

Fascism and Acephalic Man: Masson, Bataille, Lacan, and the Orgy of Blood

Shep Steiner

Volume 18, numéro 1-2, 1991

Questionner le modernisme
Modernism in Question

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072985ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072985ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)
1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Steiner, S. (1991). Fascism and Acephalic Man: Masson, Bataille, Lacan, and the Orgy of Blood. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 18(1-2), 64-72. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072985ar>

Résumé de l'article

À la fin des années trente, au moment où il collaborait avec Georges Bataille à la production du journal *Acéphale*, André Masson a réalisé un certain nombre de dessins d'une apparente facture automatiste mettant en scène des images d'agression et de violence sexuelle. Destinées à un public d'initiés (*Acéphale* est aussi le nom d'une société secrète) parmi lesquels l'on compte des dissidents du surréalisme et des intellectuels gravitant dans l'orbite du Collège de Sociologie, ces représentations doivent beaucoup à la théorie psychanalytique, notamment aux premiers travaux de Jacques Lacan sur le stade du miroir.

L'examen du contexte d'émergence des oeuvres et de la théorie, démontre leur profonde affinité de même que leur alliance tactique à un moment où tout projet politique révolutionnaire semblait rendu impossible par la démobilisation des forces socialistes et l'inexorable montée du fascisme. Tranposée dans le registre symbolique où le sujet psychique trouve son identité sexuelle en même temps que sa force d'action, la situation de véritable impotence politique gagnait à la fois son principe d'explication et une forme d'exutoire. L'intérêt de Masson pour les thèmes d'agressivité, de mutilation sexuelle ou de dislocation corporelle traduit une volonté de résistance aux forces de régression incarnées par le fascisme.

Fascism and Acephalic Man: Masson, Bataille, Lacan, and the Orgy of Blood*

SHEP STEINER

Résumé

À la fin des années trente, au moment où il collaborait avec Georges Bataille à la production du journal *Acéphale*, André Masson a réalisé un certain nombre de dessins d'une apparente facture automatiste mettant en scène des images d'agression et de violence sexuelle. Destinées à un public d'initiés (*Acéphale* est aussi le nom d'une société secrète) parmi lesquels l'on compte des dissidents du surréalisme et des intellectuels gravitant dans l'orbite du Collège de Sociologie, ces représentations doivent beaucoup à la théorie psychanalytique, notamment aux premiers travaux de Jacques Lacan sur le stade du miroir.

L'examen du contexte d'émergence des oeuvres et de la théorie, démontre leur profonde affinité de même que leur alliance tactique à un moment où tout projet politique révolutionnaire semblait rendu impossible par la démobilisation des forces socialistes et l'inexorable montée du fascisme. Tranposée dans le registre symbolique où le sujet psychique trouve son identité sexuelle en même temps que sa force d'action, la situation de véritable impotence politique gagnait à la fois son principe d'explication et une forme d'exutoire. L'intérêt de Masson pour les thèmes d'agressivité, de mutilation sexuelle ou de dislocation corporelle traduit une volonté de résistance aux forces de régression incarnées par le fascisme.

Caca AVANT TOUT.

(André Masson; Letter to Georges Bataille,
Tossa, November 8, 1935)¹

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 unites 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 monster.

(Georges Bataille, "La Conjuración Sacrada," *Acéphale*, 1936)²

It is a necessary condition for the maturation of the gonad of the female pigeon that it should see another member of its species of either sex: so sufficient in itself is this condition that the desired effect may be obtained merely by placing the individual within sight of the reflective field of a mirror.

(Jacques Lacan, "Le stade du miroir."

A first version of this paper was delivered at
The International Psychoanalytic Congress
in Marienbad, 1936)³

André Masson's drawings from the 1930s, a period when he worked in collaboration with the journal *Acéphale*, are often disturbing, violent, and sexually explicit representations. Such is indeed the case with *La mère sadique*, 1937 (fig. 1), and *Naissance de la femme*, 1938 (fig. 2). These two images seem to hint at a dark and cryptic psychic existence beyond the reach of the conscious and of historical meaning. At a locus point where the forces or energies of the unconscious funnel, concentrate, and burst through to the everyday, these drawings are but the trace of a vection.

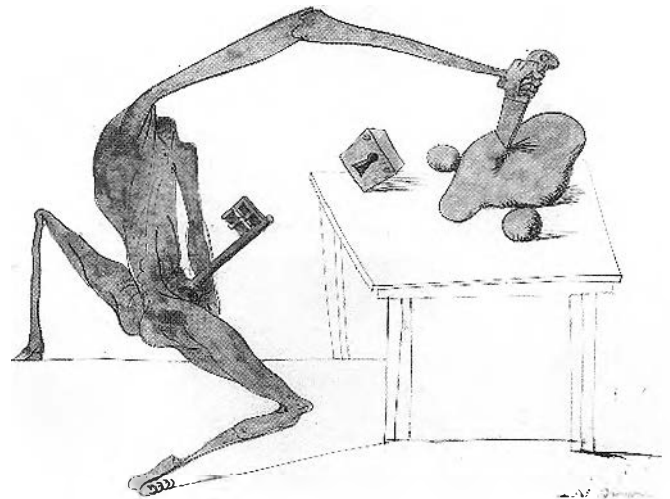


Figure 1. André Masson, *La mère sadique*, ink and aquarelle drawing, 1937, 48 x 62 cm (Photograph: Galerie Brusberg, Berlin).

So too, they are a locus of the otherwise disparate notations quoted above; Jacques Lacan's socio-biological notes on the maturing gonad of the female pigeon and Georges Bataille's vision of the Acephalic man. Like the "caca" Masson privileges above all else, these drawings form a translucent composite where psychoanalysis and base materialism blend and inscribe the *informe*. This article will explore the shared and refracted field of surrealist representation and historical process, providing a formative mirror for grasping the politics of a hyper avant-garde.

