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**‘We Conserve Nothing:’**

**Nietzschean Excess and Bataillean Insufficiency**

*A labyrinthine man never seeks the truth, but only his Ariadne.*

*He is not me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster.”*

The cover of the first issue of the journal *Acephale* (headless)—written by Bataille as a radical left response to right-Fascist Nietzscheanism—features a drawing by Andre Masson, representing a headless man ready to carry out a human sacrifice. Bataille’s description of the acephalic figure in “The Sacred Conspiracy” evokes a headless being, “anthropomorphic but incomplete;” arms outstretched in a cruciform posture, hands bearing a blade and a flaming sacred heart, intestines visibly churning with a gaping torso, and with a skull in place of the genitals.[[1]](#endnote-1) For Bataille, the acephalic man expressed sovereignty and an identification with Nietzsche’s *Ubermensch*. Interpreters of Bataille, namely Foucault and—following him—Jeremy Biles, have argued that Bataille’s acephalic community springs from the sovereignty gained after the Nietzschean death of God. Indeed, Foucault’s “Preface to Transgression” argues that Bataille’s erotic politics and inner experience are “derive[d] from nothing else than … the death of God.”[[2]](#endnote-2) This paper will argue instead that we should read Nietzsche’s staging of woman as the undecidability between truth and deception as the real core of Bataille’s Nietzschean influence. Following Derrida’s reading of Bataille’s notion of *sovereignty* in “From Restricted to General Economy” as “the simulation of meaning in play,”[[3]](#endnote-3) which links form and content inextricably, I will argue that Nietzsche’s influence stems from his epistemological claim to truth as dissimulation. Nietzsche’s sliding (*glissement*) together of style and writing and collapse of distinction between truth and interpretation, I will argue, finds an adoptive paternity in Bataille’s excessive economy of impossible community. By rethreading the motif of Ariadne as it leads through the “tertium datur”[[4]](#endnote-4) of gender difference in Nietzsche’s *Dionysus Dithyrambs* to the path between rejection and assimilation in Bataille’s labyrinth of thought, I will show that the dissolution of the limit between style and writing at work in Nietzsche’s corpus is politicized in Bataille’s *l’ecriture du corps.* Primarily, my project will engagewith the work of castration in Nietzsche’s texts and its reconfiguration in Bataille’s *acephalic* project.

Influenced by Nietzsche, Marx, and Sade, Bataille’s pornographic fiction of the 1920s developed in the 1930’s into an explicitly political agenda. The paternity of Bataille’s excessive, excremental, and surrealist fiction of the 1920s--once dissimulated by surnames because of its obscenity—was unveiled by the 1930s with the publication of Bataille’s “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* [Superman] and *Surrealist* (1929).” Bataille’s political essays demonstrate an ambiguous and complex politics, which attempts to reconfigure the erotic and libidinal energy piqued by Fascism *against* Fascism. Bataille’s politics of community arose from his reading of and identification with Nietzsche, who offered an unbounded sovereignty excessive to politics and irreducible to a political party. Bataille’s experiments with community exceeded both left and right appropriations of Nietzsche, and in 1936 developed into *Acephale* (headless)--Bataille’s *Acephale* community would seek sovereignty rather than power, and attempt a release of unrestricted libidinal energies “beyond the control of any head or leader (especially the *Fuhrer).*”[[5]](#endnote-5)

In 1935, Bataille formed the anti-fascist group ‘Contre-Attaque’ (Counter-Attack) with the purpose of countering the Fascist appropriation of Nietzsche based on “an emotional attachment to the past,” and the Left appropriation of Nietzsche based on “rational principles”—both ‘restricted economies’ seeking to assimilate Nietzsche’s mobilization of the will and the aggressive instincts into a “servile” economy of “use value.”[[6]](#endnote-6)According to Bataille, however, “NIETZSCHE’S DOCTRINE CANNOT BE ENSLAVED.”[[7]](#endnote-7) The teachings of Nietzsche, according to Bataille, “mobilize the will and the aggressive instincts”[[8]](#endnote-8) in a movement of affirmation irreducible to servility and utility. Fascism drew on the freedom and energy of Nietzsche’s thought but only in service of a restricted economy of use value. Bataille saw in the political experiments of the ‘30s a desire to seize power through a “pseudo-Nietzschean will to power” which, due to the uncontrollable excess of Nietzsche’s text, produced a world where “life is tied down and stabilized in an endless servitude.”[[9]](#endnote-9) In contradistinction to the employment of Nietzschean excess for political servility, Bataille sought to destabilize the possibility of appropriating Nietzsche into a restricted economy of anaesthetized control. Bataille saw in Nietzsche's Dionysian genealogy a wellspring of impossibility capable of freeing the libidinal energies of the mass movements in France:

