

The Remnants of Desire: Sacrificial Violence and Sexual Transgression in the Cult of the Kāpālikas and in the Writings of Georges Bataille

HUGH B. URBAN

Notorious for its transgressive sexual and sacrificial practices, the Śaivite sect of the Kāpālikas, or skull bearers, has long been misunderstood by historians of religions. This essay suggests a new way of approaching the Kāpālikas by using some of the insights of the controversial French thinker, Georges Bataille. By examining the symbolism of sacrifice and sexuality, beheading and castration, and the dialectic between taboo and transgression, this paper argues against many past interpretations, like that of Mircea Eliade. The Kāpālikas, it is argued, were not simply attempting to escape the world of history and death by transcending the duality of purity and impurity and achieving a state of other worldly detachment. Rather, they were deliberately playing upon and exploiting the dangerous, transgressive power on the margins of the social order, as a source of this-worldly power and liberation.

Among the many obscure heterodox sects of medieval India, few remain so perplexing or so misunderstood by contemporary scholars as the South Indian Śaivite sect known as the Kāpālikas, or skull-bearers. Infamous for their highly ambivalent oscillation between strict asceticism and violent hedonism, between austere acts of penance and transgressive acts of human sacrifice, eating faeces and ritual sex with outcastes, the Kāpālikas remain a disturbing enigma in the study of Indian religions. David Lorenzen has done a remarkable job of assembling the scattered evidence regarding this lost sect and of reconstructing their doctrines; but unfortunately, his interpretative comments are disappointingly brief and underdeveloped. Most other scholars, like Mircea Eliade and Jonathan Parry, have interpreted the Kāpālika cult as an attempt to escape the burden of time, death and *saṃsāra*, by transcending the duality of purity and impurity.¹

In order to understand a tradition as difficult and disturbing as the Kāpālikas, I would submit that we need to employ a comparable hermeneutical tool: specifically, I wish to use some of the insights of the controversial French novelist and social theorist, Georges Bataille, in order to open up a new way of understanding the Kāpālikas. To most readers, Bataille is known first of all as an author of rather filthy and disturbing pornographic novels; to his critics, like André Breton, he is known as that 'excremental philosopher', a sick and self-contradictory scatological pervert;² to those who are versed in the literature of post-modernism, however, he is also recognized as one of the heralds of post-structuralism and a forefather of Derrida and Foucault; and among some sociologists, he is even regarded as one of the most innovative thinkers in the tradition of Durkheim and Mauss.³

But rather oddly, Bataille has seldom been taken seriously by historians of religions—despite the fact that he devoted a large and fairly sophisticated body of writings to the study of ritual and mystical experience. Born in 1897 in Puy-de-Dôme, Bataille was throughout his life obsessed with religion; he briefly converted to Catholicism and considered the priesthood, only then to denounce the Church and become a sort of self-styled pagan mystic; though he never entered academia, and spent his life as a librarian, he was a founder both of a mystical secret society and of the Collège de Sociologie in Paris, which centered around the role of religion in society.⁴

Like all of his writings, Bataille's works on religion are shocking, offensive and blasphemous. Nevertheless, as I hope to show, they also contain a number of remarkable insights which have much to offer contemporary historians of religions. Indeed, it is precisely because Bataille is so weird and scary that he can help us understand some of the weirder and scarier of the world's religious phenomena (of which there are not a few). If it is true that we need to use many different methodological tools to interpret many different kinds of religious phenomena, then I suggest that Bataille should be added to our toolbox of pluralism.⁵

Specifically, I wish to employ Bataille's theories about sacrifice, eroticism, and the dialectic between taboo and transgression, in order to argue against the opinions of scholars like Eliade and Parry. The Kāpālikas, I submit, are not simply trying to escape the world of rebirth by transcending the duality of purity and impurity; rather, they are deliberately playing upon the symbolism of excess and the dialectic between taboo and transgression, as a supreme source of worldly empowerment which is always contained within, and yet always threatening to all rational systems, which simultaneously supports and yet subverts established religious boundaries.

Obviously, there are several methodological problems involved in using a figure as difficult and controversial as Bataille to interpret a foreign religious tradition, particularly a tradition as elusive as the Kāpālikas. First of all, there is the basic problem of our historical evidence on the Kāpālikas themselves. Because of the poverty of first-hand sources on the Kāpālikas, their doctrines and practices must be reconstructed largely from either fictional sources or from their opponents. Therefore, we must ask the basic question: are these accusations of human sacrifice and orgiastic rites merely the fabrication of their enemies or simply the projections of the darkest fears of the Indian unconscious? While admitting that this is possible, Lorenzen, Eliade, Barthakuria and most other scholars believe that there is sufficient evidence from a wide variety of sources to suggest that these accusations do have some basis in historical fact. Not only are there the fictional sources like the dramas of Kṛṣṇamiśra and Bhavabhūti, the Persian *Dabistān*, or the mythological *Periya Purāṇa*; but there are also much more believable sources, including philosophical treatises like Rāmānuja's *Śrībhāṣya*, Ānandagiri's *Śaṅkara-vijaya*, or the *Śaṅkara-digvijaya* attributed to Mādhava; and there are even a few inscriptions from Kāpālika temples in Mysore and Andhra Pradesh which provide concrete evidence for the existence of the cult.⁶ Moreover, we also know of other contemporaneous Śaivite Tantric sects, who did practise both sacrifice and ritual sex, as well as modern descendants of the Kāpālikas, like the Aghorīs, who still do practise necrophilia, necrophagia and other gruesome rites.⁷ The single most convincing piece of evidence, however, is Alexis Sanderson's recent discovery of a corpus of Kāpālika texts in Nepal, foremost among which is the *Jayadrathayāmala*; this finding lays to rest any lingering doubts about the existence of the sect, and also shows its close connections with Tantric ritual practices.⁸

Ultimately, however, I would argue that even if the Kāpālikas never did practise human sacrifice or sexual rituals, the very fact that for centuries the so many Indians *believed they did* would still be extremely interesting and noteworthy. Like the violent, erotic Śiva himself, they would still represent an integral part of the Hindu mythic imagination, expressing its deepest fears about that dangerous power on the margins of the social order.