Though Lacan would not publish his article on "Le stade du miroir" until 1949, it was first formulated in the mid 1930s. His fetishistic interest in the processes of maturation and virility are hence firmly entrenched in the same decade of the 1930s in which Bataille's base materialism was elaborated and intensified. Neither are Lacan's interests or frames of reference an anomaly. Within surrealist circles and the Parisian psychoanalytic community such concerns and themes were widespread. Indeed, the issues and parameters

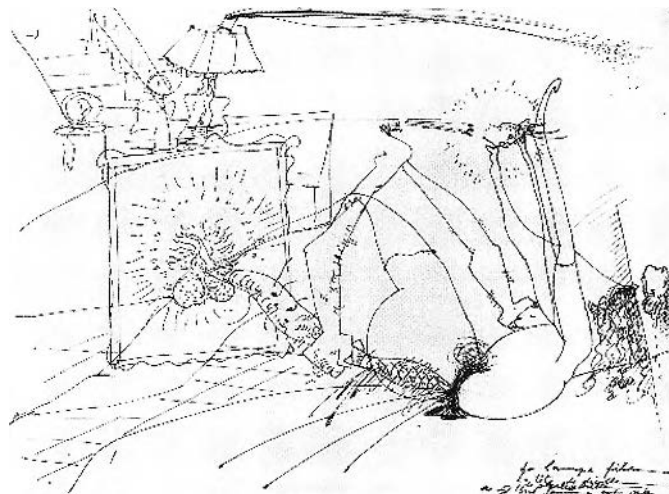
of debate which Lacan employs for an understanding of maturity and gendering were the key issues of a wide-ranging cultural debate in France concerning national potency and, more specifically among the Left, concerning political emasculation and divirilization. At the core of these issues for the intellectuals gathered around Bataille was the sustaining of a viable politics for the individual, a politics which might overcome the ego's dissolution during a period when it was so susceptible to the gaining momentum of the "mass." In its context, the reflective field of the mirror in Lacan's mirror stage is inseparable from the avant-garde politics of *Acéphale*, confronted as they both were by the mobilization and virilizing of Nazi Germany. This single metaphoric preoccupation, so important to the maturation of the gonad of the pigeon, would occupy the representational strategies of André Masson as well.

This essay will study a small number of automatic-like drawings André Masson produced during the period 1937 to 1939, a period when the threat of war and fascism occupied the minds of many. As a first set, *La mère sadique* and *Naissance de la femme*, both conspicuously violent and disturbing images, hinge on issues surrounding representation, the unconscious and aggressive sexuality. More specifically, the eroticized implications of individual psychic development, accessing the unconscious or symbolic plane through the processes of psychoanalysis, will be seen in the context of a period-bound corpus of works. These will be tensioned off against drawings produced for the journal *Acéphale*—representations of singular male figures, apparently the Nietzschean "Übermensch" or the captation of the Dionysiac. The tensions invoked by a comparative study are provocative. The differing representational strategies reveal dramatically a highly integrated project, a politics in common with Georges Bataille, hinging on a delimited public, a singular mapping of the unconscious and an attempted harnessing of an aggressive libidinal energy to combat the violent ascendancy of Fascism.

Published between June 1936 and June 1939, the journal *Acéphale* was the combined effort of members of the College of Sociology: Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Pierre Klossowski, and André Masson.⁴ (Concealed within the College and shielded behind the public facade was the secret society of *Acéphale*.) Masson's representations of the Acephalic man, appearing as the cover image on every issue of *Acéphale*, are familiar to most.⁵ This study will focus particularly on one image accompanying text in the July 1937 issue, entitled *L'Univers dionysiaque*.⁶ In it, the head of a minotaur with the body of *Acéphale* suddenly and explosively coalesces from a scene of utter carnage. Twinned figures engaged in mortal combat, resembling Masson's earlier *Massacre* series, share a landscape of uncontrollable aggression, destruction and natural eruptions.

These two sets of images are revealing. They reveal precisely the aporia which faced this splinter group of the French Left in the late 1930s. After its dalliance in the Popular Front's desperate attempts to revitalize Leftist strategies in face of the tremendous gains made by Fascism, the *Acéphale* group had of necessity to look inward and focus on the vital energies only its own community com-

Figure 2. André Masson, *Naissance de la femme*, 1938, 28 x 28 cm, ink drawing (Photograph: Galerie Brusberg, Berlin).



manded. At one time, in fact only one year before the establishment of *Acéphale*, at a time when Bataille and Masson were in collaboration with *Contre-Attaque*, a broad class-based strategy to combat Fascism seemed ripe with possibility. This necessitated a tapping into the very source of mass power which Fascism had mobilized through the uniting of classes, a process in which "the expressive elements of each class"⁷ were galvanized. The possibility for a revolutionary effervescence, of an ungraspable quantity or force emerging from a shared unconscious, is clearly articulated in Bataille's 1936 article for *Cahiers de Contre-Attaque*, entitled "Popular Front in the Streets."

Derided humanity has already known surges of power. These chaotic but implacable power surges dominate history and are known as Revolutions. On many occasions entire populations have gone into the street and nothing has been able to resist their force. It is an incontestable fact that if men have found themselves in the streets, armed, in a mass uprising, carrying with them the tumult of the total power of the people, it has never been the consequence of a narrow and speciously defined political alliance.