Reading Nietzsche during this period is not a source of hope for Bataille but an experience of a free and mobile thought, an irruptive laughter that shatters the self. Bataille would inscribe this experience as an inner experience, not an *internal* experience but an inner experience of such intensity that it would make identity flow away.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Bataille sees in Nietzsche’s style, heterogeneous and impure to both literature and philosophy, a violent Dionysian energy capable of resisting “fascist appropriations of Nietzsche to a politics of purity.”[[11]](#endnote-11) The liberating power of Nietzsche’s thought is laden in the unreadable heterogeneity of his text, which resists a stable interpretation, end, or use-value. The paradigmatic doctrine of the impossibility of the text, for Bataille, was the eternal recurrence. Bataille notes in “Nietzche and the Fascists” that what fascist and Nazi readings consistently failed to read in Nietzsche was the “pathos-laden experience”[[12]](#endnote-12) of the eternal recurrence. The eternal return “unmotivates the moment and frees life of ends—thus first of all destroys it”[[13]](#endnote-13) The elimination of the homogeneity of a totalitarian end resides in the heterogeneity of style in Nietzsche’s texts—which dons masks and utilizes a dissimulating, paradoxical play in what Bataille describes in the *Solar Anus* as a “purely parodic” and “circular movement.”[[14]](#endnote-14) This parodic circulation erupts sense and possibility, precluding any attempt at an asphyxiation of the free air of Nietzsche’s text, while “Nazism imposes the image of a unified people upon the dispersion of the labyrinth of Nietzsche’s thought, giving that labyrinth a sense.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

The labyrinth of thought is a recurring motif in Bataille’s corpus, and subsists in dialogue with his (anti)political texts on Nietzsche. The image of the labyrinth is a stylistic metaphor, a metaphor for style, and an image of existence determined by what Bataille calls “a principle of insufficiency.”[[16]](#endnote-16) As Bataille elaborates in ‘The Labyrinth’ (1935-6), this principle of insufficiency is a decentered prefiguration of becoming—“a network of endless waves that renew themselves in all directions”[[17]](#endnote-17)—structured by ‘absolute insufficiency’ and so an auto-deconstructing structure. The labyrinth illustrates the principle of insufficiency which dominates all of being, rendering no being complete and thus always open toward difference:

Bataille chooses the image of the labyrinth to describe this state because it captures the effect of disorientation caused by insufficiency, but at the same time the labyrinth is never sufficient and is always in relation to an exterior which cannot be completely specified in advance. The most powerful example of the principle of insufficiency is language, because language imposes itself on us and puts us in relation to others.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Bataille’s image of the labyrinth deconstructs the stability of identity—introducing difference into the body as language to a text, tracing the way in which “being depends on the mediation of words, which cannot merely present it arbitrarily as ‘autonomous being’, but which must present it profoundly as ‘being in relation.’”[[19]](#endnote-19) Indeed, Bataille contends, the image of the labyrinth itself is inscribed and written onto bodily existence through the mediation of language—“One need only follow, for a short time, the traces of the repeated circuits of words to discover, in a disconcerting vision, the labyrinthine structure of the human being.”[[20]](#endnote-20) The principle of sufficiency is repeatedly sought after by the necessarily insufficient being as a parodic return to a maternal origin—the insufficient being emerges “out of an inconceivable void into the play of beings, as a lost satellite of two phantoms (one with a bristly beard, the other softer, her head decorated with a bun).”[[21]](#endnote-21) The decentered locus of insufficiency—a locus disclosed by language through which we persist in believing in the idea of separate autonomous beings—is castrated, unable to regain the self-sufficiency granted by the ‘lost satellite of two phantoms.’ The only guiding thread of Bataille’s labyrinth is ‘the impossible,’ a broken thread with which we tread through the “foggy labyrinth”[[22]](#endnote-22) of difference, eternally seeking like a lost child “knots and concentrations” of power able to replace the “all-powerful beings who took care of him:” in cities, empires, God or Gods the insufficient being orbits “around a nucleus where being hardens.”[[23]](#endnote-23) The insufficient being, always already castrated by the auto-deconstructing structure of the labyrinth, is faced with the disoriented space of inner experience. Because of the decentered, disoriented nature of the space of inner experience, Ariadne’s broken thread,[[24]](#endnote-24) the “guiding thread of impossibility”[[25]](#endnote-25)is the only thread that can lead to the destabilized center of the labyrinth of experience—a “central insufficiency.”[[26]](#endnote-26) This labyrinthine (de)structure of inner experience—its disorienting ecstasies and impossibility—is identified by Bataille as constitutive of Nietzsche’s thought *and* of its misappropriation by Fascism:

