

The Greece of Andre Masson

July 11, 2007

The Basil and Elise Goulandris Museum on Andros island hosts an exhibition on the famous surrealist artist

The French surrealist painter Andre Masson once said that when, in a small study conducted within the surrealist movement during its early days, artists were asked to list the creatures of Greek mythology that interested them the most, they all cited the Minotaur. This deadly creature represented the instinctual forces that the surrealists sought to release in the hope of breaching the dominance of reason. For, according to their thinking, it was reason that had led to the impasse of Western civilization and the crisis of the interwar period.

Theseus was the figure of reason and the Minotaur the image of the beastly and of death. The labyrinth, a structure with psychoanalytical connotations as it also symbolized the delving into the unconscious, was the dangerous and often fatal path that man had to take in order to attain wisdom and liberation. The labyrinth offered no way out, yet, in surrealist utopian thinking, death and disaster were necessary for the birth of a new society. Life and death, violence and eroticism were the flip sides of the same reality.

The myth of the Minotaur captured human drama in all its range. As an artist at the core of the surrealist movement, Masson (1896-1987) was actually the one who introduced the mythical monster into surrealist iconography. Several years after his well-known "Massacre" scenes, in 1938 he painted "The Labyrinth," a painting with complex visual symbolism. In this famous painting, a labyrinthine structure and other elements taken from nature fill the insides of a beastly figure, presumably the Minotaur, that towers against the background of a formidable, cosmogonical landscape.

The painting is one of the most impressive works of Masson presented at "Ancient Greece and Masson," an exhibition held at the Basil and Elise Goulandris Museum of Contemporary Art on Andros island. Vassilis Goulandris bought the painting in 1977 when the Andre Masson retrospective organized by New York's Museum of Modern Art traveled to Centre Pompidou's National Museum of Modern Art. Goulandris donated the painting to the Museum; its current display on Andros brings the story full circle.

The Andre Masson exhibition helps bring attention to an artist who, according to Didier Ottinger, chief curator of the Musee National d' Art Moderne and co-curator of the Andros exhibition together with Guite Masson and Kyriakos Koutsomallis, was the most intellectual of the painters who were part of the surrealist movement.

In the early 1920s, Masson gathered with artists and intellectuals that went on to become leading figures in surrealism, among them Michel Leiris, Antonin Artaud, Georges Limbour and Joan Miro, in meetings that discussed the poetry of Rimbaud and Lautremont, the writings of Dostoevsky and the Marquis de Sade and the philosophy of Nietzsche which had a profound effect on their thinking and particularly on the work of Masson. The concept of the sublime as expressed in the romantic-symbolist tradition fitted the surrealist rejection of the rational and the concept of an artist as a visionary, while Freud's analysis of the unconscious provided a theoretical basis for the technique of psychic automatism that the surrealists introduced in art.

Masson joined the surrealist movement in 1924, when it was officially founded by Andre Breton, who that same year bought Masson's "Les Quatres Elements" at the artist's first solo exhibition in Paris. The painting is one of the earliest expressions of Masson's keen interest in pre-Socratic philosophy, particularly the thinking of Heraclitus. It also shows his passion for the philosophy of Nietzsche.

The Andros exhibition includes a wonderful portrait of the Greek philosopher that Masson painted in 1943 when he was living in New York. Like other European artists and Breton himself, he left Paris because of the war but returned in 1945. In those days, Masson was interested in Asian calligraphy and was inspired by the spiritual contact with nature that was inherent in Asian philosophy. His work had a profound effect on the American abstract expressionists.

This connection with nature, which in the New York period took on a certain mysticism, is latent in all of Masson's works and underlies the themes of metamorphosis, violence and eroticism that dominate his work.

It is the dark, "Dionysiac" and "Nietzschean" aspect of Greek mythology that pervades the work of Masson. In the Andros exhibition drawings inspired by the fearsome Horses of Diomedes, the massacre of the Amazons or hideous monsters such as the Gorgons or the Minotaur unfold Masson's perusal of Greek mythology. "Bataille and I dealt with the dark Greece, the pre-Classical Greece that was filled with abysses and ruins" he once wrote.

“According to the Greek myth, the Minotaur is slain. In my version he is the victor, he kills anybody who enters the labyrinth.”

His paintings of violence corresponded with the thinking of Bataille who, for ideological reasons, broke off from the Breton circle in 1929, taking with him other dissident surrealist artists and intellectuals. Masson followed suit and his work, especially his “Massacre” series, was published in Documents, the periodical that expressed the group’s beliefs, their interest in the Jungian approach to civilization and their study of ethnology.

Together with Bataille, he also participated in the periodical Minotaure, a venture by the Greek publisher Stratis Eleftheriadis-Teriade.