What drives the crowds to the street is the emotion directly aroused by striking events in the atmosphere of a storm, it is the contagious emotion that, from house to house, from suburb to suburb, suddenly turns a hesitating man into a frenzied being.⁸

During the period of *Acéphale*, in the wake of the failures of the Popular Front and the collaboration with *Contre-Attaque*, it had become certain to the group that proletarian revolution, a vast and encompassing overthrow of an entire social order, was no longer a possibility. The programmatic approach of the International Left was inconsistent with the spontaneity or effervescence upon which Fascism had seemingly built its successes, and which Bataille's article had tried to elucidate. By 1937, with Nazism and Stalinism in a face-off at the *Exposition universelle*, and the broadly based conservative shift to the right with the new regime of Daladier, Benjamin's aestheticization of the political must have seemed fully realized.⁹

For Bataille, Masson, and those members of *Acéphale*, the viable prospects for the mobilization of political community were all but dead. What little revolutionary possibility remained was entirely delimited to the closed community or secret society.

This last-ditch positioning—a seeming retreat into the apolitical and psychoanalysis—necessary for the *Acéphale* group, in order to sustain a viable and radical politics, was not an isolated or solitary retreat. It was but one symptom of a collapse and disabling of an entire European Left. For such independent leftists as Ernst Bloch, Max Horkheimer and, of course, Bataille, the revolutionary complex, i.e., the processes of transgression, are seen in terms of inevitable cooptation. In France, Germany, Italy, the Soviet Union, and apparently by 1936–37 in Spain as well, the revolutionary project had caved in upon itself. In every case, whether the process involved violent revolution, as in the Soviet Union, or only liberalizing reform, as under Blum's Popular Front government, the apparatus of power had overturned any and all "heterogeneous"¹⁰ transgression and resolidified as a new and more insidious form of hegemony. Given the complex historical configuration, there appeared a basic structural incapacity for transgression to play itself out in anything but a virtual form. At the root of the problem lay the individual unconscious. Somewhere lodged in the very unconscious structure of a culture, a nation, a class or a gender, a faulty mechanism was swinging the choice for free will to an emasculating and impotent desire finding form in Fascism. A kind of forced, last sanctuary for many, the terrain of the unconscious was perceived as the last reservoir of hope.

A retreat to the unconscious is central to the project of *Acéphale*. Synchronous with the widespread pessimism and debilitation on the Left, the spontaneous burst of "contagious emotion . . . that suddenly turns a hesitating man into a frenzied being"¹¹ was retained as the hinge-pin of a vital program. It is precisely this inoculatory moment of revolutionary effervescence, grounded in the psyche, which structures Masson's representations for *Acéphale*. By 1937, the problematic efficacy of the revolutionary process is apparently entirely delimited to the ungraspable negotiations of the subjective unconscious. This enormous delimiting of revolutionary possibility to the terrain of the unconscious, and more specifically to the rational understanding and capturing of the instant of the revolutionary burst of desire—a problem which singularly orders Masson's other set of drawings as well—will form the crucial core of ideas from which I will unravel the politics of Bataille's and Masson's collaborative efforts during the *Acéphale* period.

Masson's images from the period fit within the parameters of political conundrum faced by the French Left, and specifically by *Acéphale*. His violent and sexually explicit drawings combat the institutionalization of aggression and violence under Fascism with the representation and harnessing of a particular sort of aggressivity outside of discursive boundaries and intent on a specious therapeutics. Historical constructions of gender and French psychoanalytic theory are absolutely central here—the theoretical writing and politics of Jacques Lacan in the middle and late 1930s particularly so.

They link up with issues related to the French family unit and nation, a disabled Leftist political community, and the avant-garde individual and practice. At stake is the unconscious, or more specifically the processes of that terrain left unoccupied or uncolonizable by Fascism and the strictures of capitalism. As will become evident, a construction of the unconscious, which maintained its absolute difference from the world of social relations, was imperative to sustain the vital mechanisms and project of the revolutionary Left.

Indeed, all that seemingly remained as the pessimistic residue of the Leftist project by the late 1930s was the formative moment of the I, the individual's symbolic genesis when the ego asserts or recognizes difference. This was the burst of heterogeneity that constituted the moment of revolutionary effervescence, not unlike Jacques Lacan's "jubilant assumption" of Gestalt by the child in the mirror stage. Pinpointed as a crucial period in development, the stage brackets the moment when the child moves away from the reflection of the mother's gaze to the recognition of its own image. As a movement from incapacity or "insufficiency to anticipation"¹² Lacan's characterization of the formative event in the structuring of the ego provides great insight into the combative and last ditch politics of *Acéphale*. His psychoanalytic project, a historical response and attempt to pinpoint the machinations of Fascism's psychic remodelling of desire in order to territorialize a space for the exigencies of a sovereign autonomous will, shares decisive structural similarities with Bataille's and Masson's own response to events. Unlike Lacan, however, they would use their mapping of the labyrinthine realm of the unconscious and the moment of the mirror stage for galvanizing virility in a politically potent way.

By September 1938, with the conciliatory overtures of the Western democracies complete with the signing of the Munich Accords, the absolutely imperative nature of this revirilizing strategy is all too evident. The "Declaration of the College of Sociology on the International Crisis," published simultaneously in the *Nouvelle Revue française*, *Esprit* and *Volontés*, makes clear the deadening "collective psychological" atmosphere of revolutionary impasse.

