan, 2000), p. 276.

56. Ibid., p. 287. Despite arguing against Adorno's passivity of hearing, Szendy comes close to this ambiguity of being outside and inside at once when he affirms with Barthes that in our day, it is no longer possible to clearly distinguish, in the act of hearing, between the one who speaks and the one who listens. (Szendy, *Sur écoute*, p. 51.)

57. Jacques Derrida, "Tympan," in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), p. IX.

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and merely vibrates at the frequency of the transgression, allowing the sound to exist both outside and inside. A perforated eardrum does not transmit sound, just like a taboo that is abolished does not bring us closer to the sacred sphere that it was set up to protect. Likewise, the metaphorical order of the ear does not seek to pierce through the limit, to perforate the ear, but rather to be simultaneously within and without, to reach the Sun by giving up the moment of transgression, to transcend the limits of being by affirming the impossibility of doing so.

Bataille's use of the Icarus myth hinges on a reversal of perspectives similar to Benjamin's reading of the death of Socrates. In addition to the reversal he signals in "Rotten Sun," there is a departure from the Romantic interpretation of the myth, which cultivated a narcissism of persecution and suffering by portraying the artist as a genius rising above the crowd and being struck down, "the man chosen and the man fated to suffer."[58] Romantic literature became a battleground for two archetypal representations of the artist—the languorous and passive hero of the eighteenth century, incapacitated by *mal du siècle*, and his opposite, the passionate hero who sought to impose his personality on the world—as illustrated by Rastignac's having to "choose between the satanic revolt of Vautrin and the Christlike resignation of old Goriot."[59] Bataille's Icarus—like Benjamin's Socrates—embodies both types in one single event that can interchangeably be described as one or the other, depending on the vantage point of the observer. Satanic revolt equals Christlike resignation. The saturnine shades of melancholia are home to the exuberance of saturnalian revelries. Like Baudelaire's "Saturnine book," Bataille's work is at once both "orgiastic and melancholic."[60] Icarus's flight becomes his fall, but when he surges back toward the Earth, the solar desire projected onto the ground provokes a sudden eruption of lava, causing it to undulate "like a rapid sea."[61] The Earth is now the unreachable Sun; the fetish is the original object of desire. Suspended between two Suns, Icarus neither flies nor falls.

The fetish takes the place of the sacred object of desire, not in the incomplete sense scorned by Kant, but by becoming its origin.[62] It was always more original than the sacred yearning itself. As Sarah Kofman notes, Freud's fetish serves as a substitute for nothing more than an earlier substitute, hiding nothing more than an absence. Fetishism is not so much about substitution as it is about oscillation "between a gesture mastering the oscillation and a gesture that rattles and solicits all oppositions, carrying with it in its drift, among others, the opposition of fetish/non-fetish, substitute/thing itself, masculine/feminine."[63]

The ear is always about oscillation. Before mutilation, the tympanum vibrates

58. Maurice Z. Shroder, *Icarus: The Image of the Artist in French Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 31.

59. Ibid., p. 39.

60. Charles Baudelaire, "Épigraphe pour un livre condamné," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 137.

61. Bataille, "Van Gogh Prométhée," p. 499.

62. See Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 111.

63. Sarah Kofman, "Ça cloche," in *Les fins de l'homme: À partir du travail de Jacques Derrida: Colloque de Cerisy, 23 juillet–2 août 1980* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), p. 100.

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and the acoustic oscillation allows the inside to become the outside, the labyrinth to become the feather. As an object of self-mutilation, the ear stands for the destruction of both the labyrinth and the feather, suspending Icarus in an endless oscillation between the Sun and the ground, which becomes another Sun. In a sense, the act of mutilation therefore accomplishes nothing. There is no transformation and no transgression. Like the eardrum itself, the act merely reproduces and amplifies an oscillation that was already present. It only refers back to itself. This is why Bataille writes that there is no reason to separate the severed ear from Prometheus's liver. Both events are eminently self-referential and self-enclosed. It is not a case of "casting *out of oneself* a part of the self."[64] And this is probably why Bataille, for whom sacrifice at the time holds a fascination beyond measure, seems reluctant to accept the importance of a severed ear unless it can be brought back to the notion of ocular enucleation. What Bataille senses, but is unable to articulate, is that the severed ear is not a sacrificial gesture, because there is no rupture of the self. In this sense the ear does not only evoke the inescapability of the gravitational force of the sacred but also paradoxically prefigures the impossibility of sacrifice that Nancy ascribes to the absence of a sacred outside to our finite being. Bataille needs to be corrected, Nancy writes, "withdrawn from the slightest tendency towards sacrifice."[65] It should be clear by now that this correction begins with the melancholia that surrounds the sacred. It begins with the fetishistic oscillation that stems from the implicit admission that the sacred is both all too present and always already absent. The correction begins with an attunement as the tympanum harmonizes with the vibrations of the outside, a penetration without penetration that reflects what Nancy elsewhere calls "the sacred stripped of the sacred."[66]

Nancy also writes that Bataille never advocates the return of the sacred. But this is because the sacred never disappeared, and because it was never there, just like Bataille's first stumbling steps as an author, the forever absent panegyric to Notre-Dame de Reims, whose presence nevertheless persists in the strain of melancholia that runs through his work. This is also why Bataille's reading of Nietzsche's parable can state the opposite as if it were the same. The sacred is absent to the townspeople who believe that it is present and it is present to those who believe that it is absent. The same is true for the notion of the sacred in Bataille's work. Its presence is constantly reaffirmed by the author himself but always in another form—as violence, eroticism, art, community. It is never more than a word that no longer denotes the sacred itself, a word that, as Maurice Blanchot writes, "only serves to hide the fact that it cannot say anything."[67] This is the gravitational force of the sacred, its orienting principle. This is the profound melancholia that attaches to the idea of the sacred: not that it should or should not be mourned, not that we are soaring into the Sun or plunging continuously through space, but that we are capable of neither, only of suspended oscillation.

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64. Bataille, "La mutilation sacrificielle et l'oreille coupée de Vincent Van Gogh," p. 266.
65. Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Unsacrificeable," trans. Richard Livingston, *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991), p. 36.
66. Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986), p. 86.
67. Maurice Blanchot, "Le grand refus," in *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 51.