This is the published version:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30051240

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 2013, The Author
Headless and Unborn: Interfering with Bataille and Masson’s Image of the Acephale

Leon Marvell
School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University

KEYWORDS
Acephale, Bataille, Masson, Absolute, Emblem

At a certain period in European intellectual history, a comparatively large number of artists and intellectuals—arguably the most important thinkers and artists of the times—were all involved to a greater or lesser degree in the envisioning of a new myth that might lead European civilization out of the gathering darkness of fascism, a myth they hoped would provoke the total and radical transformation of society and culture.

Two principle groups were involved: the Surrealists, constellated around the ideas and political interventions of André Breton, the foremost ideologue of the Surrealist movement, and a group of “dissident” surrealists that included Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris, key figures in the radical boys club, the Collège de Sociologie, which coalesced in 1936. Hovering between these two camps were a number of artists and intellectuals who appear to have been loathe to choose between the two encampments, or who periodically aligned themselves first with one, then the other. Overriding these vacillating allegiances and the petty clash of personalities was the unifying dream of finding a new myth through which society could be transformed. This dream was at first principally fomented within two vectors of cultural intervention: the journal Minotaure and the political activities of a group of engagés known as Contre-Attaque.

Minotaure saw its first issue in 1933. The editorial philosophy of Minotaure was summed up by the publisher and editor in this way: “Starting from the fact that it is impossible in our era to isolate the plastic arts from poetry and science, the review proposes to associate these three domains.” Thus “the plastic arts, poetry, music, architecture, ethnology, mythology, spectacle, psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis” were all to be included within its pages in an effort to showcase “the most audacious intellectual activity of the day.” In effect this was the reinvention of an experiment that Georges Bataille had began several years before with the publication of Documents, a journal that had sought provocation through a
violent juxtaposition of ideas and images, the pages exploiting a paratactical arrangement of essays (on gnostic gems, ethnography, jazz, the big toe, and Buster Keaton, for example) and images from contemporary visual artists, photographs of slaughterhouses and pictures of African and Oceanic art. *Documents* appeared the year that *La Révolution surréaliste* ceased publication, Bataille no doubt hoping that it would symbolically represent a final, devastating salvo in Bataille’s ongoing critique of Surrealism and of André Breton in particular.

Boiled down in the alembic of retrospection, we can see that what was primarily at stake in this drawn out intellectual contretemps between two heavy hitters was the nature and relevance of images, of representation itself. Breton was committed to the championing of the importance of images from the very first *Manifeste du Surréalisme* of 1924. Bataille, by the early 1930s, was not so sure that images, art and literature had any relevance at all anymore. The rise of Fascism with its emphasis on spectacularity and the illusory fascination of imagery—a what we might call today the rhetoric of the image—had led to a crisis of faith in representation itself.

Most of the usual suspects that had been associated with *Documents* had subsequently become associated with *Minotaure*. Soon *Minotaure* was effectively being edited by André Breton and his close friend Pierre Mabille, a surgeon, writer, scholar of alchemy and Haitian voodoo. *Minotaure* was a kind of high-rent “neutral ground” where dissident Surrealists, existing Surrealists, ex-Dadaists and members of the (soon to be formed) Collège—primarily Bataille, Leiris, Patrick Waldberg and Caillios—all contributed. The title of the journal indexed one of the key mythologems around which many of the writers and artists constellated their ideas in the divining of a new myth. In foreshadowing the lineaments of this future myth, they looked to the past, and the minotaur seething in the heart of its crepuscular labyrinth was one of the key players.

*Contre-Attaque* was a small group of revolutionary intellectuals who had provisionally banded together to present a double front: to aggressively denounce the ever-expanding threat of fascism, and to agitate for what they regarded as a concomitant radical transformation of society and culture. In April of 1936 Georges Bataille resigned from the group. This break with *Contre-Attaque* is doubly significant in that previous to this severing, Bataille’s participation in the group represented a rapprochement between himself and André Breton, but it also signaled his violent frustration with the manner in which intellectuals had pursued their aims in the recent past. Bataille’s solution to this perceived impasse was to create a secret society of like-minded enragés dedicated to following the minotaur into the very heart of the forest.