The College of Sociology regards the general absence of intense reaction in the face of war as a sign of man's devirilization. It does not hesitate to see the cause of this in the relaxation of society's current ties, which are practically non-existent as a result of the development of bourgeois individualism. There is no love lost in its condemnation of the effect: men who are so alone, so deprived of destiny that they find themselves absolutely defenseless when faced with the possibility of death, who, having no profound reasons to fight, inevitably find themselves cowards in the face of battle—no matter what battle—some sort of conscious sheep resigned to the slaughterhouse.¹³

In *La mère sadique* and *Naissance de la femme*, the fetishization of the mirror stage as specific to widespread cultural stasis is complete. The images crystallize the Left's revolutionary impasse in the late 1930s. They describe in vivid gendered language the inevitable

cooptation of the virile transgressive principle at the moment of paroxysm and at the instant when it meets the threshold or window of the conscious visible world. The drawings as an unconscious distillation of history, like the analyst in the psychoanalytic session, assume a locus for the forces of transgression and sublimation, providing “the pure mirror of an unruffled surface,”¹⁴ as access to the unconscious. As a spectacularization of the mirror stage, the images focus on the debilitating moment of choice for either maternal dependance and impotency, or anxiety and freedom; the latter a movement from incapacitation to mastery, a crystallization of the Nietzschean “will to power”—precisely what the College was calling for—assumed an aggressive, virile posturing against the masculine entity of Nazi Germany. In their graspable content male and femaleness, accentuated by vividly eroticized subject matter, confront one another in what appears to be a hopeless and vicious struggle for power.

Of course, for Lacan in 1936, the theorization of the stage was as part of a response to the symbolic representation of such power. Though his paper was ill received at the International Psychoanalytic Congress in Marienbad, the verity of his own conclusions must have been strengthened during his stopover at the Berlin Olympiad on his return to Paris. As participant in the mass spectacle of the Nazi aesthetic, surrounded by Albert Speer’s triumphal architecture and the spectacularized presence of Hitler, Lacan undoubtedly glimpsed the primordial and regressive desire which his conception of the mirror stage describes, and as part of the weaning process futilely negotiates. He writes of the formative event of the unconscious with respect to the nursing baby for the first time taken by its own image.

Unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and held tightly as he is by some support, human or artificial . . . he nevertheless overcomes in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstruction of his support and, fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image . . . This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursing dependance would seem to exhibit an exemplary situation of the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form.¹⁵

For Bataille and Masson the frozen moment of the mirror stage as metaphor of France’s devirilized condition is central. Perched at the end of history, Bataille’s unemployed negativity would take advantage of an impossible and incapacitating situation.¹⁶ The choice of assimilation of the Gestalt image as fascist Germany was to be the crucial moment for the constituting and reconstituting of the virile subject in subversive opposition. *Acephale*’s efforts would hinge precisely upon a neutralizing of the aggressive energies which Fascism was constructed as commanding, by commanding those very energies themselves. The crux of the group’s project was a contesting of Fascist violence with the promoting of an aggressivity or violence of a distinct form. The importance of aggressivity cannot be

overstated. It was this otherwise heterogeneous element rooted in the unconscious, that Fascism had tapped into and built its successes upon, which the *Acephale* group would attempt to secure for its own purposes. In their structural relation to a particular construction of the unconscious it is this work or effort which Masson’s drawings attempt to accommodate and fulfill.

Historically significant for an understanding of this representational engagement and the group’s politics within the tensions of French culture in the 1930s is a set of discourses circulating around and within French psychiatry. Within this arena to which members of the College of Sociology are affiliated, a small, though growing psychoanalytic community will be explored. The theoretical writings and debates of this psychoanalytic culture are illuminating. Their body of interests correspond with the College of Sociology in its focus on the individual in relation to the gaining complexities of modern culture. I will use French psychoanalysis as the key entrance to study the politics of Bataille and Masson, whose positioning and representational strategies cryptically encode this theorization of the unconscious.

Within Paris the more liberal psychiatric journals such as *L’Évolution psychiatrique* and *L’Hygiène mentale* provided a loose forum for psychoanalytic concerns. While a hotbed of activity during the 1930s they were, however, overwhelmingly devoted to the specialized research, concerns, and parameters of the medical and psychiatric disciplines.¹⁷ This is particularly the case with *L’Encephale* (certainly the word play here is not a coincidence), in which a loose body of institutionalized discursive practices focused on documenting and categorizing psychological and physiological abnormality and their various manifestations as social evil. Though the members of *Acephale* undoubtedly relished the shared grim visual culture these publications permitted, the project of the group goes directly against everything that institutionalized practice and knowledge stood for. The gaining minority of members in the Parisian psychoanalytic community, the energies of which were focussed in *L’Évolution psychiatrique* and especially *Revue française de psychanalyse*—whose position corresponds loosely to that of the *Acephale* group—perceived that construction of social evil as integrative and a function of the advanced capitalistic state, i.e., implicit to the movement toward Fascism.¹⁸ Whereas in the institutionalized forms of discourse the unconscious and theories of the unconscious figure highly and are often explicitly related to France and its problems after World War I relating to psychiatry, immigration, demographics, and criminology, this institutionalized practice did not employ its analytical framework toward an understanding of political economy, nor its contemporary manifestation as Fascism. The particular project of *Acephale*, I would suggest, makes this attempt, and further, promotes an active and combative strategy against Fascism using this topography of the unconscious as a weapon.

This seemingly oppositional stance is confirmed five years later in an article appearing in *L’Hygiène mentale*. As part of a wide interdisciplinary project, the article entitled “La Circoncision” was the

collaborative summation of papers given to the *groupe d'études d'ethnographie psychologique*.¹⁹ On the initiative of Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris and members of the Parisian psychoanalytic and psychiatric community, including Dr. René Allendy, Dr. Adrien Borel,²⁰ Dr. Paul Schiff and Dr. Daniel Lagache, the *Société de psychologie collective* would form and publish its "ethnographic considerations" on circumcision. In it they trace the history and specific significance of sexual mutilation and its relation to manhood for the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Metzizas and the Jews. The piece is especially resonant in view of its treatment of a ritualistic social practice, intimately tied to the Jewish faith, during a time when that faith was being singled out in Nazi Germany for systematic and institutionalized aggression. In relation to Masson's images of violence and corporal dislocation, sacrificial sexual mutilation, as in the practice of circumcision, accessed the vital and heterogeneous force of opposition, and hence virility—explored by Bataille in his 1938 article "The Sorcerer's Apprentice."