After a two-year stay in Spain (1934-1936) which enriched his depiction of the myth of the Minotaur with scenes inspired by bullfights, Masson collaborated with Bataille once more, this time in the newly released publication Acephale. Masson designed the cover of the magazine: He drew a headless human figure with a skull in place of the genitalia and a labyrinth for the intestines. The image is one of the most potent symbols of surrealism’s loss of faith in conventional power and the authority of logic. It contains all the violence and dark side that suffuses the work of Masson. But it also expresses the utopian and visionary thinking that lies behind his art. Through his work, Greece became the start for a more profound understanding of human nature and the inspiration for a liberated society.

“Ancient Greece and Masson” at the Goulandris Museum of Contemporary Art on Andros island, tel 22820 22444, to Sept 30.

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"André Masson: Surrealism and His Discontents"

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Martin Ries

André Masson: Surrealism, and His Discontents

Civilization obeys an internal erotic impulsion.

- *Sigmund Freud*

We see now that the abyss of  
history

is deep enough to hold us all.

- *Paul Valery*

André Masson fought in the Great War because he wanted to experience "the Wagnerian aspects of battle" and know the ecstasy of death; Otto Hahn's biography of Masson explained that "ecstasy" the day a bullet ripped into the young artist's chest during the offensive at Chemin des Dames in April of 1917. Stretcher-bearers were unable to get him to safety and he was left on his back for the night. "The world around him became something wondrous and he experienced his first complete physical release, while in the sky there appeared before him a torso of light."<sup>[1]</sup>

Every person is unconsciously convinced of his own immortality, but when he faces his destiny, testing ceases and reality comes into its own. Gold must be tried in the fire until the dross is burned out, and similarly, when certain elements are exposed to high temperatures new substances are produced which are more than the sum of their components,<sup>[2]</sup> likewise the truly religious are essentially otherworldly. Because of that "ecstatic experience" Masson became a stranger on earth, a perverse theologian of a world that had suffered a Fall and experienced an Incarnation which changed all the relations of his past and future.

From that alembic bullet and that torso of light, death became a fateful vision for Masson. The war left him nervous with nightmares; he suffered from insomnia and spent long painful hours dreaming new paintings. He defined the relationship between life and death as between two sides of the same coin, *l'endroit* and *l'envers*,<sup>[3]</sup> two faces of the same picture; in his greatest moments of illumination and metamorphosis he painted what transpired on both sides.

Many young men suffered traumatic war experiences that shaped their lives and changed history. Max Ernst bombarded the trenches in which his eventual close friend, Paul Eluard, was standing guard; Franz Marc and Duchamp-Villon were among those killed, Guillaume Apollinaire died on Armistice Day " and we were able to believe that Paris was bedecked in his honor." [4] Max Beckmann, Oskar Kokoschka, Fernand Léger, Georges Braque, Otto Dix, George Grosz and many others, all belonged to a generation for whom this slaughter was an overwhelming trial in their lives, shattering their confidence in the moral and rational assumptions of Western culture and throwing into question the entire nature of human existence. [5]

There were others who fed on the horrors of war. A would-be artist, Adolf Hitler (about forty of his wartime sketches survive), an almost suicidally heroic dispatch runner, received nearly every medal available, two minor wounds, was gassed, and blinded. [6] It was while in the hospital, suffering mutism and hysterical blindness that he had the vision that he had a great mission to perform, that he was chosen by Providence to liberate Germany from its bondage and make it great. This was the most outstanding characteristic of Hitler's personality, and it is this that guided him with the "precision of a sleepwalker." [7] More significantly, he enjoyed his war experience and was excited by the new life opening up for him after the bleak failure of his early years. By his own account the "ecstatic feeling" in the trenches persuaded and "toughened" him for the struggle ahead. His front line crisis, which contained all the psychological conditions of a conversion, fixed in Hitler's psyche the passion and conviction that changed him into the furious Creator of Warriors. No one evoked so much rejoicing, hysteria, and expectation of salvation during the 1930s as Hitler, when with displays of pseudo-religious pageantry and military power, he turned a demoralized nation into an unqualified instrument of defiance and conquest. The defeated German people accepted him as the Messiah for whom they had been waiting. Germany, ruled by a failed painter, went berserk.

During the 1920s Masson's life was far from serene. He had already developed a masterly cubist style (Picasso praised him highly); but emerging from the war, shattered and subject to fits of rage, he was frequently in a violent, emotional state. There followed a succession of hospitals and finally confinement in a mental ward. The artist's new gore-scarred art was a meditation on death, concentrating on Masson's realities: metamorphosis, erotic violence, death and chaos. He opened himself to the provocation of Surrealist ideology,

and his work became a medium of poetic exploration, a realm where dark myths and mutations of the psyche held sway over the forms invented for their depiction.