---

100 By which I mean a sorcerous *fascinans*—to be entranced and captured by an illusory appearance.
Directly following his break with *Contre-Attack*, Bataille traveled to the Spanish coastal town of Tossa de Mar to visit the on again/off again Surrealist artist André Masson, a friend and associate of both Bataille and Breton. It was good timing: the Spanish Civil War was just breaking out.

Holed up in Masson’s kitchen, listening to a recording of *Don Juan*, Bataille witnessed Masson quickly produce a drawing that would become the escutcheon of Bataille’s esoteric cabal and the exoteric journal (*Acéphale*) that would come to espouse his vision of a new, violently sacralised society. André Masson’s drawing is the emblem of Bataille’s radical break with *Contre-Attaque* and the pretensions of both *Minotaure* and the public face of the *Collège de Sociologie*. It is his “rite du passage”, his initiation into another world. The figure of the acephalic “monster” (as Bataille called it) is described by Masson in this manner:

> I saw him immediately as headless…but what to do with this cumbersome and doubting head? — Irresistibly it finds itself displaced in the sex, which it masks with a ‘deaths head’… Automatically one hand (the left!) flourishes a dagger, while the other kneads a blazing heart (a heart that does not belong to the Crucified, but to our master Dionysus)…The pectorals starred according to whim…(W)hat to make of the stomach? That empty container will be the receptacle for the Labyrinth that elsewhere had become our rallying sign. This drawing, made on the spot, under the eyes of Georges Bataille, had the good luck to please him. Absolutely.101

*Absolutely*—not provisionally, not temporarily, not just for today, but forever, outside of space and time. I don’t believe I am making too much of Masson’s concluding statement here. It is inarguable that a great part of Bataille’s mission in life was to define an Absolute that was the very inversion of the Absolute as previously, endlessly discussed in the West. Masson’s drawing of the acephalic monster is the emblem of this negative Absolute, and of Bataille’s quest. In his introductory essay in the first issue of the journal *Acéphale* Bataille is uncompromising in his rejection of the Absolute as conceived of in the past. What he is calling for is an *absolute rupture*:

> It is time to abandon the world of the civilized and its light. It is too late to countenance being reasonable and educated—which only leads to a life without appeal. Secretly or not, it is necessary to become totally Other or cease to be.102

---

102 My translation of: *Il est temps d’abandonner le monde des civilisés et sa lumière. Il est trop tard pour tenir à être raisonnable et instruit—ce qui a mené à une vie sans attrait. Secrètement ou non, il est nécessaire de devenir tout autres ou de cesser d’être.*
The last sentence is perhaps a snide reference to Breton’s *Nadja* and its famous concluding line: “La beauté sera convulsive ou ne sera pas”, and thus Bataille levels his scimitar squarely at Breton and what Bataille considered Breton’s barely sublimated yearning for the light. This light is that of the *intellectus*, the light which streams through Western thinking since Plato’s philosopher struggled out of the cave to apprehend the true sun. The light of the sun, the light of the world that has existed up until the appearance of the acephalic monster, is the manifestation in the phenomenal world of the light of the Absolute beyond it: civilization and its light are one. The Acephale signals an end to all that. An end to the useless light, and an end to all images illuminated by the light.

The Acephale thus becomes a substitute god, a substitute for the Absolute. No more the light of god, no more the light of the image. Masson’s emblematic Acephale is therefore the final image, the talisman that will wipe out all other images.