For Jacques Lacan, a key member of this psychoanalytic community and as well an accepted theorist within Surrealist circles, the merging of psychoanalysis, Leftist politics and avant-garde strategies is complete. As early as 1933, in an article for *Le Minotaure*, Lacan would note the complicity between the constructed disciplinary boundaries of institutional psychiatry and the "laws proper to the development of the whole ideological superstructure."²¹ What had allowed the ascendancy of Fascism in Germany was as well in France legitimating an entire institutional fabric and social order.²² From Lacan's perspective, the compartmentalization of knowledge as a function of capitalist superstructure and the value-laden conceptualization of various psychic phenomenon in academic practice,²³ was the inevitable precursor of Fascism's institutionalized form of violence. The broad interdisciplinary approach of psychoanalysis offered a strategy in opposition. Masson's representational strategies and the hyper avant-gardist politics of *Acéphale* were, then, absolutely critical.

In André Masson's 1937 drawing *La mère sadique*, the French psychoanalytic critique of Fascism is crystallized. In it, eroticism and violence converge on the symbolic plane of the unconscious. In a domestic-like interior a figure, apparently representing the sadistic mother, stabs a phallic sac, presumably that of her son, which lies on a table. Interestingly, this calls up the most serious question then troubling the French Left: a question with which *Acéphale* was especially consumed. In the wake of the First World War the very real absence of paternal authority in French culture and family life gave wide consensus to the illusion of a breakup of patriarchal authority. In Carolyn Dean's excellent analysis of this development she tracks it as part of a discursive movement toward liberalization in psychiatry and criminology.²⁴ Across the political spectrum the French situation, described as a "moral vacuum," is constructed in terms of impotency and devirilization. Along with monetary collapse, a drastic decrease in the birth rate and a policy of appeasement toward Nazi hostility, crime statistics of the inter-war period are revealing. There is a marked decrease in violent crimes committed by men, and an equally marked increase in crimes perpetrated

by women, especially so-called crimes against morality such as adultery, abortion and infanticide.²⁵ For many on the right wing these statistics could only reveal the racially polluted nature of France's population, indicative of an incurable moral degeneracy, an issue which would gain in prominence with the massive increases of immigration throughout the mid and late 1930s. For the Leftist faction of the psychoanalytic community the problem was conceived of in culturally specific psychic/developmental terms. Such a reading was, of course, in direct contrast to the kinds of nationalistic fervour the *Croix de feu* and the *Action française* were able to mobilize during this period, through the conception of pure community. Such an alternative reading interpolated a broad Leftist community and keyed in, especially, on the culturally literate psychoanalytic audience. For this community, the issue was approached as a problematic ambivalence of gender at an unconscious level, itself galvanized by intensifying capitalist forces. This loose framework of investigation, fomented in oppositional circles, would provide the terms and relations required of an understanding of the widespread successes of Fascism, a political order seemingly empowering the individual subject, while actually stimulating a process of devirilization via a system of relations hinging on introjection and projection in the Fascist leader. The political project of *Acéphale* was to propose an alternative to that based on community and its inevitable debasement. Rather, it proposed a virile and masculinized opposition based in absolute alterity, a construction homologous to their topography of the unconscious hinging also on fundamental alterity.

Jacques Lacan's conceptual framework for explaining this "moral vacuum" left by World War I is especially crucial. It brings into focus the struggle of signifiers Masson consciously employs to visualize desire as political expedient. Within culturally and historically specific parameters Lacan locates a set of mechanisms registered structurally in the unconscious as complexes. Impeding to a greater or lesser extent a normative psychosexual maturation, these complexes are a structural translation of the dynamics inherent to the family unit and domestic situation. His analysis and focus on female psychopathology in the case study of Aimée hinges on the decipherability of neuroses as a function of these factors.²⁶ During the crucial period in the evolution of the ego, that is, during the familial complexes grouped around the Oedipal complex, normative development was altered. For Aimée, as for a majority of France's population, the lack of a father, or more simply the domineering mother in the context of the family group, had precipitated a quirk in both male and female childhood sexual development. For the boy it posed an obstacle to the successful resolution of the Oedipal conflict, wherein the repression of sexuality for the mother is achieved, and for the girl, as in the Aimée case, it accelerated and intensified this process, creating a dangerously aggressive woman.²⁷ The resulting trauma, referred to as a transference neuroses, prohibited or accelerated in varying degrees psycho-sexual maturation. For Lacan, psychoses and neuroses in general could be linked to the culturally mediated factors of the familial complexes.

By the 1930s, the situation had become especially acute. Along with the abnormal family situations implicit in demographic shifts, the evolution of the modern family unit under capitalism had progressively foregrounded certain irregularities which promoted an internal disabling of the Oedipal process—that cycle in which virile ego formation was focused.²⁸ Within this framework the increase in moral crime by women is conceptualized as an inversion of gender, i.e., the female criminal is masculinized on the symbolic plane in order to account for her breaking of the law. Indeed, and in fact, Lacan notes that Aimée writes “I feel that I am masculine.”²⁹ The resonance of Lacan’s topography of the unconscious is, I think, clear. In relation to Masson’s images, a kind of transcription of the complex, historically constructed nature of the unconscious is given deterministic form, by a period termed by Alexandre Kojève “the end of history.” In *La mère sadique*, the headless mother, a clue in itself to the symbolic terrain where the drama of mastery is played out, wears a key as erect phallus. Her insectoid, mantis-like appendages mechanically perform an activity played out again and again. For the male sibling, release from the maternal imago is prohibited. The mother’s choice for the knife and not the key, signalling an unlocking of maternal dependancy, forecloses forever the possibility of revolutionary effervescence. Lacan would write:

intended aggressivity gnaws away, undermines, disintegrates: it castrates; it leads to death: “And I thought you were impotent!” growled a mother, suddenly transformed into a tigress, to her son, who with great difficulty, had admitted to her his homosexual tendencies. And one could see that her permanent aggressivity as a virile woman had had its effect.³⁰