The second problem with a study like this is the nature of Bataille's own writings: by no means a careful scholar, Bataille was an extremely eclectic and haphazard reader, who used his sources quite indiscriminately. Moreover, it is difficult to know how much

Bataille himself knew about and was influenced by Indian thought. He had clearly read a good deal about Indian religions, including yoga, Tantrism and the mythology of Kālī; but strangely, his own writings on these traditions are neither extensive nor accurate.⁹ Nevertheless, while acknowledging these problems, I will argue that we can still salvage and make use of some of his key ideas. I am by no means suggesting that Bataille offers the definitive interpretation of the Kāpālikas, nor do I wish to exclude other readings. Rather, he opens a new ‘shifting perspective’, in Richard Shweder’s terms, one which should not become another petrified view, but should allow us to look at other cultures and ourselves through ‘new ways of seeing’.¹⁰

After a brief historical and mythological background, I will first examine the relationship between sacrifice and sexual rituals, which form the core of Kāpālika practice (I). Second, I will explore the dialectic between taboo and transgression, asceticism and hedonism (II). And third, I shall examine their ideal of final liberation, which is conceived in terms of this-worldly empowerment and a kind of perpetual cosmic orgasm (III).

I. Sacrifice and Sex; Beheading and Castration

The bliss which becomes manifest through sexual union is the true form of Bhairava. The attainment of that (bliss) at death is *mokṣa*. This is the ultimate truth.

(Unmatta Bhairava (a Kāpālika) in Mādhava’s *Śaṅkara-digvijaya*, xv.28)
the embrace restores us, not to nature . . . but rather to the totality in which man has his share by *losing himself* . . . For an embrace is not just a fall into the animal muck, but the anticipation of death and the putrefaction that follows it . . . the totality is reached . . . only at the price of a sacrifice: eroticism reaches it precisely inasmuch as love is a kind of immolation.

(Bataille, *The Accused Share*, v.II, p. 119)

Historically, the origin of the Kāpālika sect can probably be traced to South India of the early centuries C.E. The oldest known references to a cult of skull-bearing ascetics appears in the *Yājñavalkya-smṛti* (iii.243) [100–300 C.E.] and the *Gāthā-saptaśatī* [1st century C.E.]; however, the sect appears to have only taken root and flourished later, between the 7th and 15th centuries in South India, particularly in the area of Mysore and Karnataka, although also spreading as far north as Varanasi and Bengal.¹¹ Often classified as one of the four primary Śaivite sects, the Kāpālikas share much in common with other movements of devotional worship of Śiva, such as ascetic renunciation and worship of the linga; however, they also mixed this with the more extreme yogic and Tantric schools of South India. By the 15th century, the sect seems to have been gradually dissolved and assimilated into other Śaivite groups—such as the Kānphaṭās, the Goraknāths and particularly the Aghorīs, who even today in areas like Banaras are infamous for their shocking practices of eating and copulating with dead bodies.¹²

Mythologically, however, the Kāpālikas trace their own origins to the deity Śiva, and specifically to myths of Śiva as Kapālin or the skull-bearer. In some Purāṇic versions of the myth, it is said that the creator god, Brahmā, made some insulting remarks about Śiva; in other variants, it is said that Brahmā’s crime was actually incest with his own daughter.¹³ But in either case, Śiva (or his wrathful incarnation, Bhairava) promptly cut off one of Brahmā’s five heads, and was then punished to wander over the earth with the skull fastened to his hand as his begging bowl, ‘thus defying all the strict Hindu ordinances of purity and impurity’,¹⁴ until the skull finally fell off at the sacred site of Kapālamocana in Banaras.

However, as Wendy Doniger has shown in her discussions of this myth, it needs to be understood in the context of several related narratives about Śiva and his acts of transgression, beheading and castration. Rudra-Śiva, from the very earliest texts, is the god of punishment, who violates the law of society and the ritual in order to set it aright again. In the Brāhmaṇas, for example, the creator-deity Prajāpati committed incest with his daughter in order to beget all living things; hence, Rudra was called upon to punish him, and, once slain, Prajāpati's head flew up to become the constellation of the Antelope's head—a kind of cosmic beheading.¹⁵ In some versions, when Prajāpati was slain, he let loose his semen, which then became a fiery, 'destructive power', knocking out the teeth and pulling out the eyes of those who get in its way.¹⁶ In other myths, it is said that the gods excluded the wild outsider Rudra from their sacrifice, which violated the proper order of the ritual. Therefore, Rudra slew and beheaded the sacrificial beast—again letting loose a dangerous and violent power—to restore the ritual order and gain his proper share of the feast.¹⁷ Some later narratives, like the story of Dakṣa's sacrifice, combine both the themes of sacrifice and incest. Dakṣa, who had incestuous tendencies towards Satī, his daughter and Śiva's wife, excluded Śiva from the sacrifice (in some versions, he did so in part because Śiva is a Kāpālīka—an 'impure abolisher of rites . . . a mad-man, naked, laughing', a god of 'heretical doctrines, Kāpālīkas and Kālāmukhas').¹⁸ In his rage, Śiva again let loose his terrible violence, destroyed the ritual and beheaded Dakṣa, ironically making him the victim at his own sacrifice (see Table 1).¹⁹