As he would later affirm, "I am more a sympathizer with Surrealism than a Surrealist or a non-Surrealist. The movement is essentially a literary movement." What Gertrude Stein called "my 'wandering line' is probably the key characteristic of my work. But it wasn't the line that was wandering, it was me."<sup>[8]</sup> Seeking deeper inspiration, the erudite Masson turned to the somber, chthonic Greek myths. Sapphire points out the appearance, in the 1920s, of cemeteries, men trapped in underground chambers, cruel, erotic and violent combats, butchering and devouring of animals, and finally the massacre of women, which continued through the 1930s and into the early 1940s. <sup>[9]</sup>

A crisis in the Surrealist circle erupted in 1929, precipitated by the question of the movement's relationship to the Communist Party; Masson left and eventually broke with the movement entirely.<sup>[10]</sup> He decided Surrealism was a closed system; and any system, as Nietzsche points out, lacks integrity. In France, during the 1930s, the Surrealists cultivated the Cult of the Erotic Female as revelation of truth and transcendence, and the only experience by which man could find final salvation. Masson twisted the arrow in the heart of this cult when he showed the world in all its impossibilities and spiritual nihilism. But Masson, that terrified and terrifying Cassandra, explored the imagery of his unconscious, consciously projected it as evocative subject matter and creatively opened the way to emotional and philosophic expression. His work was a dreadfully accurate depiction of the psychotic aspects of European life. Carolyn Lanchner, writing about Masson's 1938 drawing, *Dream of a Future Desert (Rêve d'un future desert)*, contended that "this apocalyptic vision of the end of the world embodies the torment of the artist who saw in the Spanish Civil War and the rise of Hitler the sure portent of holocaust."<sup>[11]</sup>

To eat together is communion. Meals in an ancient household were sacred because the household god was present; in myths and dreams and in marriage ceremonies, eating symbolizes the sexual act, and on another plane this ingestion relates to the final digestion by the earth, the dissolution of the body. The window in *Pygmalion* becomes the square (meaning contemporary) halo of the Nietzschean god being consumed. The table is tilted so as to become part of the holocaust without. Chaos, the state descending on the Western World, and in another context the condition that precedes consciousness, had been described by Plato and Pythagoras as "the primordial substance," or the soul of the universe. Twentieth-century man was confused and his image distorted by the schism

between different realities; until that alembic bullet and torso of light of World War I, Masson (and Western Man) felt at home in the world. After that he could find his way only by rejecting and/or transcending the world. Man had accepted *le néant*, *le gouffre*, the abysmal nothingness of Charles Baudelaire; the House of Horrors which Europe became in the spring of 1939 was built on that splenetic foundation.

In Masson's metamorphosis of image and reality in *Pygmalion*, the sculpture on the right becomes the esurient monster at the table; indeed, it becomes the table itself, devouring its contents. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Harpies attack Aeneas and his men: "Italy is the goal ye seek; ... until dread hunger and the hunger of violence towards us force you to gnaw with your teeth and devour your very tables."<sup>[12]</sup> Praying Mantises, unlike other insects, do not eat plant life; they are the outstanding cannibals of the insect world and devour even members of their own family. They appealed to the Surrealists because of the fact that, while mating, the female devours the male. Masson's sculpture is surmounted by an ominous beaked head more akin to a bird of prey than a praying mantis (*Mantis religiosa*); while the chair at the left, with bowed head, is similar to the male mantis about to be eaten, as well as the Dalíesque peasant in Jean-François Millet's famous painting, *Angélus* (*The Angelus*; 1857-59).<sup>[13]</sup>

The decapitated bird's head on the chair (like the fish, the bird was originally a phallic image, with the power to heighten and spiritualize) corresponds to the Surrealists' desire to transform the world by amorous love and sexual passion. Elena Dimitrovnice Drakonova married Paul Eluard and was the object of his early love poetry. He renamed her Gala, as did Salvador Dalí, for whom Diakonova left Eluard. But Dalí also called her Galatea, a reference to the ivory maiden brought to life by Aphrodite in response to the prayers of the sculptor Pygmalion. This myth, used by the Surrealists during the 1930s, resembles Sigmund Freud's Gradiva theme in its blurring of the distinction between animate and inanimate, life and death, creation and destruction.

Freud's 1906 essay, "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*" was the analysis of a story by a minor German writer concerning an archeologist so devoted to his profession that he had no place in his life for women. The archeologist became fascinated by an antique marble relief depicting a walking girl whom he called Gradiva (based on Gradivus, the surname of Mars, signifying He Who Walks in Battle). In the story he dreamed he saw her inundated by the ancient eruption of Vesuvius, and felt impelled to visit Pompeii where he did indeed meet "Gradiva," who turned out to be a childhood friend who, in love with

him, conformed to his delusion in order to cure him. Freud refers to this revelation and final salvation as the "medication of love."