It is precisely the processes of devirilization, captured on the symbolic plane through the visual and affective actions of aggressivity, which Masson represents. The form of aggressivity is crucial. It is structurally analogous to that institutionalized aggressivity which Fascism would wield for the purposes of power. It is a sadistic force only able to reassert the power relations already established between master and slave. For the male child, the processes of transgression and sublimation were both focused in the father. Only through this same sex relation, as a function of the law of the father, could aggressivity take on a formative power. Only in the choice for the father could contact with reality be assured and the constituting of the virile subject position enabled. For the fatherless male sibling in the family context of the 1930s, a period described as a “moral vacuum” and “of the father in decline,” the vital dehiscence of maturation, that is, the mastery of the Oedipal cycle was an impossibility.

Masson’s image spectacularizes the constant renegotiation of subjectivity in the eternally revisited moment of the mirror stage. As a moment of eternal return, the moment of aggressivity’s visual and affective action, *La mère sadique* encapsulates that structural weakness or caprice in the formation of the subject which had given tacit consent to the successes of Fascism. The crucial choice for “either an identification with the mother or an intensification of his

identification with the father,” i.e., the moment enabling mastery of the Oedipal cycle, ends as in the wider historical and cultural context, inevitably in stasis, a nostalgia and desire for the permanence and wholeness of the mother. The immobility of social relations and the ever tightening grip of capitalist forces are reaffirmed at the most basic level. The essential paranoiac machinery of political transgression becomes foreclosed in its mechanical infancy during the processes of maturation.

Within the Fascist economy of desire the erotic energy of paranoiac knowledge, that which might otherwise precipitate autonomy, was being rechanneled through the sublimating processes of a false fulfillment. Fascism, as a developmental stage of capitalism, had tapped into this nexus of aggressivity and through this the fundamental alienation of the mirror stage. In terms of desire it had transfixed the normally mobile and maturing specular gaze of an entire social body onto the mother. The Leftist project of harnessing the desiring subjects’ utopian wish for integrity of being had been reversed and remolded into an intrauterine regression for womb and state apparatus. Fascism’s successful use of institutionalized and spectacularized aggressivity was actually a function of the psychosexual stasis within which Europe’s advanced capitalistic social order was locked. The very failure of Socialism to mobilize support from a broad consensus was thusly traceable, for the Leftist and Lacan’s constituency of the psychoanalytic community, successively back to the individual, his unconscious, and ultimately to the ego and the lack of a virile will to be.³¹ Only in a culture frozen in the mirror stage unable to choose the father, anxiety, and mastery, could violence and aggressivity have such efficacy. The crucial and untransferable distinctions between the unconscious and the world of social relations were interminably blurred; Fascism was feeding on and compounding this loss of distinction of objects. In such a culture the closed community or secret society was an absolute necessity for the sustaining of pure and heterogeneous revolutionary effervescence.

In *Naissance de la femme* the mirror stage is again taken up. It constructs a wide and unsettled public, indeed a universalized human condition in which virility was not at all secure in face of the Gestalt image which power, and specifically German Fascism, held forth. The emasculating processes of representation, of transcribing the heterogeneous desire of the unconscious into the visual, is seemingly confirmed by the sub-text: “The lamp is off—the head unstuck—the phallus shines—A woman is born.” As much an impotent signpost to the labyrinthine meanings lying on the level of content and association, the text, as much as the sexualized, private space of the domestic interior, implicates the capricious and deadening role of the historical moment in the complete emasculation of meaning and virility. With the father as both the nexus of subversion and of law, in contrast to the functioning of the one-sided Freudian Oedipal complex, the Lacanian mapping of the unconscious can only offer paradoxical and despairing politics. In this dialectical order where liberation can be accomplished only through a return to the father, the representing of desire can alone sanctify

the law. In representing the paroxysmal moment of transgression when absolute alterity is confronted, its potential is entirely and simultaneously diffused.

There is something to be salvaged in these representations, however. It is intimately linked to the scotoma that the secret society and politics of *Acéphale* represented and to the theoretical apparatus of Lacanian psychoanalysis. While this image toys with the incessant bundling of dialectical opposites, it silently circumscribes the ungraspable terrain of the unconscious and the process therein of aggressivity for itself. Masson's representational strategy, like the project of *Acéphale*, territorializes the unconscious and that aggressivity distinct from its systematized, linguistic form. It was the forefronting of this absence, as the sign of its own potency, that the efficacy of *Acéphale's* virtual revolutions hinged.

In *Naissance de la femme* the drawing assumes the role assigned Freud's imago divested of its instinctual origin and given culturally specific resonance. Just as for Lacanian psychoanalysis, the complex was the interiorized structure of interpersonal relations discernible and based upon the representation of the imago:³² for Masson, the representation of the imago held within its formal parameters a sacred essence of its ungraspable source. Functioning as imago, *Naissance de la femme* maps "an imaginary set of attributes (affective as well as visual) that constitutes the subject's view of another person,"³³ and subsequently renders manifest the unconscious structural mechanism which constitutes the subject through otherness. The imago of Masson actually exteriorizes a representation otherwise only tracked linguistically by the psychoanalyst. As a frozen image of libidinal energy at its most violent and excessive pitch, the drawing becomes specifically an abridgement of the imago of the fragmented body,³⁴ that imago specific to the paranoid instability of the mirror stage. "One has only to listen to children . . . (Lacan writes) . . . to know that the pulling off of the head and the ripping open of the belly are themes that occur spontaneously to their imagination and that this is (always) corroborated by the experience of the doll torn to pieces."³⁵ The formative and magical efficacy Lacan would prescribe to the imago of the fragmented body, just as in the psychoanalytic session, emerged in its absence. In Masson's automatic drawing this power or sacred aggressivity was carried on the level of form. It, too, was revealed in its absence, decipherable to only a select and circumscribed constituency, which understood the complex manoeuvrings and mapping of the self.