Official Fascism has been able to use invigorating Nietzschean maxims, displaying them on walls; its brutal simplifications must nevertheless be sheltered from the too-free, too-complex, and too-rending Nietzschean world. This prudence seems to be based, it is true, on an outmoded interpretation of Nietzsche’s attitude, but this interpretation has been carried out, and it has been because the movement of Nietzsche’s thought constitutes, *without any hope of appeal,* a *labyrinth*, in other words, the very opposite of the *directives* that current political systems demand from their sources of inspiration.

Nietzsc he’s attention was drawn to the conditions beyond political formations and a mythos beyond the limit of confined or defined conditions. Fascism’s understanding of myth, “linked by Baumler to an intense feeling for the past is countered by the Nietzschean *myth* of the *future.*”[[27]](#endnote-27) That is, Nietzsche’s labyrinthine thought seeks the impossible center of insufficiency without mourning its maternal past—Nietzsche’s Zarathustra , “who demanded to be disowned” was the paradoxical “CHILD OF THE FUTURE,” [[28]](#endnote-28) the paradoxical child of central insufficiency, “THE MONSTER IN THE NIGHT OF THE LABYRINTH”[[29]](#endnote-29)—difference. Nietzsche’s child of the future, in Bataille’s reading, lacks a fixed origin or “a point of presence,”[[30]](#endnote-30) and is contrasted to the Fascist myth of the child “covered with the past, covered with fatherlands like a man is covered with wounds.”[[31]](#endnote-31) Bataille’s acephalic politics calls for a liberation of life from the past and from any system of administrative measurements—it is a politics of absolute sovereignty guided by the broken thread of impossibility through the labyrinth of inner experience. This inner experience is itself in flux and homeless in response to the demands of the “passionate and tumultuous movement that forms life” for the “strange, the new, [and] the lost”[[32]](#endnote-32)—a politics of impossibility because these forces and demands can only be structurally contained in moments of brief illusion. Bataille prefaces his identification of Nietzsche’s child of the future with a reference to Section 337 of *The Gay Science,* “We Who Are Homeless,” an aphorism Bataille credits with “[summing] up more precisely than any other Nietzsche’s attitude toward contemporary political reality.”[[33]](#endnote-33) In this aphorism, which reads as an uncanny manifesto for Bataille’s *Acephale* community, Bataille finds an elaboration of a “sect or ‘order’ whose dominating will creates a free human destiny, tearing it away from the rational enslavement of production, as well as from “the irrational enslavement to the past.”[[34]](#endnote-34) *Acephale* would attempt to free the energies of Nietzsche’s ‘dominating will” from the restricted economy of ‘rational production:’

We ‘conserve’ nothing; neither do we want to return to any past; we are by no means ‘liberal’; we are not working for ‘progress’; we don’t need to plug our ears to the market-place’s sirens of the future; what they sing—‘equal rights’, ‘free society’, ‘no more masters and no servants’—has no allure for us. We hold it absolutely undesirable that a realm of justice and concord should be established on earth (because it would certainly be the realm of the most profound levelling down to mediocrity and *chinoiserie*); we are delighted by all who love, as we do, danger, war, and adventure; who refuse to compromise, to be captured, to reconcile, to be castrated…”[[35]](#endnote-35)