The Surrealists adopted Gradiva as their ideal woman or Madonna; she could intercede between the real and the surreal, and was a "*perceur de murailles*", or piercer of walls, an expression used by Eluard in his poem, *Au défaut du silence* (1925), as a reference to his wife Gala, whom the Surrealists regarded as their muse. Later this expression was used symbolically by André Breton, Dalí, and René Crevel, to describe the unique ability of the muse Gradiva to perceive the surreal.[14]

In 1931, Freud's essay, "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*," translated for the first time into French, impressed the Surrealists more powerfully than his other writings. That same year Dalí painted the first of a series of works treating the theme of Gradiva, which was eventually to unite the all-embracing figure of Gala, the elusive wife of Eluard and mistress of Max Ernst.[15] After Gala married Dalí she received the name "Gala-Gradiva." One could interpret Masson's iconography for *Gradiva* (1939) as a Freudian illustration drawn directly from the Jensen story as it depicts the archeologist's dream of the eruption of Vesuvius. The archeologist, before his cure through the "medication of love," is disgusted by the sight of the sexual coupling of "evil and unnecessary flies," recalling Dalí's persistent insects as consumers of time and of life. Masson's Gradiva is beset by bees, which are not only concomitant with Cupid, representing the pains and sorrows of love, but also were used in ancient Roman libations for death rituals.[16] The religious associations of honey (the god Priapus was a protector of bees) were derived from the notion that it was *ros caelestis*, (celestial dew) which bees gathered in the upper air.[17]

## GRADIVA

The body of Gradiva is in both a birth and death attitude (like a combination Aztec birth goddess and sleeping Ariadne) and she is half flesh and half marble with a slab of beefsteak between her legs. Her position even retains the right foot "in erection,"[18] as in the ancient marble relief of *Gradiva* in the Vatican Museum - and similar to the stance of a preying mantis.

Not only do bees bring to blossoms the essential fertilizing pollen by means of their feet, but Masson makes a further connection by having Gradiva's left breast serve as a hive.[19] The woman who feeds on man, mantis-like, is fed upon by bees, and again by man, who consumes beefsteaks.[20] The left wall is pierced by a rifle-like opening, while the poppies refer to the war, or possibly to the more traditional emblem of sleep and death. The volcano is a male sex symbol, whose "spermatic lava" (*lave spermatique*, Masson's phrase) covers Pompeii; it is also Freud's image of repression. Masson's and Dali's paintings, Breton's essay, Freud's paper - all used the Gradiva theme as a myth of metamorphosis, intergeneration, and regeneration of life.

However, Masson gives this idea a perverse twist since the beefsteak also corresponds to the maze, as in his drawing, *Ariadne's Dream* (*Le rêve d'Ariane*, 1938). The maze betokens the mysteries of female organs, just as the shell-vulva is associated with water and Venus, sources of fertility and symbols of one generation rising from the death of the preceding.

While the chair in *Pygmalion* is as humble and honest as Vincent Van Gogh's (the more elaborate chair in Masson's *Mansion of Birds* [*Hôtel des oiseaux*, 1938] has overtones of Paul Gauguin's chair, also depicted by Van Gogh), the armchair of Louis XVI refers to a pseudo-throne, a false "World Center" without the stability, equilibrium, and synthesis customarily attributed to thrones since prehistoric times. In contrast to the phallic bird of *Pygmalion* or *Mansion of Birds*, this "seat of government" is in a stagnant pool, a reference to Louis's inability to consummate his marriage (the trap is a surrealist symbol for *vagina dentata* [toothed vagina]), and probably for Dali's noted onanism.[22] The king is an old symbol of universal and archetypal man. But what is left here is the "body" (the theme of decapitation is linked with castration), the seat of insatiable appetite, desire, and death. This image does not refer to the myth of the dead and resurrected king which has its origins in the movement of the sun and the giver of life (in pre-historic Egypt the king ritually walked around the walls of the temple to keep the sun on its course); but this Louis is not a king who walks, much less a sun king.

One cabriole leg is rooted in the ground (originally crowns were made of tree limbs and were attributes of the gods) and the other is a cloven hoof. The crown of light is nowhere to be seen. Does this lack of a head refer to the very efficient machine of Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotine, or the consuming activities of another preying mantis? (Plato asserted that the head is "the image of the world," and Hitler was fascinated with the idea of

severed heads, his favorite doodle). Louis holds the Veto (just as Jacques-Louis David's *Marat* holds the note from Charlotte Corday), a reference to the attempt of Louis to exercise the veto assured him by the Constitution of 1791, one of the causes of the Revolution.

#### *LANDSCAPE WITH PRAYING MANTIS*

Masson returns to an illustrative depiction of a mantis in supine position in his *Landscape with Praying Mantis* (*Paysage á la mante religieuse*, 1939) with *vagina dentata* as barbed vise (the shell-vulva of *Pygmalion* and *Gradiva*, with their classical allusions, have been discarded for twentieth century "reality." Indeed, the mantis's legs are in the same position as *Gradiva's* and reminiscent of the table legs in *Pygmalion*). The giant mantis advances toward us over a non-spatial landscape of hills with *mons veneris* curves. This odalisque has metamorphosed into the more threatening Medea-like trap in *Mansion of Birds* and looks very much like an ancient Egyptian funerary bed.