On the level of content like *La mère sadique* then, *Naissance de la femme* offers only paranoid insufficiency. However, for the closed community of interests the apparatus of the imago articulated the trace of that which is silenced and carried on the level of form, i.e., the affective emotion of aggressivity felt during the negotiation or formation of the I. Importantly, this was a virile, empowering, and formative action: it was the silenced dialectical component of the intended aggressivity of Fascism or the sadistic mother which betrays the singular intention to subjugate. Sacred aggressivity was inherently heterogeneous. In the paranoid state of surrealist creativity, aggressivity intentionally aroused permitted an actualizing of

the scotomized signifier, that existing permanently on the level of the symbolic, now reproduced through the process of psychoanalysis as the silenced and absent ally to aggressive intention.³⁶ Though codified through the form of automatism, and assuming the appearance of corporal dislocation, sacred aggressivity is circulated in a manifestly ungraspable yet nevertheless politically potent (or decipherable) form.

Masson's interest in aggressivity, sexual mutilation, or indeed any form that corporal dislocation took focused on its function as the vection of desire from the symbolic to that of the social relationship, for with it came the sacred and unmediated power of self-emancipation. In Masson's representations, the sacred efficacy which could turn a "hesitating man into a frenzied being" is distilled and purified, the link between the revolutionary burst or moment of political effervescence, and the subjective experience in the psyche of the "jubilant assumption" of the "other" is spectacularized.³⁷ Because the cooptation of transgression was constructed as an immanent process all that remained of a debilitated Leftist project was the abstract movement from insufficiency to anticipation, the jubilant assumption of the I occurring on the altogether ungraspable symbolic plane. As such, the secret society, constructed as a duplicate symbolic realm, would foment a revolutionary effervescence undisturbed until its pressures would cathartically explode into the reality of social relations.

In *L'Univers dionysiaque* it is precisely this cathartic moment when the virile will to be bursts from the unconscious to cross into the reality of social relations. The twinned figures of paranoid constitution now blur into the background as the scotomized signifier, i.e., the fundamental figure of heterogeneity and sacred aggressivity bursts forth. Masson's *Massacre* series, his mutant, half-human, half-furniture hybrids, and the graphic and explicit orgies of blood between doubles, all recede into the twilight. Here those impotent by-products of a culture balanced at the end of history are swept aside by the vital dehiscence of desire fomented on the imaginary plane and thrust into anticipatory combat with its dialectical manifestation as Fascism.

Acéphale's politics hinged upon the secret society or closed community, a site constructed as homologous to the symbolic plane or the Lacanian réel, a dimension resistant to symbolism and beyond the flow of signifiers accessible to Fascism. It was this construction, encapsulated in the journal *Acéphale* and intended for a select readership, that permitted the representation of an otherwise ungraspable and always silenced Dionysian component. The specific mechanism of foreclosure, operating in the unconscious, was the functional mechanism of the secret and virtual revolutions it, as heterogeneous revolutionary possibility, would ritually enact, a speck within the larger social totality. The secret society of *Acéphale*, like Caillois' mantis would, "in the absence of all centers of representation and of voluntary action . . . walk, regain its balance, have coitus, lay eggs, build a cocoon, and what is most astonishing in the face of danger fall into a fake cadaverous immobility."³⁸ Completely surrounded by nationalistic fervor and masculinity hinging on the ac-

tualization of aggression, Bataille and Masson offer a critical alternative—the representation of aggressivity. The utopian project of the Left, encapsulated in the mirage of unity formed as the specular other, had been delimited entirely to the symbolic realm. *Acéphale*, as an integral community, was to substitute an erect and masculine Gestalt image of German nationalism with a virile, avant-garde version. Like the gonad of the female pigeon, conditioned to mature at the sight of its own mirror image, impotency for Masson and Bataille would be exorcised again and again by assuming the Gestalt image of a phallus expelled from the culture at large.

* This paper was written for a graduate seminar in the Department of Fine Arts at The University of British Columbia. I wish to thank students involved in that class for their insights and Professor Serge Guilbaut, for his criticism and direction in the writing of this paper.