Furthermore the Acephale does not *represent* this totally Other world without light, it *invokes* it. The acephalic monster of Masson and Bataille is a talismanic, incantatory machine. Bataille’s introduction in the first issue of the journal *Acéphale* is entitled *La Conjuration Sacrée*. There are several possible translations of this: Sacred Conspiracy, Sacred Confederacy, or Sacred Conjuration. All these meanings are possible and all, I would suggest, are *necessarily* present. It is the last possible meaning, sacred conjuration, that I want to run with here.

The acephalic man mythologically expresses sovereignty committed to the destruction and death of God, and in this the identification with the headless man merges and melds with the identification with the superhuman, which is entirely ‘the death of God’.¹⁰³

I will make no comment on the obvious Nietzschean aspirations here, it is the *identification* that Bataille emphasizes which I want to dilate upon now. Bataille’s day job was as an archivist/paleographer/numismatist at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, and as such he had access to a large and prestigious collection of rare books and manuscripts. I suggest that among these recondite texts Bataille had discovered a particular text in the collection of Grecoc-Egyptian magical texts collectively known as the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*.

¹⁰³ Bataille in Lebel & Waldberg, 14
These texts were collected in the 19th century by an enterprising and avaricious diplomat in Alexandria, shipped to Europe and subsequently sold to various libraries, including the British Museum and the Bibliothèque nationale de France. It has been hypothesised that these papyri were originally the collection of one man, a magician, “who was also a scholar, probably philosophically inclined, as well as a bibliophile and archivist concerned about the preservation of the material.”

A man, in other words, remarkably similar to Georges Bataille. His well-known interest in Gnosticism may have inclined him to search out similar material, and inevitably he would have come across the magical texts of the Greco-Egyptian magician.

If this seems far-fetched, one only has to remember that in the early 1930s in Paris, many of the foremost intellectuals and artists of the time—at least, those of the particular persuasions and allegiances of which I am writing—were regularly attending the soirees of occultist Maria de Naglowska, the self-styled “satanic woman” and hierarchess of the Order of the Golden Arrow.

André Breton, Man Ray and his friend the American adventurer William Seabrook regularly attended her evenings of occult weirdness, and certainly Bataille would not have been outdone in this. It is quite possible that Naglowska’s demonstrations of magical rituals and her ideas on ritual practice were a direct inspiration behind Bataille’s formation of his secret society of the Acephale. It is certainly true that Bataille seemed to be emulating Naglowska when he attempted to drag his fellow Acéphalists into the depths of the forest…for ritual sacrifice.

Amongst the Papyri Graecae Magicae there is one text that stands out from the standard magical spells that provide solutions for petty objectives, the spells for keeping a lover for example, or for getting bugs out of the house. This text is Papyri Graecae Magicae V. 96—172, named by its English translator as the “Stele of Jeu the Hieroglyphist.”

The ritual begins in this way:

I summon you, the Headless One, who created earth and heaven, who created night and day, / you, who created light and darkness; you are Osoronnophris whom none has ever seen…you have distinguished the just and the unjust; you have made female

---

105 Refer to Lebel & Waldberg, 14-15
and male; / you have revealed seeds and fruits; you have made men love each other and hate each other.  

The being that is summoned is explicitly named *Acephalos* (Ἀκέφαλος), the Headless One, in this ritual.  What makes this ritual even more unusual, unusual in terms of the entire Greco-Egyptian magical corpus in fact, is that after the standard banishing of demons from the ritual chamber, the magician invokes the “Holy Headless One” into himself, thus becoming the one who “makes the lightning flash and the thunder roll…the one whose mouth burns completely…the one who begets and destroys.”

Masson’s emblem of the Acephale holds a flaming heart in its right hand, and the Headless daemon in the *Stele of Jeu the Hieroglyphist* says that its name is a “heart encircled with a serpent, come forth and follow.” In his text Sacred Conspiracy/Confederacy/Conjuration Bataille writes:

…he holds a steel weapon in his left hand, flames like those of a Sacred Heart in his right. 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.

A magician who has invoked a Headless daemon into himself is of course no longer a man and not a god, but something that is neither one nor the other. He is himself but more than himself. He is, in other words, an Acephalic monster, as Bataille avers in the quoted passage.