In short, as the god who violates the proper order so as to restore it, Śiva is the embodiment of the paradox at the very heart of the sacrificial ritual itself. As J. C. Heesterman has argued, the Brahmanic sacrifice is intended to create a closed world of order and purity, a harmonious microcosm based on meticulous rules and ritual injunctions, which will bring new life and regeneration to the world. And yet at the core of the sacrifice lies the problematic reality of violence and the defiling impurity of slaughter.²⁰ The myths of beheading, and the figure of Rudra-Śiva, Heesterman argues, are a symbol of this inescapable violence at the very core of the Vedic ritual.²¹ The very attempt to deny or repress this violence—to exclude the terrible Rudra—leads to an explosion of new violence with a ten-fold destruction. Throughout the history of Indian ritual, the brahminical tradition tried to rationalize away as much of the violence and bloodshed as possible, gradually replacing it with a tidy system of ritual rules, and eventually eliminating the blood sacrifice altogether. However, as David Shulman suggests, the underlying fear of uncontrolled violence continued to haunt the Indian imagination for centuries, surviving in the later classical mythology and in the bhakti traditions.²²

This same paradox of purity and impurity, order and transgression, also appears to be transposed onto the sexual level in several myths surrounding Śiva's liṅga. Long before Freud developed the idea of sublimation and upward displacement, of course, Indians had been aware of the symbolic relationship between the genitals and the head, as well as between castration and beheading.²³ Not only do Hindu yogis sublimate their sexual energy, withdraw their semen and store it up in the head, where it is manifested in the form of their matted hair (Table 2); but in Indian iconography, particularly Tantric art, sexual intercourse is commonly symbolized by the image of the Goddess holding a severed head and wielding a great phallic sword. Moreover, Shulman has argued convincingly that the myths of sacrifice later served as the underlying paradigm for myths of sexuality and marriage in the classical tradition; here, the threat of unrestrained violence and beheading in the sacrifice is often replaced by the threat of unrestrained sexual power of the castrating Goddess, Durgā or Kālī.²⁴

TABLE 1.
A structural analysis of the myths of beheading and castration

Myth	Initial transgression (incest, improper sacrifice, improper creation)	Transgressive punishment (Beheading, castration)	Release of violence (fiery seed, etc.)	Restoration of order (restoration of head/penis)
Prajāpati's creation*	Prajāpati has incest with daughter to beget all things	Rudra slays him;	[Prajāpati spills fiery seed which knocks out eyes and teeth]†	Prajāpati's head becomes Antelope's Head constellation
Rudra and sacrifice‡	gods exclude Rudra from sacrifice	Rudra beheads sacrificial beast	destroys sacrifice	head of victim restored; Rudra gains his proper share (remnant)
Dakṣa's sacrifice§	Dakṣa excludes Śiva from sacrifice: has incestuous tendencies	Śiva beheads Dakṣa	destroys sacrifice [drop of sweat falls from Śiva and becomes destructive fever] [Dakṣa curses Śiva to be an impure, destructive, outcaste god of heretics (i.e., the Kāpālikas)]¶	replaces Dakṣa's head with that of beast; Śiva gets share of sacrifice
Beheading of Brahmā**	[Brahmā commits incest with daughter]††	Śiva cuts off 5th head	wanders earth as terrible skull-bearer	skull falls off at sacred site
Pine Forest‡‡	sages becomes proud because of great asceticism (=excessive <i>tapas</i>)	Śiva gets naked, shows penis and seduces wives; Sages castrate Śiva	liṅga becomes destructive power; loss of fertility and life in universe	liṅga established as object of devotion; order restored
Śiv's Self- Castration§§	gods create world without Śiva (improper creation) Śiva has excess creative <i>tapas</i>	Śiva tears out liṅga; creative <i>tapas</i> becomes destructive <i>tapas</i>	liṅga becomes a terrible, fiery pillar; releases flame which burns everything	gods worship liṅga; destructive <i>tapas</i> becomes creative again

N.B. Beheading punishes transgression (especially sexual transgression by release of *excessive* violent power.

N.B. Castration is a result of excess creative/ascetic *tapas* which releases a negative form of destruction (lack of fertility and life).

**Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 2.2.2.8–9.

†*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 1.7.4.1–8.

‡*Gopatha Brāhmaṇa*; 2.1.2; *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, 3.34.3.

§cf. *Varāha Purāṇa*, 33.4–15; *Mahābhārata*, 12.274–58; O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil*, p. 276.

||*Mahābhārata*, 12.274–59; O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil*, p. 162.

¶*Brahmā Purāṇa*, 2.13.70–3; O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil*, p. 278f.

**cf. *Vāmana Purāṇa*; 2.20–37; *Kūrma Purāṇa*, 1.25.64–95.

††*Śiva Purāṇa*, *Jñānasamhitā* 49.65–80; cf. O'Flaherty, *Śiva, the Erotic Ascetic* pp. 126ff.

‡‡*Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*, 1.2.27.1–123.

§§*Śiva Purāṇa*; *Dharmasamhitā*, 49.23–86.

TABLE 2.
The relationship between the head and the phallus/semen in Indian ascetic groups

Group	Role of semen (sexual energy)	Head/Hair-style	Process	Gender
Hindu yogis	sublimated semen becomes Soma	matted hair	sublimation, upward displacement of semen to head	androgynous (male dominant)
Buddhist monks*	no seed	shaved head	symbolic castration†	neuter
Hijras	no seed	woman's hair-style	physical castration	androgynous (female dominant)
Kāpālikas	excess seed, emits semen in ritual	symbol of severed head/skull	beheading	extra male?

*On the different attitudes of Hindu and Buddhist ascetics toward sexuality, which is reflected in the matted hair of the Hindu and the shaven head of the Buddhist, see Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair*, pp. 38ff.

†Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair*, pp. 38ff.