- 1 André Masson, *Les Années surréalistes: correspondance 1916–1942* (Paris, 1990), 293.
- 2 George Bataille, "The Sacred Conspiracy," in *Georges Bataille: Visions of Excess, Selected Writings 1927–39* (Minneapolis, 1985), 181.
- 3 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Écrits: A Selection* (New York, 1977), 3.
- 4 See Denis Hollier, *The College of Sociology (1937–1939)* (Minneapolis, 1988), 3–5.
- 5 In the January 1937 issue entitled *Nietzsche et les Fascistes*, the Acephalic man is placed in relation to Montserrat, either balanced on top of the mountain, where at one time Pre-Christian cults would make sacrifice to a Black Madonna; incorporated into a landscape where the mountain and figure become part of a fiery and volcanic scene; or else in the final case where the Acephalic figure shoots up heavenward leaving the jagged spires of the summit plateau behind.
- 6 In the same issue two other representations appear. In the first a violent and headless Dionysus bursts forward from a desecrated and mythic landscape, blood gushing from a self-inflicted wound; in the second, a monumental Dionysus is again represented, this time with the head of the minotaur.
- 7 Georges Bataille, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," in *Georges Bataille: Visions of Excess, Selected Writings 1927–39* (Minneapolis, 1985), 154.
- 8 Georges Bataille, "Popular Front in the Streets," *Cahiers de Contre-Attaque*, I (May 1936), in *Georges Bataille: Visions of Excess, Selected Writings 1927–39* (Minneapolis, 1985), 162.
- 9 In 1938 Walter Benjamin would address the College on perhaps a similar theme. See Hollier, *The College of Sociology*, xxi.
- 10 See Bataille's use of heterogeneity in his article "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," in which he poses homogeneity as "linked to the bourgeois class by essential ties" (139) and analogous to an assimilating or adapting function of the state. Within "such conditions heterogeneous elements find themselves subjected to a *de facto* censorship. He continues:
"The exclusion of *heterogeneous* elements from the homogeneous realm of consciousness formally recalls the exclusions of the elements, described (by psychoanalysis) as *unconscious*, which censorship excludes from the conscious ego. The difficulties opposing the revelation of *unconscious* forms of existence are of the same order as those opposing the knowledge of *heterogeneous* forms. As will subsequently be made clear, these two kinds of forms have certain properties in common and, without being able to elaborate immediately upon this point, it would seem that the *unconscious* must be considered as one of the aspects of the *heterogeneous*." Bataille, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," 141.
- 11 Bataille, "The Popular Front in the Streets," 162.
- 12 Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 4.
- 13 Hollier, *The College of Sociology*, 45.
- 14 Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 1–2.
- 15 Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 1–2.
- 16 The pessimism of Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel is central to Bataille's position, though the possibility for cathartic pubescence in a social sense is kept alive, unlike Kojève's position.
- 17 See Elizabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan and Co: A History of Psychoanalysis in France 1925–85* (Chicago, 1990), chapters 1–4.
- 18 There are important political distinctions to be made within this psychoanalytic community as well, however. For instance, Jacques Lacan's structural mapping of the unconscious and understanding of psychoses, employing the culturally situated familial complex, positions him in opposition to the hereditary geneticism and theories of sexuality of Edouard Pichon. See Pichon's article "La Polarisation masculin-féminin," *L'Évolution psychiatrique*, III (1934), 59–96. Also Mme Françoise Minkowska, "L'hérédité dans la schizophrénie et dans l'épilepsie," *L'Évolution psychiatrique*, V (1936), 45–66. And Carolyn Dean, *Playing by the Rules and other Symptoms of Modernist Despair: Georges Bataille and Jacques Lacan: 1925–55* (unpublished Ph.D., Univ. of California Berkeley, 1988).
- 19 "La Circoncision," *L'Hygiène mentale*, XXXIII, 5 (May 1938), 73–85.
- 20 Dr. Borel was the psychoanalyst of both André Masson and Georges Bataille. For an interesting analysis of the ineffable, i.e., the unsystemic other, which could be contacted through the psychoanalysis of the psychopathic subject see Borel's article "L'Expression de l'ineffable dans les états psychopathiques," *L'Évolution psychiatrique*, III (1934), 35–54.
- 21 Jacques Lacan, "Le problème du style et la conception psychiatrique des formes paranoïaques de l'expérience," *Le Minotaure*, I (1933), 69.
- 22 In this respect, the reworking or reformulating of the topography of the unconscious through a phenomenological approach incorporating an active cultural contingency was coincident for Lacan to a gravitation toward avant-garde circles and Leftist politics.
- 23 See Lacan's "Au delà du 'Principe de réalité'," *L'Évolution psychiatrique*, III (1936), 67–86. A critique of the value-laden practices of institutionalized psychology. translated in *Jacques Lacan: a bibliography* (Santa Cruz, 1987).
- 24 Carolyn Dean, *Playing by the Rules*, 17–83. Though Dean's analysis is certainly the best attempt to ground Lacan and Bataille in any kind of discursive context, she rules out what are the crucial political contingencies of the moment; factors and negotiations necessitated by the rise of Fascism.
- 25 Dean, *Playing by the Rules*, 137–181.
- 26 See Lacan's Ph.D. thesis *De la Psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité suivi des premiers Écrits sur la Paranoïa* (Paris, 1975).
- 27 Lacan, "Les Complexes familiaux en pathologie," *Encyclopédie française* (Paris, 1938), VIII, 1–8.
- 28 Lacan, "Les Complexes familiaux en pathologie." In effect the sociological shift in female crime statistics was an increase which had necessitated a reconception of the unconscious.
- 29 Macey, *Lacan in Contexts* (New York, 1987), 71.
- 30 Jacques Lacan, "Aggressivity and Psychoanalysis," *Écrits: A Selection* (New York, 1977), 10.
- 31 The orthodox Freudians in Paris would not be included in this group.
- 32 I paraphrase here from *Jacques Lacan: A Bibliography*, 125.
- 33 *Jacques Lacan: A Bibliography*, 125.
- 34 For Lacan: "These are images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body; in short the imagos grouped together under the apparently structural term of imagos of the fragmented body." Benvenuto and Kennedy, *The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction* (London, 1986), 57.
- 35 Benvenuto and Kennedy, *The Works of Jacques Lacan*, 57.

- 36 Again what is crucial is the example and result offered by the psychoanalytic session.
- 37 This vital or sacred aggressivity stemmed from the projected part of the self contained within the Gestalt, which would awaken in the subject its desire for the object of the others desire. It was this phenomenological current which crystallized the erotic relations of the dialectical self and produced the erotic energy for ego constitution.
- 38 Roger Caillois, "La Mante religieuse," *Minotaure*, V (1934), 26.