#### *MANSION OF BIRDS*

Symbolism, which once pointed skyward to the deity, now points to the brothel, and mutation is saturated with erudition, eroticism, and sadism. The bed and chairs<sup>[23]</sup> in *Mansion of Birds* are not only variations on the mantes, but become the genital *persona / daemon* of the sitter or recliner, and enact a primeval battle for the survival or destruction of the species. Tertullian, in the second century, wrote about the crimes alleged against Christians, including ritual infanticide and cannibalism in which the sacred Eucharist was dipped into the infants' blood before being consumed. During the Middle Ages it was claimed that witches smothered children in their beds; after the funeral they supposedly exhumed the bodies and took the dismembered parts to their meetings where they were eaten, according to *Errores Gazariorum* (Errors of Gazarius).<sup>[24]</sup> Witches offered these dead children (symbols of their souls) to Lucifer (torso of light?) then copulated with each other and with Lucifer. The shadows and vulva-shaped mirror in *Mansion of Birds* denote the "double" or "other self" of the body, the repressed dimensions of the psyche. Freud pointed out that a factor of "hostility to civilization must have already been at work in the

victory of Christianity over pagan religions. It was closely related to the low estimation put upon earthly life by Christian doctrine."<sup>[25]</sup>

A room without doors or windows evokes the absence of birth and death, an artificial existence, like Danaë sealed in the tower. A room in a brothel suggests shrouded thoughts and secret actions as well as repressive sexuality. In the center of the painting, instead of a door to the room, the chair faces a solid compositional divide - a *jauna diaboli* (devil's gate) through which devils enter, a patristic epithet for woman. The curtain, an old symbol of revelation, has been torn down and, instead of being used as swaddling clothes in the crib of the *Mansion of Birds*, is now used as a winding sheet for Western civilization and its values that were aborted by World Wars I and II.

The failure of Christianity to cope with religious pluralism over the centuries is congruent with the failure of the West to come to terms with the feminine side of the human psyche, or with women as persons. Medieval witchcraft was not a rebellion against orthodoxy so much as a continuation of heathen impulses (the Witches Sabbath resembled Dionysian revels). By excluding women and persecuting heretics, Christianity struggled against and repressed important dimensions of the Western psyche. In Nazi Germany Hitler offered men the full dependence of women, who were returned to the home where they were needed for reproduction for military build-up; hence the concept of "pure motherhood" and the men's denial of female sexual expression.

### *THE LABYRINTH*

Masson's *The Labyrinth* (*Le labyrinthe*, 1938), like Hieronymus Bosch's central image in the right panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1505-15), depicts a chimera of many parts. And just as Bosch's image, made up of boats, tree trunks, egg and tavern, is capped by a self-portrait, so we may interpret *The Labyrinth* as largely autobiographical. Indeed, Masson regarded it as "the key to the whole series of paintings undertaken since the spring of 1938."<sup>[26]</sup> Although this figure may have overtones of the torso of light as well as of Gradivus, ("Mars Who Walks in Battle") it certainly alludes to Masson's World War I injury (almost all his paintings at this time depict gaping lacerations). Masson considered himself a kind of bestial Minotaur: the head has a bull's skull and horns, the body cavity contains the maze, and next to his right "leg" is a swan which is associated with Leda's

abduction by Zeus (who also carried off Leda's cousin Pasiphaë). Bosch supposedly belonged to an Adamite sect which ritually ate a swan because it symbolized lasciviousness.

Freud accused Europe of developing, before World War I, a timid "museum culture," caring only to preserve its facade. However much he loathed barbarism, he gave it a certain therapeutic sanction and saw "The War to End All Wars" as a painful chastisement to an over-refined society that looked down on passion and excitement. Wars, Freud explained, return us to our sense of reality, and "death will no longer be denied."<sup>[27]</sup> He believed politics was founded on the group's erotic relation with authority, as a lover presupposes an "object" and a group presupposes a leader. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) he argues that the energy which made civilization possible subtracted from direct erotic experience;<sup>[28]</sup> it is no coincidence that Surrealism, in its early Dada phase, began as an anti-civilization movement. Is it a coincidence that Hitler's "ultimate purpose was ... aimed at the destruction of European civilization"?<sup>[29]</sup> As soon as Freud described erotic man he found that the human psyche had to rise beyond the pleasure principle, like Nietzsche's and others' autistic soaring beyond good and evil. If destructiveness was to be curtailed, it was necessary that the libido be sublimated. Freud's surreality principle absorbed his concept of "polymorphous perversity"; this became a catch phrase similar to the philosopher Herbert Marcuse's later "non-repressive sublimation," and the two have become inseparable, one serving as an explanation of the other, two sides of the same coin, *l'endroit* and *l'envers*, as body took over brain, id over ego. Thus Masson's torso of light, like Dali's *Invisible Man (L'Homme invisible, 1929-33)*,<sup>[30]</sup> is a manifestation of Nietzsche's "Last Man" whose feeling is ennui and whose posture is reclining, and a portrayal of Freud's *Urmensch*, man debilitated and exhausted by the struggle to live beyond his psychological means and suspicious of his own morality.