Even more specifically, however, there also appears to be a clear structural parallel between the myths of Śiva's violent transgression and his sexual transgression, as well as between the myths of beheading and castration (Table 1).²⁵ For example, in the story of the Pine-Forest, a group of sages grew proud because of their great asceticism; Śiva therefore seduced their wives in order to teach them a lesson, in other words, violating the law in order to restore the law. In turn, the sages punished Śiva by using their yogic power to castrate him. When Śiva's life-giving penis was severed from his body, it 'became a destructive fire';²⁶ the universe was in great distress, without any life or fertility, and all things were turned topsy-turvy'. Finally, after Śiva made the severed penis into an object of devotion, the liṅga was then restored to him, which brought about the restoration of the proper order of the universe.²⁷ Similar themes also appear in the myths of Śiva's self-castration: when the gods created the world without Śiva (i.e., perform an improper act of creation), Śiva tore off his own penis; his creative *tapas* became a destructive *tapas* while the severed penis became a terrible fiery pillar, a 'flame which burned everything' and which released 'the energy which [he] gathered in excess to destroy creation'. Finally, the liṅga was instituted as an object of devotion, which turns its destructive power back into creative power, as a source of fertility and life for the world.²⁸

In all of these myths of beheading and castration we may discern a common structural pattern: (1) the proper order is violated (incest, improper sacrifice or improper creation); (2) Śiva doubly transgresses the order, by means of beheading or castration, in order to correct it (in Indian myth, two wrongs very often do make a right); (3) this unleashes a terrible violent and destructive power which threatens to destroy all things; and (4) the head or penis is again restored, bringing about the restoration of the cosmic order.

And yet, despite these structural parallels, it would seem that the myths of beheading and castration are also in certain respects inversions of one another. Rudra-Śiva's acts of beheading represent the release of excessive violent power as a punishment for excessive or transgressive sexuality; but his castration is as a result of excessive asceticism (i.e., the

sages' extreme asceticism, or Śiva's stored up *tapas* when he prepares to create the world and is thwarted), and it releases a negative destructive, ascetic power, which deprives the universe of fertility and life.

But in any event, as the god of violent and sexual excess, Śiva is also called the lord of the remainder—*Vāstoṣpati*, the god of the leftovers which do not fit neatly into closed system of the ritual or the social order.²⁹ In India generally, leftovers are always highly ambivalent: the remnants of food and of the human body (sexual fluids, excrement, hair and nail clippings) symbolize that which violates the tidy boundaries of the rational system. In Mary Douglas' terms, they are the 'refuse' or 'dirt', the polluting substances which do not fit into categories of the social order, and which are therefore both dangerous and powerful.³⁰ In the Vedic sacrifice, the leftover of the sacrificial victim, that which remains when all the offerings have been made, is said to be at once the most dangerous and polluting, and yet also the most important part of the sacrifice: it is the symbolic 'seed' which will be carried over into and give birth to the next ritual. Indeed, in the *Atharva Veda*, the remnant is praised as the 'foundation of the world', or 'the subtle unqualified spiritual Essence';³¹ however, because it is so powerful and dangerous, the remnant must be disposed of—either destroyed by fire and reduced to ash outside the ritual enclosure, or else handled and removed by Untouchables (the polluted remnants of the social order).³²

But in all of its many forms, the ambivalent remnant is precisely the share of the wild outsider Rudra, and it is associated with him in a variety of ways. Often it is said that the remnant is the share which he won when he destroyed the sacrifice and beheaded the sacrificial beast; sometimes this remnant is also identified with the wound which he inflicted upon Prajāpati, just as the sacrificer inflicts the wound upon the sacrificial beast; and in other texts Rudra as *Vāstoṣpati* himself is said to have been born from the 'charred residue' or 'what is left (*vāstu*)' after Prajāpati's fiery incestuous seed fell to earth.³³ Finally, according to David Shulman, it is the same ancient concept of the sacrificial remnant or *vāstu* which reappears in the myths of Śiva's beheadings and castrations. The severed head and the severed penis are both dangerous, destructive and yet also supremely powerful remainders which violate the closure of the physical body and the social body alike.³⁴ As the god of severed heads, castrated penises, ashes and sacrificial leftovers, Śiva is the Lord of the liminal excess which overflows the boundaries of the rational world. As Shulman suggests, the 'evil' of 'death, dirt or unlimited violence' is both inescapable and necessary for creation; for 'it is the impure remainder of the sacrifice, the *vāstu*, the portion sacred to Rudra, that gives birth to the new life produced from death'.³⁵

All of these myths come together in the ritual practices of the Kāpālikas. Indeed, the Kāpālikas appear to be one of the few Śaivite sects who really try to imitate Śiva literally, rather than just symbolically, in all of his most violent and sexual attributes. According to some texts, it is even said that Śiva committed the crime of beheading Brahmā precisely for the sake of founding the cult of the Kāpālikas, and thereby providing a means to expiate the sin of killing a Brahman (once again violating the law in order to restore it).³⁶ In theory, at least, the Kāpālikas are those who spend their lives in ascetic renunciation doing penance for their sins—specifically, the Mahāvratā vow of carrying a skull-bowl as penance for killing a Brahman.³⁷ Like Śiva himself, the Kāpālikas are lords of remainders and leftovers, of liminal and ambiguous things which do not fit properly into rational systems and which are therefore both powerful and polluting. As their characteristic insignia they carry skulls and bone-ornaments (remnants of cadavers), smear their bodies with ashes (remnants of cremation), eat excrement (remnants of food)

and drink menstrual blood and sperm (remnants of sexual intercourse). They are also infamous for their rejection of the caste system, for their criticism of aristocrats and orthodox Brahmans, and for associating with the impure, marginal figures of society, including sudras, untouchables, and menstruating prostitutes. As Lorenzen summarizes the basic features of the tradition:

The Kāpālikas . . . [were] a heterodox sect accused of both necrophiliac and orgiastic practices.³⁸

The keystone of the Kāpālika faith was *bhakti*, personal devotion to . . . Śiva in his terrific Bhairava incarnation . . . The aim of the rituals was a mystical communion of the worshipper and god. The rewards . . . were twofold. On the mundane plane the devotee gained suprahuman magical powers (*siddhis*) while on the eschatological plane he attained final liberation . . . and dwelt in a heaven of perpetual sexual bliss.³⁹

According to our sources, the core of the Kāpālika practice was sex and violence—on the one hand, the ritual of sacrifice, preferably human and ideally by beheading, and on the other hand, ritual sexuality, preferably with menstruating prostitutes, outcastes or corpses: in short, ‘they carry orgiastic practices and ritual cruelty to the extreme’.⁴⁰ As the Kāpālika in the *Prabodhacandrodaya* (11th century) proclaims:

I dwell among ashes of the dead and eat my food in human skulls . . . We drink liquor out of the skull of Brahmans; our sacred fires are fed with the brains . . . of men mixed up with flesh, and human victims with blood gushing from their . . . throats are the offerings by which we appease the terrible god [Bhairava]. . . He . . . who with delight embraces women as beautiful as Pārvatī, feels supreme bliss.⁴¹

Virtually all our sources agree about the Kāpālikas’ fondness for human sacrifice and beheading. For example, according to the *Śaṅkaravijaya*, a Kāpālika ascetic named Ugra-Bhairava visits the great sage, Śaṅkara, and tells him that he needs the head of a great sage or king as a sacrificial offering to Śiva. Seeing the awesome figure of the Kāpālika, with his skulls and bones, his eyes rolling with intoxication, Śaṅkara happily agrees; and at the last moment, as Ugra-Bhairava is swinging his trident to behead the sage, one of the Śaṅkara’s disciples intervenes, kills the Kāpālika and rips out his heart (here, in an ironic inversion of the Dakṣa myth, the Kāpālika appears to be made the victim at his own sacrifice).⁴² This story is of course a myth. However, the practice of human sacrifice is corroborated by several other, reputedly more reliable, texts, such as Rāmānuja’s *Śrī-Bhāṣya*; and it is paralleled by several contemporaneous and probably historically related Tantric texts like the *Kālikā-Purāṇa*, which give detailed instructions for the performance of human sacrifices.⁴³

Next to human sacrifice, the favourite practice of the Kāpālikas is said to have been the sexual rituals, particularly sex with unclean castes or menstruating prostitutes. In fact, the sexual rituals are very often identified as symbolic acts of killing and sacrifice. According to one of the Kāṅhapāda’s Bengali songs, it is a ritual of both sex and slaughter, a dangerous rite performed outside the boundaries of society, with impure partners, like the ḍombī or washerwoman:

Outside the city, O Ḍombī, is thy cottage . . . I have become a naked Kapālī without aversions . . . for thee have I put on a garland of bones . . . I shall kill thee, Ḍombī, and take thy life.⁴⁴

In many texts, we find an explicit connection between the ritual sacrifice and sexual union. The body of the male and female are identified respectively with sacrificial meat

and wine, the union of which produces both sexual and transcendental bliss. Alternatively, the menstrual blood of the female partner, who represents Śiva's consort, Pārvati, is called wine, *surā*, which is drunk, together with the semen, as a eucharistic sacrament. And in other texts, the semen of the male is called the sacrificial oblation which he pours out into the ritual fire of the female. As Lorenzen summarizes the ritual,

During the sexual act . . . he creates an attitude of the oneness of Śiva and Śakti. As he abandons his semen he should recite the mantra, 'Om . . . relying on the ladle, I, who take dharma and non-dharma as his sacrificial ingredients, offer this oblation lovingly into the fire' . . . *here orgasm is both communion and sacrifice!*⁴⁵

Now, we have seen in the mythology of Śiva that there is a certain structural parallel between the narratives describing the transgressive violence of sacrifice and those describing transgressive sexual acts; and we know from both Freud and from the Indians that there is a certain psychological connection between the beheading and castration. However, this still leaves us wondering precisely why there is such an intimate connection between sacrifice and sex, violence and eroticism, which becomes explicit in the Kāpālīka tradition.

As I wish to argue, Georges Bataille's rather unusual theory of religion can offer some very useful insights into the myths and practices of the Kāpālīkas, and specifically, into this relationship between sacrificial violence and sexual transgression. For Bataille, the sacred or ultimate reality is, in essence, a radical Otherness, alterity, or heterogeneity: the sacred is that numinous, awesome vitality and 'prodigious effervescence of life', which lies beyond the narrow limits of our ordinary world with its rational boundaries and conceptual categories. The nature of the sacred is what Bataille calls pure excess or expenditure, *dépense*, the spontaneous and free overflowing of life which is like the Sun, consuming and expending itself without hope of any return.⁴⁶ As such, the sacred is radically opposed to any kind of rational system or closed theory about the world: Bataille is the arch-enemy of idealist philosophers like Hegel, who try to assimilate all otherness into a neat self-identical philosophical system, or to eliminate all difference negativity through the work of rational dialectic.⁴⁷ On the social level, Bataille is also the enemy of sociologists and anthropologists like Mauss, who regard human society as a harmonious relationship of economic gift-exchanges.⁴⁸

For Bataille, in contrast, the laws of reason and social restrictions belong merely to the mundane world of labour and production, by which man negates his animal condition and creates civilization; but in every society, human beings always have the undeniable urge to burst these boundaries, to expend and exceed themselves and so communicate with the pure limitless being of the sacred.⁴⁹ This radical expenditure explodes forth in spontaneous, ecstatic rituals like dance, festivals, carnivals or the potlatch, the free give-away found in some American Indian tribes.⁵⁰ However, for Bataille, the two most important manifestations of expenditure are the ritual sacrifice and various forms of sexual excess—such as orgies, saturnalias and sexual acts which transgress normal boundaries and taboos (incest, homosexuality, necrophilia, sado-masochism, etc.). Inspired by Freud, Bataille regards the two most basic human drives to be the sex drive and the death drive; correspondingly, the two most basic taboos in human civilization are those against incest and prohibition; and therefore, the most powerful transgressive and liberating experiences are precisely rituals of sacrifice and sexual excess. Both violate the utilitarian values of society through non-productive excess, violence or pleasure; and both break down the normal social roles which divide human beings from one another.