If all this seems circumstantial, I totally agree—yet this hitherto unsuspected connexion is certainly not unlikely, and moreover possesses a high degree of *imaginal logic*, if I may use the term. Allow me to proceed a little further in my interference with Masson and Bataille’s Acephale.

I have consistently called this image an “emblem”. I have done this in order to point towards a tradition in which I believe the Acephale is the final arrival. This is the tradition of the

---

106 Betz, 103
107 McGregor Mathers, hierophant of the late 19th century *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*, translated the daemon of this text—inexplicably—as the ‘bornless’ one, a reference found in the title of this essay.
108 Betz, 103
109 Bataille in Lebel & Waldberg, 14
emblematic books, a tradition that was kick-started when the text of Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphica* was purchased by Cosimo d’Medici from a Byzantine monk in 1422. The translation of this text (which was originally written, incidentally, in the same period as the texts of the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*) caused as much an intellectual furor as Ficino’s later translations of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and Plato’s dialogues. The *Hieroglyphica* purported to explain ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs as emblematic figures containing layers of embedded meanings. The translation of the *Hieroglyphica* set in motion an entire industry that led to the production of hundreds of emblematic books, and possession of these collections was considered *de rigueur* in the 16th and 17th centuries. In the hands of a few dedicated publishers (such as Theodor de Bry, who published books by Robert Fludd and Michael Maier, both notable Hermeticists) the hieroglyphic and graphic tradition of the emblem developed into an efflorescence of Hermetic publishing, which would have a defining influence on alchemy:

Allegorical images accompanied by a few cryptic lines of prose or verse, emblems presented to the learned a kind of pictorial riddle containing a solution of a moral nature. But emblems which could easily conceal more than one meaning constituted ideal vehicles for the secret transmission of esoteric information, and as such…were adopted by the alchemists.  

Allegorical representation in the form of *personification*—an ingenious method of encapsulating an abstract idea in the form of a human figure—has probably the longest tradition in the history of Western culture. Emblematic personification was a method in which a host of interconnected, often difficult ideas were subsumed into the one, easily comprehensible image. Examples that are still with us today would include the personification of Justice as a blindfolded woman carrying a sword and a set of scales, and the medieval figure of Fortuna, a woman turning a giant wheel, the symbolism of which perhaps only survives through a certain television game show.

Considering that hermetic emblems were “allegorical images accompanied by a few cryptic lines of prose or verse”, the cover of the first issue of *Acéphale* is a perfect example of such an emblem—an hieratic figure beneath which we can see a few cryptic lines: *The Sacred Confederacy*, or *Nietzsche Against the Fascists*. Indeed, I would insist that the form and function serve the very same purpose as an emblem in the hermetic and alchemical books: images the purpose of which is to accomplish much more than mere representation.

---

Masson and Bataille’s figure of the Acephale is also an emblem with a special purpose: it is a magical machine that heralds the cut-off point of images altogether.

As exactly the same figure was reproduced on the cover of the journal Acéphale in each successive issue (there were only three issues), and as only a single line of text on the cover changed with each successive issue (The Sacred Confederacy, or Nietzsche Against the Fascists, for example)—thus serving the function of an allegorical figure with a “few cryptic lines of prose”—one can say that this emblem belonged to that unchanging Other world of the sacral, standing outside of the pornography of images with which we are daily bombarded. A more recent iconoclast, Jean Baudrillard, in describing this blitz, notes:

Obscenity begins when there is no more spectacle, no more stage, no more theatre, no more illusion, when everything becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication. We no longer partake of the drama of alienation, but are in the ecstasy of communication. And this ecstasy is obscene.111

If one recalls as well Fredric Jameson’s despair at the “pornography” of images which miscegenate around us at an astounding daily rate, then the figure of the Acephale is the buzzbomb sent to devastate the endless plain of representation.

---

111 Jean Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1988), 22