Masson stripped away much of the symbolism that screened Freud's theory of the id, yielded to his own unconscious, was informed by it, and relating imagination to reality, questioned the stability of consciousness itself.

The specter of death haunted Masson's work and the twentieth century as one of the signs of the times. Masson's traumatic experiences in World War I, the February 1934 riots in Paris, then the October riots in Barcelona affected him deeply. He was in Spain when the Civil War began, and wrote: "The violence, the fanaticism - so much love and so much hate - surpass anything that I could have imagined."<sup>[31]</sup> Death, a total vision for Masson,

held sway over all things, and it became a tutelary divinity as he attempted to purify his soul and purge his memory of horrible events. He fused his dreams with broader and higher levels of meaning, and his personal myths were expressed in images that were themselves difficult to understand pictorially as well as interpret verbally. Masson's work is full of archetypal content, but his picture-making as a neat Gestalt package was dissolved as art served revelation. The ingenious complexity of his mental processes, his randomness of composition, and his non-formalistic paintings, suggest to a younger generation that he is saying something else (to use one of Rilke's favorite words, *unsäglich*, something unsayable - or even unpaintable). Surrealism is essentially literary and psychological rather than plastic and formalistic, hyperbolically ready to trust its effects to the morbid shocks of fortuitous encounters whose juxtapositions endow the absurd complexity of our world and our psyche.

André Masson shows us what was so special about the tragedy of the twentieth century and the uniqueness of its crisis. He invented new labyrinths to search for new Minotaurs without regard for the dependability of Ariadne or her thread. Whether he encountered the Minotaur, or was transfixed by the torso of light, or found his way out of the maze did not concern him; he contemplated the experience of the journey. He would not slay the Minotaur but interrogate it for revelation; he would portray the line of Ariadne's thread wherever it led as he drew each beholder into the vital unstable center of his energy. Masson's art, without the coincidence of form, is a means of knowing; the intricate passages of his thought are so flowing as to leave the door open for man to find his way to the essential center. The highest achievement of modern man is a program of discontent, and within the blight of our dislocated sensibilities, Masson's surrealism of the 1930s is an exercise in courage and wisdom.

END

NOTES:

[1] Otto Hahn, *Masson*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1965, p.6-7.

[2] "Everything that may abide the fire, ye shall make it go through the fire, and it shall be clean." (*Numbers*, 31:23)

[3] *L'Envers et l'endroit*, by Albert Camus, 1937; the term referred symbolically to the inside and outside of a garment, here it meant the horror of death and the love of life.

[4] Jean Cocteau, *Journals of Jean Cocteau*, New York, Criterion Books, 1956, p. 48.

[5] Only after her son was killed at the front did Käthe Kollwitz recognize the madness of World War I. Almost all the combatants entered what they thought would be a short and glorious war for aristocratic, idealistic, and patriotic reasons. As a medical student, Sigmund Freud was proud of his reservist uniform, and thought of his military service as a healthy antidote to the neurasthenia of "over-civilization."

[6] Robert Payne, *The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler*, New York and Washington, Praeger Publishers, 1973, p.111-113, 120.

[7] Walter C. Langer, *The Mind of Adolf Hitler: the Secret Wartime Report*, New York and London, Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1972, p. 29. See also John Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1976, Chapter 14, "With the Assurance of a Sleepwalker," pp. 528-561. Marshall Göring flattered Hitler with the highest praise he knew when he said that the Führer proceeded with *nachtwandlerischer Sicherheit* [the security of a sleepwalker].

[8] *Newsweek*, 15 November 1965, p. 106. See also "...she was interested in his composition in the wandering line in his compositions." From *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1933, p. 258.

[9] L. M. Sapphire, *André Masson*, New York, 1973 (catalog for Blue Moon, and Lerner-Heller Galleries, New York), p. 8.

[10] Whitney Chadwick, "Masson's *Gradiva*: The Metamorphosis of a Surrealist Myth," *Art Bulletin*, vol. LII, no. 4, (December, 1970), p. 417.

[11] William Rubin and Carolyn Lanchner, *André Masson*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1976, p. 158.

[12] Norma Lorre Goodrich, *Ancient Myths* (New York: New American Library, 1960, 217; Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Cambridge and London, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 365.

[13] Salvador Dalí, *Le Mythe tragique de l'Angélu de Millet* (The Tragic Myth of the Angélu of Millet), Paris, 1963; cited in William L. Pressley, "The Praying Mantis in Surrealist Art," *Art Bulletin*, vol. LV, no. 4, (December, 1970), p. 601, n. 11.

[14] Chadwick, 418, n. 36.

[15] Jack J. Spector, *The Aesthetics of Freud: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Art*, New York and Washington, Praeger Publishers, 1972, p. 156. Max Ernst's *Premier mot limpide (At the First Limpid Word)* (1923; Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf), one of a series of decorations he created for Paul Éluard's house in Eubonne, is based on the Gradiva motif. Werner Spies points out the possible link between the painting and Freud's analysis of "Gradiva." Werner Spies, *Max Ernst, 1950-1970: The Return of La Belle jardinière* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1971): 48, 53.