Sacrifice defies the normal laws against non-utilitarian killing, exploding social bounds through violent excess and returning us to a state of communion with other human beings and with nature.⁵¹ Transgressive sexuality, likewise, oversteps social laws through non-reproductive pleasure, which brings about an expenditure of the self and communion with the other. 'Love expresses a need for sacrifice', he writes, 'each unity must lose itself in some other which exceeds it . . . in erotic frenzy . . . the being is led to tear itself apart and lose itself'. Bataille is fond of pointing out that in erotic parlance orgasm is called *le petit mort*.⁵²

In Western society, Bataille believes, the original power of sacrifice and violent expenditure has been progressively domesticated and rationalized—first by the peaceful, non-bloody sacrifice of the Christian Eucharist, and today in the stagnant, desacralized, demystified modern world of capitalism and the bourgeoisie. (We might note that many Indian Tantrics employ a similar argument, suggesting that the ancient Vedic sacrifices are no longer effective, and that in this Kali age we now need to use more extreme and expedient measures like ritual sex.)⁵³ Thus, the power of expenditure and radical transgression survives now only on the individual level of sexuality.

Violence alone . . . can burst barriers of the rational world and lead us to continuity . . . the force of depense, rejected by religion (and philosophy) has been channeled into an acquisitive ethic . . . Because sexuality is violent, it is fundamentally ambivalent . . . it participates in that region of experiences which cannot be articulated in rational discourse.⁵⁴

Like ritual sacrifice, sexuality is a kind of 'violent wound', an opening up of the body so as to discharge and mix together the most threatening body fluids. It represents the death of the finite individual ego, a radical expenditure and loss of oneself, and a communion with the other. Like the passion of Theresa of Avila, who felt that she was 'dying because she could not die', *erotism* is precisely the experience of 'giving in to life to the point of death'.⁵⁵

For Bataille, the supreme symbol of both sacrificial and sexual excess is none other than the headless body—the Acephalus (see Fig. 1). In fact, Bataille and his close associate Roger Caillois formed a secret society called *Acéphale*, which had even planned to perform a human sacrifice (though this was never actually carried out).⁵⁶ The headless body represents the decapitation of the closed Hegelian absolutist system; for it marks the irreversible loss and excess which lies at the heart of existence, and which bursts forth in violent sacrifices and in the experience of orgasm. As the sign of both ritual decapitation and the symbolic death of sexual intercourse, it is what he calls 'universal existence, eternally unfinished and acephalic, a world like a bleeding wound, endlessly creating and destroying finite beings'.⁵⁷

Man has escaped from his head just as a condemned man has escaped from his prison . . . Beyond what I am, I meet a being who makes me laugh because he is headless . . . he holds a steel weapon in his left hand, flames like that of the 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 . . . I discover myself as him . . . as a monster.⁵⁸

The acephalic man is like Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, beyond good and evil, overstepping every taboo, and experiencing the 'explosive liberty of life'.⁵⁹

Like the head, as one might expect, penises and castration are also among Bataille's favourite symbols. The threat of castration represents the law, taboo, prohibition against

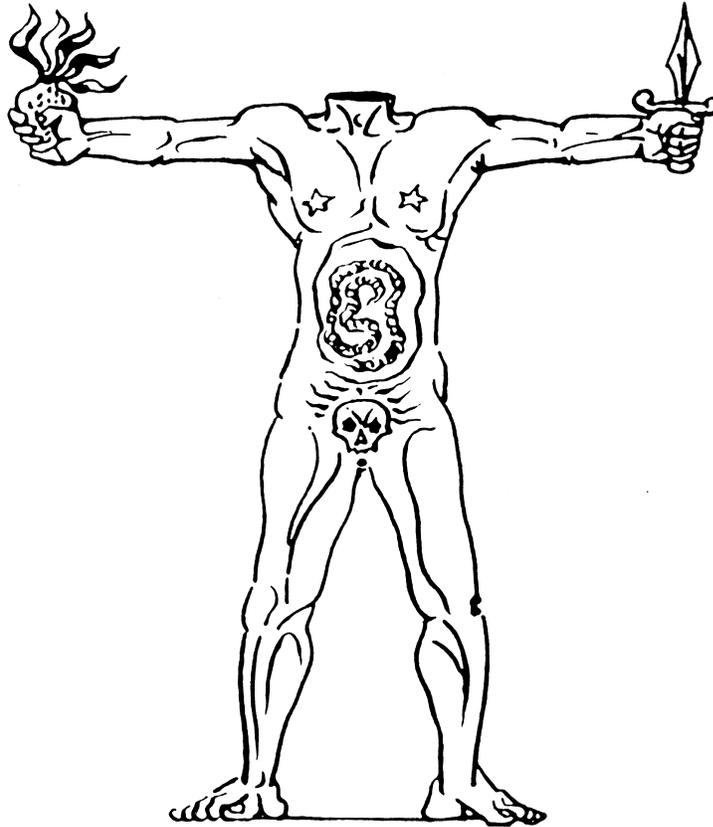


Figure 1. The Acephalus drawn by André Masson, from *Visions of Excess*.

incest and the punishment which follows upon excessive sexuality. In short, we may say that beheading is the quintessential symbol of violent transgression and excess—the loss of reason—whereas castration is the symbol of taboo, prohibition, ascetic negation and punishment for such transgression. Idealist philosophers like Hegel, Bataille believes, wish to ‘sublimate or sublimate’ (*aufheben*) the sexual and bodily drives, in a kind of ‘symbolic castration’, which transforms them into something spiritual and ideal.⁶⁰ Bataille, on the contrary, seeks a much more physical and violent castration, that is, a complete defiance and transgression of the law which brings about the most severe punishment; castration is in fact violently affirmed as the bloody wound which destroys the closure of the unified system: ‘Castration is not sublimated or sublated but is ecstatically experienced as the father’s actual castration of the son as a response to the son’s total defiance’.⁶¹ Bataille’s Acephalic Man is therefore the *coincidentia oppositorum* in which both beheading and castration, transgression and taboo are fused, in a constant ecstatic experience overstepping every law. The Acéphale marks the ‘end of reason, the end of man’ in a violent, bloody ‘ejaculation which idealist philosophical systems had forgotten’.⁶²