Bataille’s labyrinth of undecidability “alone encompasses the numerous possibilities of life”[[36]](#endnote-36) called for by the exigencies of nature—of the earth; of the body and its linguistic inscription of the impossibility of self-sufficiency. The path of the labyrinth leads between rejection and assimilation to the center of incoherence where the broken thread of Ariadne embroiders “the inevitable crumbling of the soundest constructions.”[[37]](#endnote-37) The decentered network of ‘endless waves’ crumbling the structure of Bataille’s labyrinth is a thought of difference—“an unstable putting into relation, the ‘*nonlogical difference’* of matter that Bataille discusses at the end of ‘The Notion of Expenditure.’”[[38]](#endnote-38) The economy of nonlogical difference is a ‘general economy’ of excess and fluid exchanges, “willing loss” and the expenditure of energies condensed in a single head (*monocephale*) “in a flowing away that would no longer be controlled.”[[39]](#endnote-39) Bataille’s political incorporation of a Nietzschean ‘inner-experience’ sought to deconstruct and liberate the body from the ‘restricted economy’ of totalitarian/*monocephalic* power into a ‘general economy’ of *acephalic/polycephalic* excess. The restricted economy of logical difference is a structure of intelligible opposition, it is the “*Aufhebung* [which] profits from everything, wastes nothing,”[[40]](#endnote-40) and reduces human activity to processes of production and conservation. The general economy, on the other hand, is concerned with *differance*—with the excremental excess that is left behind, with what cannot be profited from. The general economy is the other of economy, it is “something heterogenous both to productivity and unproductiveness” [[41]](#endnote-41) which takes place in dissimulation and at the withdrawal of meaning. Bataille’s distinction between a ‘restricted’ and a ‘general economy’ largely develops out of a dialogue with Hegel, whose “concern for negativity, would be a restricted economy. The distinction between restricted and general economy is not a relationship of negativity. Bataille’s general economy is a “Hegelianism without reserve,”[[42]](#endnote-42) an economy of difference unassimilable to universality or to particular contexts—it is neither “transcendental nor empirical:”

Instead general economy is specific to a particular play of forces, so it is never an abstract universal, but it is always tracing the excess of this play of forces, and so it can never be reduced to the empirical description of this play of forces. This is an economy of difference where difference does not settle into a stable structure of opposition. [[43]](#endnote-43)

A general economy is attentive to otherness--to the marginal excess of commerce and relationships of negativity constitutive of restricted economy. A general economy, Derrida avers in “From Restricted to General Economy,” must attend to the other of philosophy without it being subsumed beneath philosophy’s panoptical discourse. This proto-deconstructive economy requires “an accent on simulacrum and subterfuge,”[[44]](#endnote-44) and must uncover “the limit of discourse and the beyond of absolute knowledge.”[[45]](#endnote-45) Like the seductive ‘we’ of Nietzsche’s above aphorism, the general economy ‘conserves nothing,’ and refuses to be castrated by a *monocephalic* power. The instability of the general economy which wills waste and unassimilable heterogeneity, disrupts the reorganization of this waste into a new, rational structure:

Bataille’s folding of the discourse of philosophy comes from his feeling of community with Nietzsche. In his community with Nietzsche the communal logic of philosophy is shaken, philosophy can no longer be sustained as a community of seekers of knowledge without provoking hilarity. By forcing philosophy back into the waste products which it tries to put to use, Bataille is disrupting the tendency of philosophy to appropriate those waste products in new intellectual constructions…At this moment community is no longer a closed experience, no longer the accumulation of power or knowledge but is opened by a sovereign generosity which is the opening to sovereign experience.[[46]](#endnote-46)

If the labyrinth is the image of an anti-essential destructuring of all structure, then Bataille’s ‘general economy’ is the dispersal of energies excessive to the limits of logical difference. The ‘general economy’ is the force of excess that overflows and floods any fixed origin or center of a conceptual structure—the labyrinth, marked and graphed by language, is necessarily open to difference, exceeding and destabilizing any fixed point of stability or sufficiency. The labyrinth’s path between rejection and assimilation, guided by the broken thread of undecidability, is opened by the general economy of difference into ‘a sovereign generosity.’ The castrated wanderer of the labyrinth—castrated because irreparably severed from a maternal point of sufficiency—irreparably opened toward difference by language, is opened up by impossibility to sovereignty. The labyrinthine destructuring of inner experience is opened by communication and “thrown outside of itself, beyond itself; it ruins itself in an undefined throng of possible existences.”[[47]](#endnote-47)