[16] Andrea Alciato, *Emblemetum Libellus* (Book of Emblems), Paris, 1542, Emblem # 112.

See also: <http://www.mun.ca/alciato/>. Samson Eitrem, *Opferritus und Voropfer der Griechen und Römer* (Sacrificial Rites and Offerings of Greece and Rome), Olms, Georg Publishers, 1977.

[17] Aristotle, *Historia Animalium* (History of Animals), Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1965, 5.22, 553 b 29.

[18] Jean-Paul Clebert, *Mythologie d'André Masson* (Mythology of André Masson), Geneva: Cailler, 1971. Cited in William Rubin and Carolyn Lanchner, *André Masson*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1976, p. 227, n. 94. Freud describes her foot as "perpendicular" in Jensen's "Gradiva" (*Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey [London: Hogarth Press, 1959]), 10, 28, 46, 95.

[19] Virgil relates in his *Georgics* the belief that, should a colony of bees perish, a new swarm would be regenerated from the blood of a bull.

[20] Beefsteak, like Dalí's limp tongues, has genital references.

[21] Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 30. "The one thing that held together all elements of the army, whether old guard or republican, Jesuit or Freemason, was the *mystique d'Alsace*." [Tuchman's italics]. The Alsace-Lorraine territory was originally part of the Holy Roman Empire, ceded to Louis XIV by the peace of Westphalia; restored to Germany after the Franco-Prussian war. Napoleon III's shameful defeat in 1871 cost France two of its richest provinces, Alsace and Lorraine. The military resolved to restore them to France, and young officers were drilled on *élan vital*, the cult of the offensive.

[22] Pressley, p. 603

[23] They recall the Marquis de Sade's *Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), in which women assume the role of furniture.

[24] *Errores Gazariorum*, 1450, by an anonymous Savoyard Inquisitor. There is no edition, but see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *History of Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1972, p. 239; and Henry Charles Lea, *Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft*, 3 vols., edited by A. Howland, Phila., 1939; reprinted, New York, 1957.

See also Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenverfolgung im Mittelalter* (Origin and Examination of the History of Witch Madness and Persecution in the Middle Ages), Bonn, 1901; reprinted, Hildesheim, 1963.

[25] Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents," (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), 87.

[26] William Jeffett (ed), *Andre Masson: the 1930s*, St Petersburg Florida, Salvador Dali Museum, 1999, p. 148.

[27] Freud, *S. E.*, XIV, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," 14, 291.

[28] Freud, *S. E.*, "Civilization and Its Discontents," p.103-4.

[29] Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 261; see also 95, 96, 118, 123.

[30] Dalí's creation of this painting (1929-33, Vicomte de Noailles Collection, Paris) coincided with Dalí's initiation into the Surrealist movement, and with Masson's expulsion ("excommunication" was Breton's term) from it in 1929. Rubin and Lanchner, 214.

[31] Jeffett, p. 146. I wish to thank poet, critic and publisher, Edwin Treitler, for his suggestions in writing this study. A Release-Time Research Grant from Long Island University at Brooklyn enabled me to write the paper.

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Theseus, Minotaur, Acephale

### The Problem of the Insufficiency of Being (Bataille)

We will see how Bataille elaborates such "master and slave" dialectics in his scatological enterprise to write back the "accursed shares," especially his negative notions against architecture, his preoccupation with the "labyrinth" and the "Acéphale."

Bataille's main concern is the "problem of insufficiency of being" suggested in the Hegelian "life and death struggle for recognition." Denis Holler in his interpretation of Bataille's writings, *Against Architecture: the Writings of Georges Bataille*, correctly points out that Bataille's idiosyncratic rebelling against architecture as a prison warden is a revolt against the symbolic "authoritarian superego" and that "[t]he great motive for Bataille's aggressivity toward architecture is its anthropomorphism."<sup>[1]</sup> Bataille writes in "Architecture" that "whenever we find *architectural construction* elsewhere than in monuments, whether it be in physiognomy, dress, music, or painting, we can infer a prevailing taste for human or divine *authority*."<sup>[2]</sup> What is distasteful for the anthropomorphic skeleton in the architectural structure is the "silence" imposed on the audience and the "genuine fear" engendered from the monument (ibid. 35). Such a silence and fear is derived from the silence and fear that grounds the Kojévian "master-slave" edifice--the sustention of the mater-slave relation is built on the silence of "the thing" and the "thingness" of the slave. (In Hegel's text, however, there is contradictory reversal between the lord and the bondman.) Hence, for Bataille, "an attack on architecture . . . is necessarily, as it were, an attack on man" [the domineering value of man] (36). And the weapon is "bestial monstrosity" (36).