Even more explicitly than the Indian myths, Bataille identifies both the severed head and the castrated penis with the concept of the remnant or remainder, *le reste*, that problematic excess and overflow, which cannot fit into closed rational system (what Levinas also called the *trace*).⁶³ Like the Indians, Bataille is fascinated with the problem of the leftovers of sacrificial rituals, with that portion of the sacrificial victim which has

no utilitarian purpose, which is not divided up, distributed, consumed or offered to the gods, but which simply *remains*. This is what he calls the *accused share* (*la part maudite*), 'a remainder which is not eliminated by negation'.⁶⁴ It is that part of the ritual which cannot be assimilated into some transcendental other world, but which decomposes and rots, and which therefore is polluting and dangerous. In a more general sense, however, Bataille uses the symbolism of the remainder to describe those things which do not fit properly into any rational system: on the social level, the 'remnants' are those oppressed or marginalized individuals (like the untouchables of India) who do not have a clear place within the greater 'social body', and are therefore heterogeneous remainders.⁶⁵ On the physical level, the remnants are those physical substances which overflow from and destroy the closure of the human body—excrement, vomit, sweat, and above all, sexual remainders like menstrual blood and sperm.⁶⁶ Hence Bataille calls his own work both heterology, the study of otherness, and scatology, the study of the excrement and bodily remnants which escape logical systems. Whereas absolutist philosophers like Hegel had dreamed of gulping down and consuming all otherness, Bataille wishes to show that there is always an inescapable *remnant* of alterity and materiality which no rational system can successfully devour and digest. It cannot be assimilated; it 'catches in the throat of reason', and ultimately forces reason to 'choke and vomit'.

Since Hegel . . . relates knowledge to assimilation, digestion, that which is outside of thought . . . appears to be outside the belly. *Dépense* . . . connotes something difficult to stomach, something the belly cannot contain—like shit or vomit. Such excrement is the refuse . . . Always open at both ends, the gaping body spreads its excremental residue from anus to penis, mouth to eye, shit to vomit, fart to laugh . . . sperm to tears.⁶⁷

Obviously I do not mean to say that the Kāpālīka practice of sacrifice and orgy can be reduced simplistically to Bataille's theory of violence and sexuality. I merely suggest that it helps us to understand why the myths and rituals of sacrificial violence have such a parallel—but inverse—structure to those of sexual transgression, and why the symbolism of the remainder—the severed head, the lingam, the sexual fluids—is so central to this cult. Like Bataille and like Śiva himself, the Kāpālīkas are exploiting the symbolic power of that violent, destructive excess which is released through beheading (and symbolic castration); but unlike Śiva, *neither Bataille nor the Kāpālīkas are interested in putting the head back on again*, that is, *in restoring order*. Rather, they delight in the chaotic, liminal middle-ground (stages 2 and 3 of Table 1), the violent space betwixt and between which marks the fusion of beheading and castration, of violent excess and ascetic negation, of transgression and taboo—a dialectic which we must now explore in more detail.

II. Taboo and Transgression: The Erotic Dialect of Asceticism and Hedonism

Compared with work, transgression is a game. In the world of play, philosophy disintegrates. (Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 275)

Transgression opens on to a scintillating and constantly affirmed world . . . without the serpentine 'no' that bites into fruits and lodges contradictions at their core. It is the solar inversion of the satanic denial. It was originally linked to the divine . . . it opens the space where the divine functions.

(Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. (Ithaca, 1977), p. 37)

Despite their shocking violent and sexual rituals, the Kāpālikas were by no means mere hedonists or antinomians; on the contrary, their practice represents a paradoxical and schizoid dialectic between strict purity and outrageous impurity, between taboo and transgression.⁶⁸ Śiva himself is of course the supreme deity of both taboo and transgression, of both castration (extreme asceticism) and beheading (violent excess), the erotic ascetic who both punishes those who commit incest or violate the proper order of the sacrifice, and yet who also commits the most violent and perverse crimes himself. Similarly, in many texts, the Kāpālikas appear as the strictest and most severe of ascetics, known for their chastity and their great acts of penance, such as the Mahāvratā vow. But just as frequently, they appear as the most defiled transgressors, who eat excrement, drink alcohol from skulls, have sex with outcastes and perform human sacrifice. Hence they are regularly accused of being 'libidinous hypocrites'. As Lorenzen comments, 'the Kapālin symbolizes the perfect yogin precisely because . . . he is the most debased of ascetics . . . The Kapālin, like the ḍombī, is a representation of the mystical doctrine of the identity of opposites'.⁶⁹

On the outward social level of daily life, the Kāpālikas usually observed all the most stringent laws of the orthodox social order. It was generally only in the carefully controlled environs of ritual that they violated the prohibitions against sexuality and violence.

the denial of caste occurs only in ritual situations. In day-to-day affairs, caste distinctions are still maintained . . . The transcending of caste barriers . . . is part of the mystical . . . *Umwertung aller Werte*, valid only in the sacred circle of worship. In the universe of the ritual opposites . . . change places—the lowest is highest and the highest lowest . . . the mystical principle culminates in the apotheosis of the ḍombī.⁷⁰

As Douglas Brooks has argued in the similar case of South Indian Tantra, taboos are violated only in a strict ritual context, in fact only after they are first intensified and exaggerated. One must first observe the laws of asceticism and self-purification before one can tear down such laws. For this proves that the practitioner is the master of both the pure and impure, that he holds supreme power over the boundary of taboo and transgression.⁷¹