This is a Nietzschean sovereignty—a sovereignty appropriated in community with Nietzsche in the throng of impossibility, an *acephalic* freedom of libidinal excess acquired at the point of the “fissure of sexuality” (Foucault 70), where the excremental energy of difference—rejected from a maternal origin and unassimilable to a restricted economy of use value—exceeds the limits of a concept or structure. This excess is marked upon the body by language as a castration from the womb of sufficiency. In “From Restricted to General Economy,” Derrida emphasizes Bataille’s concept of sovereignty as that which links form and content inextricably.[[48]](#endnote-48) Derrida follows Foucault in calling Bataille’s sovereignty a “nonpositive affirmation”[[49]](#endnote-49)—that is, by attending to the unassimilable and the different, Bataille’s general economy of excess resists a positive assimilation into Hegel’s *Aufheben.* Bataille’s ‘sovereignty’ is the exceeding of limitations—including those strictures imposed by the Hegelian dialectic. For Derrida, Bataille’s sovereignty exceeds Hegel through laughter, a “renunciation of recognition,”[[50]](#endnote-50) and his conception of difference taken beyond any dialectical recuperation.

Important for our analysis is Derrida’s attention to the importance of style in Bataille’s writing which, according to Denis Hollier “positions [Bataille’s] writings among the major events in twentieth-century language; a throttled, ragged voice, struggling in the labyrinth of language.”[[51]](#endnote-51) Derrida argues that “Bataille’s writing … does not tolerate the distinction of form and content”[[52]](#endnote-52)—for Derrida, the relationship between form and content is constitutive of the general economy of his thought, and is what allows Bataille to exceed Hegelianism. Bataille’s sovereignty, “taken literally as formless content, is Hegelian, Derrida says. But to properly read Bataille’s text is to see how Bataille’s formal discourse makes the normal meaning of these terms excessive.”[[53]](#endnote-53) Bataille’s form ‘slides’ into its content through the introduction of an irreducible dissymmetry of meaning and an “accent on simulacrum and subterfuge”[[54]](#endnote-54)—that is, Bataille subverts the restricted economy of Hegelianism through the parodic play at work in his anti-conceptual *glissement* (sliding). The simulation of meaning in Bataille’s discourse collapses the distinction between form and content—a collapse without which Bataille’s general economy would be recuperated into a dialectical Hegelianism. This collapse is manifest in Bataille’s sovereignty which eludes conceptual strictures. Sovereignty is “an anti-concept,” a headless signifier “prone to fundamental irregularity”[[55]](#endnote-55) which displaces the mastery implicit in Bataille’s own concepts. Both in content and form, the ‘anti-concept’ of sovereignty is a force of disorientation felt after the “unchaining of earth from its sun.”[[56]](#endnote-56) Bataille’s stylistic ‘sliding’, I would argue, is adopted from Nietzsche’s heterogeneous and parodic play, who “attempts to undermine philosophical discourse from within by undermining his own discourse. He [Nietzsche] maintains that the active and strong writer is one who can laugh, particularly at himself.”[[57]](#endnote-57)Elsewhere, and at work in Derrida’s reading of Nietzsche in *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles,* Derrida adopts Nietzsche’s (and Bataille’s) strategy of self-parody:

He suggests that self-parody is necessary for any deconstruction that opens up some other possibilities because without parody we are merely replacing one side of a hierarchical dualism with the other. In some places Derrida characterizes self-parody as a type of auto-castration that emasculates philosophy. Through these strategies of auto-castration, Derrida suggests that philosophy is feminized.

This operation of auto-castration is central to the self-parodic, feminizing play of heterogeneity in Nietzsche’s text which, like the feminine, gives itself for what it is not. Auto-castration is a stylistic self-violence, and like Nietzsche’s ascetic priest ‘whose no to life becomes a series of ‘tender yeses,’ deconstruction’s self-violence becomes a twisted self-affirmation.”[[58]](#endnote-58) The double-movement of affirmation that Derrida reads in Bataille’s laughing subversion of the restricted economy of Hegel’s dialectic is likewise present in Nietzsche’s parodic revaluation of all values. Sovereignty, insofar as it is not assimilable to a restricted economy of dialectics or into the synthetic head (*monocephale*)of Aufhebun, must take on a meaning that is “no longer an impotent negation,”[[59]](#endnote-59) but a transformation of negativity through affirmation—through laughter, difference, or a ‘nonpositive’ affirmation. This sovereignty, I would argue, is a (deconstructive) work of auto-castration which is always dislodging itself from maternal sufficiency or conceptual security. Sovereignty in Bataille must be “something other than troubled negation,” and this otherwise than negation Bataille locates in the *Acephale*, the figure of the ‘THE HEADLESS COMMUNITY:’