Bataille's excess in writing is grounded on his gigantic project to write back the "accursed share" to the Western mind. Alastair Brotchie attests that "Bataille's ideas are grouped around a set of interrelating notions, many taking the form of more or less unfortunate dualities (profane/sacred, homogeneity/heterogeneity, accumulation/expenditure, thought/eroticism) that are connected principally by the fact that the second portion of each term--which approximates to what he calls 'the accursed share'--corresponds to values and necessities what are excluded from the predominant forms of 'civilized' culture."<sup>[3]</sup> The monstrous mythic figure "Acéphale" (fig. 50 ) and "labyrinth" are two of Bataille strategies in his writing back. In "The Secret Conspiracy," with the Masson's illustration of the "Acéphale," Bataille proclaims a war, political as well as "ferociously religious," against

the homogeneous way of living motivated by "work" and governed by the rule of "utility" (i.e. the privileged left side of the dualities quoted above). He regards this headless, ferocious monster as the role model for the "formless," "heterogeneous," and "sacred" enterprise of the "Accursed share":

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.[4]

Such a hybrid of Birth and Death has an interesting affinity with the figures of Theseus and Minotaur in the Cretan vase (fig. 15).

As I mentioned before, the difference between Theseus and Minotaur in figure 15 lies in the head and weapon. Masson's illustration assimilates Theseus's sword and Minotaur's stone (heart) but truncates both figures' heads (see figure 51) and replaces the phallic with a skull (a hybrid of life and death). The head is missing because the head is the prison for man in Bataille's "Pineal Eye": "This great burning head is the image and the disagreeable light of the notion of expenditure, beyond the still empty notion as it is elaborated on the basis of methodical analysis."<sup>1</sup>[5] Another variation of the original figure lies in that Masson replaces the soft and vegetable "intertwining spiral" with "stomach" as the reference to the labyrinth. By canceling the two heads in the Cretan legend, the values of "Order" and "Orderly Disorder" are detracted. What are left are "Disorder" and "Disorderly Order." Such a detraction makes "the quartet of Being" tumbling. By replacing a double-

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directional vegetable image with a uni-directional animal image, the subtle wisdom in the classical labyrinth is reduced to a perverted "will to power."

Bataille reverses the order of the role model for "a master and a slave," replacing the hero with the monster as the ideal ego. Through excess and labyrinth--through writing back the accursed shares--the Acéphalic monster will be a new master in the society. Such a scatological project is still near-sighted and his practices in creating a hermetic society and a new myth never succeeded in his life time. The reason is still--the prevailing of violence--the release of the suppression of monstrosity in being from the surveillance of domineering culture does not release the monstrosity between beings. The canceling as well as the promoting of the monstrosity in being cannot negate nor sublimate the "difference" between beings--especially the different attitude toward monstrosity.

Notes:

[1] Dennis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, tr. Betsy Wing. Cambridge (Mass.: The MIT P, 1989) ix, xi.

[2] Georges Bataille, "Architecture," in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, eds. Georges Bataille and Robert Lebel & Isabelle Walberg (London: Atlas P, 1995) 35.

[3] Ibid. 20.

[4] Bataille, "The Sacred Conspiracy," *Vision of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993) 181.

[5] Bataille, "The Pineal Eye," *Visions of Excess* 82.

**ACEPHAL.** — *a.* and *sb.* *Obs. rare*; also **asephal** [*a.* Fr. *acéphale*, *ad.* late L.

*acephal-us.* see ACEPHALI] *A. adj.* Having no head or chief; = ACEPHALOUS. (Oxford English Dictionary.)

THE FIGURE OF THE ACEPHAL. — The drawing of the Acephal, a potent expression of the totality of Bataille's thought, embodies his reversed hermeticism in the form of a parody or anti-idealist version of renaissance depictions of the harmonic arrangement of the human body (Leonardo, Fludd etc.). The celebrated aphorism of hermetic philosophy "As above, so below" situated man in a universe designed by God in which the structure of the

microcosm reflected that of the macrocosm. Bataille exactly reversed this formula, for him — a heretic exalting the base over the spiritual in a universe in which "man can set aside the thought that it is he or God who keeps the rest of things from being absurd"<sup>13</sup> — the body is projected onto the world: *as below, so above*. The body as trope for society and other structures recurs throughout his writing (e.g. **Architecture**), in particular with regard to the sexual act and orgasm, from which he derived his concept of *expenditure*. To some extent all his writing is a doomed attempt to encompass the tumult of the sexual act (see the final section of this introduction).

The Acephal is headless, not only man escaping his thoughts, but a headless organisation, one abjuring hierarchy (Bataille criticised the Surrealists as hierarchical, and hierarchy is of course the hallmark of fascist organisation). Andre Masson made the drawing: "I saw him immediately as headless, as becomes him, but what to do with this cumbersome and doubting head? — Irresistibly it finds itself displaced to the sex, which it masks with a 'death's head.' Now, the arms? 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. Well, fine so far, but what 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."<sup>14</sup>

The drawing inspired Bataille's text *The Sacred Conspiracy*, where he described it in these terms: "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 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 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."