The only society full of life and force, the only free society, *is the bi-* or *poly-cephalic* society that gives the fundamental antagonisms of life a constant explosive outlet, but one limited to the richest forms. The duality or multiplicity of heads tends to achieve in the same movement the *acephalic* character of existence, because the very principle of the head is the reduction to unity, the reduction of the world to God.[[60]](#endnote-60)

The libidinal force of sovereignty is released by the be-heading of “every man’s VATERLAND (Fatherland)” and replaced by the “Nietzschean KINDERLAND” of the future. This KINDERLAND is populated by the paradoxical children of the future that lack a fixed origin, and takes on “a meaning that is no longer impotent negation”[[61]](#endnote-61) However, the be-heading of the Father of the VATERLAND must occur as more than a merely negative challenge by the KINDERLAND. In other words--following the collapse in distinction between form and content in Bataille’s writing-- the HEADLESS community of general economy must be generated out of a sovereign operation of auto-castration. The headless *Acephale* must at the same time divide itself by undermining its own unity into a ‘*bi* or *poly-cephalic*’ figure. Otherwise, *Acephale* would not escape the game of castration, and would be restricted by an economy of Hegelian negation. Derrida performs a similar strategy of avoiding castration through auto-castration in *Glas:*

If I write to texts at once, you will not be able to castrate me. If I delinearize, I erect. But at the same time I divide my act and my desire. I mark the division, and always escaping you, I simulate unceasingly and take my pleasure nowhere. I castrate myself—I remain myself thus—and I “play at coming.”[[62]](#endnote-62)

This ‘playing at coming’ and work of auto-castration is the ‘feminine operation’ that Derrida associates with Nietzsche in *Spurs,[[63]](#endnote-63)* and as Kelly Oliver notes in *Womanizing Nietzsche,* is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s “description of woman as the actress who ‘gives herself for,’ ‘gives herself airs,’ ‘even as she gives herself.’”[[64]](#endnote-64) In order for the *acephalic* KINDERLAND of sovereignty to exceed an ‘impotent negation’ of the VATERLAND, it must subsist within the labyrinth of destabilizing insufficiency and constantly renew itself. It must ‘simulate unceasingly’ and ‘take its pleasure nowhere,’ because, according to Bataille: “Sovereignty is NOTHING.”[[65]](#endnote-65) Sovereignty persists in the labyrinth of instability and flux, it is “the object which eludes us all, which nobody has seized and which nobody can seize for this reason: we cannot possess it, like an object, but we are doomed to seek it”[[66]](#endnote-66)—in other words, Bataille’s sovereignty is the labyrinthine experience of disorientation that severs the possibility of a sovereign or sufficient subject. Bataille both writes and erases the possibility of sovereignty, the object of desire ‘which eludes us all.’ Sovereignty, like the question of woman in Nietzsche’s text, suspends the opposition of true and non-true[[67]](#endnote-67) /free and un-free through dissimulation:

One should have more respect for the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties. Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not letting us see her reasons? Perhaps her name is—to speak Greek—*Baubo?[[68]](#endnote-68)*

The veil that covers truth persists out of an epistemological necessity—the truth of the veil is that it covers nothing—a void, truth itself *is* this dissimulation. In “Castration Envy,” Clayton Koelb argues that the crucial figures of power and creativity in Nietzsche’s texts are ‘male mothers’—figures of castration that appear in the figure of woman and garner their power from the absence of the phallus: “as the figure of castration, woman thus becomes the object of castration envy.”[[69]](#endnote-69) Discussing aphorism 59 of the *Gay Science,* Koelb argues that in Nietzsche’s figuration of nature as woman (who urgently hides what she lacks), “the castrated body is not the locus of a loss of power” but “the feminine body of nature is the most potent force imaginable—and not merely in spite of but to a large extend because of the void at its center.”[[70]](#endnote-70) Further, following Derrida’s analysis of the (castrated) woman of affirmation,[[71]](#endnote-71) Koelb argues that woman-as-truth/woman-as-life is necessarily castrated because “power resides in the place of castration.”[[72]](#endnote-72) The castrated woman, like Bataille’s insufficient subject ‘doomed to seek sovereignty’, must desire the void that is the source of her power.

Bataille’s headless figure of *Acephale*, like the ‘male mothers’ of Nietzsche’s texts, must itself perform the radical self-abnegation of auto-castration in order to attain its sovereignty from the restricted economy of the VATERLAND—just as Bataille’s self-parodic style must perform an auto-castration to resist the Hegelian economy of negation. Bataille’s castrated figure of *Acephale* is auto-castrating, “BOUND BY THE OBSESSIVE IMAGE OF [THE] TRAGEDY” that is the void of sovereignty that it dissimulates. The *Acephale* is a Nietzschean ‘male mother’ (a Zarathustra), pregnant with “THAT WHICH FROLICS IN THE *FUTURE*”[[73]](#endnote-73) and not simply a mother—the mother for Bataille symbolizes the myth of an originary past, a lost unity from which the insufficient subject is forever divorced. The Mother is the mirror image of the Father, both lost satellites of stability imposed upon the primordial instability of life—they are the “reestablished Pharaohs and Caesars,”[[74]](#endnote-74) implicitly fascist “RECONSTITUTION[S] OF RELIGIONS ELEMENTS OF CIVIL AND MILITARY SOVEREIGNTY, TYING EXISTENCE TO THE *PAST*.”[[75]](#endnote-75) The *Acephale* community not only exceeds the Pharaoh of the VATERLAND but also opposes the Mother of “CAESARIAN UNITY, ESTABLISHED BY A LEADER—A HEAD.”[[76]](#endnote-76) In order to exceed the economy of castration which operates within a restricted economy of phallus-womb/Pharoah-Caesar, *Acephale* must castrate/decapitate itself through a self-parodic play, dividing itself into a *bi* and *poly*-cephalic figure capable of releasing the energies of the ‘general economy.’ It is in the self-parodic play of Nietzsche’s ‘auto-castrating’ style which destroys values not with wrath but with laughter[[77]](#endnote-77) that Bataille’s *acephalic* politics becomes invigorated by its Nietzschean influence. This auto-castration is constitutive of Bataille’s style of self-parody and *Acephale* community—it is an operation of self-abnegation adopted from Nietzsche’s relation to the question of woman as the figure of dissimulation. This influence is manifest in the figure of *Acephale*, the anatomical model of Bataille’s labyrinthine politics of impossibility:

Man has escaped from his head just as the condemned man has escaped from his prison. He has found beyond himself not God, who is the prohibition against crime, but a being who is unaware of prohibition. Beyond what I am, I meet a being who makes me laugh because he is headless; this fills me with dread because he is made of innocence and crime; he holds a steel weapon in his left hand, flames like those of a Sacred Heart in his right. He reunites in the same eruption Birth and Death. He is not a man. He is not a god either. He is not me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster.[[78]](#endnote-78)

The *Acephale* must castrate itself, constantly dissimulating the NOTHING of sovereignty and envying the void of insufficiency that is its source. The *Acephale* is caught in its own labyrinth of insufficiency, and like the woman-as-truth of Nietzsche’s text, its “power is an infinite void, an irremediable absence” who “longs for the castration which [it] represents:”[[79]](#endnote-79) Only the Nietzschean figure of “tragic Dionysus”[[80]](#endnote-80)—the “male god who appears *as* a female”[[81]](#endnote-81)—Bataille contends, is capable of releasing life from its *monocephalic* servitude. The *Acephale,* like the tragic figure of Dionysus, in the poem “Ariadne’s Lament” in Nietzsche’s *Dionysus Dithyrambs*, must undergo a self-abnegation before he is able to dissimulate himself as the labyrinth of insufficiency that he is: “Must one not first hate oneself if one is to love oneself?/ *I am your labyrinth*…”[[82]](#endnote-82)

1. Jeremy Biles, *Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form* (New York: Fordham Universisty Press, 2007), 1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” in *Aesthetic, Method, and Epistemology,* ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: New York Press, 1998), 71 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
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