Here also, I believe that Bataille can offer some very useful insights into the problem of taboo and transgression—a problem which obsessed him throughout his life. For Bataille, the essence of both sacrifice and eroticism is not simply the fact of brute violence or orgasm; rather, it lies precisely in the 'play' (*le jeu*) between sanctity and sacrilege, between taboo and transgression.⁷² Just as the sacrificial ritual must first create an environment of utmost purity and order before it can violate that order with the defilement of violence and dismemberment, so too, eroticism arises precisely in the dialectic of veiling and revealing, clothing and striptease, between the creation of sexual taboos and the exhilarating experience of overstepping them. All animals have sex. But only human beings have eroticism, because only human beings create such elaborate systems of taboos and sanctions around sexuality. In Bataille's words, 'The prohibition is there to be violated'.⁷³ Rules are made to be broken, for it is the experience of overstepping limits which gives us the blissful sense of continuity and communion with the Other:

taboos . . . are not only there to be obeyed . . . It is always a temptation to knock down a barrier . . . fear invests [the forbidden act] with an aura of excitement. 'There is

nothing' writes de Sade, 'that can set bounds to licentiousness . . . The best way of enlarging and multiplying one's desires is to try to limit them'.⁷⁴

Even beyond simple acts of transgression, however, Bataille is also especially fascinated with what he calls 'upside down', inverted, or 'topsy turvy' acts. In festivals and carnivals, such as the medieval Feast of Fools or the Roman Saturnalia, the ordinary hierarchies of society are temporarily turned on their heads; slaves are crowned king, donkeys are praised as Christ, and the public engages in the worst sins of gluttony and debauchery. For Bataille, this represents the return to the primordial state of fusion and chaos, the state of the world before human beings constructed the divisive boundaries of work and prohibition. 'Man achieves this inner experience at the instant when bursting out of the chrysalis he feels that he is tearing himself . . . turning topsy-turvy his original mode of being'.⁷⁵

It is above all through sexual inversions, through male–female role reversal, transvestism or incest, when ordinary reality is turned on its head, that all the excesses and remainders of the body are allowed to spill out. For 'the orgy turns everything upside down'.⁷⁶ The result is a mystical identity of opposites, in which the sacred and the polluted are temporarily fused (Bataille is fond of pointing out that, in Latin, *sacer* means both 'sacred' and 'syphilitic', and that, in Greek, *agios* means both holy and defiled). At such moments, as he writes in his essay on de Sade, we realize 'the elementary identity between types of excrement (sperm, menstrual blood, faecal matter) and everything . . . sacred, divine, or marvellous'.⁷⁷ This sort of sexual inversion is in large part the subject matter of Bataille's rather demented and twisted novels, which are filled with upside down sexual acts—necrophilia, incest with his mother, consuming menstrual blood and faeces, and other acts of debauchery which I need not recount here. To cite just one particularly shocking example from his novel, *The Blue of Noon*, the narrator has sex with the corpse of his own mother, precisely because it symbolizes the ultimate inversion or turning topsy-turvy of all laws, and the ultimate, unassimilable *reste* of matter; (*mater, mater-ia*).⁷⁸

In light of Bataille's work, then, I would suggest that the Kāpālikas are similarly playing upon and exploiting the subtle boundary between taboo and transgression; like Bataille, they use rituals of purity, asceticism and prohibition, not as ends in themselves, but as the preparation for a far more radical inversion of these same taboos—like a kind of ritual rubber band which is stretched as tightly as possible in order to propel them into ecstasy. In a sense, they are not simply imitating Śiva's mythic deeds, but are also perhaps inverting them: whereas Śiva violates the proper order of society and the ritual so as to set it aright again, the Kāpālikas first preserve the laws and rituals of the orthodox tradition, only then to break them.

III. Cosmic Orgasm: Letting the Remains Fall and the Attainment of this-worldly Power

Milk is left over from the calves
 Water is left over from the fishes
 flowers from the bees
 How can I worship you, O Śiva, with such offal?
 But it's not for me to despise such left-overs
 so take what comes . . .

(Basavaṅṅa (1106–1167); A. K. Ramanujan, trans. *Speaking of Śiva* (New York, 1983), p.90)

Life and death are passionately devoted to the subsidence of the void, . . . where life and void are mingled like lovers, in the convulsive moments of the end . . . And just as the obscene nature of their origins more passionately connects embracing lovers, so too the . . . horror of the cadaver and . . . blood tie the 'me' that dies . . . to an empty infinity—and the empty infinity is itself projected as cadavers and as blood.

(Bataille, 'Sacrifices', *Visions of Excess*, p. 133)

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, most modern scholars have interpreted the practices of the Kāpālikas as an attempt to transcend the burden of this temporal world, in an other-worldly state of detached liberation. As Parry argues, 'all this represents an attempt to escape from time and . . . death, by systematically combining opposites, [he] recaptures a . . . static condition of non-duality and . . . transcends time . . . he attains *samādhi*, a perpetual state . . . of suspended animation in which he is immune from the consequences of death'.⁷⁹ Similarly, according to Eliade, the true purpose of such antinomian practices is supposed to be liberation from this world of duality and the attainment of timeless immortality; those cults which seek a this-worldly or temporal power (like the Aghorīs and perhaps also the Kāpālikas), must therefore be 'later generations' or 'symbolic confusions'.⁸⁰ This explanation I find quite inadequate. On the contrary, I would argue that, by manipulating the boundary between purity and impurity, by constructing and then transgressing every taboo, the Kāpālika is not simply hoping to ascend into some other-worldly realm of detachment; in fact, he gains a very this-worldly kind of power. According to the Kāpālikas, liberation cannot be achieved by renouncing the senses and escaping into disembodied transcendence, but rather, it can only be gained by using senses as the tools to liberation. According to the Kāpālika in the *Prabodhacandrodaya*,

Bliss is not found anywhere without sense objects. How can *mukta* be desired when the . . . soul is in the condition of stone, devoid of . . . bliss? One who has the appearance of (Śiva) and amuses himself in the embrace of his wife, the image of Pārvatī, is truly liberated.⁸¹

Thus, as Lorenzen points out, the goal is not simply an escape from the cycle of karma and rebirth, but rather an ecstatic experience of sexual bliss at the cosmic level, a kind of eternal orgasm in which the entire universe is bathed in the overflowing bliss of Śiva and Śakti. Hence, the Kāpālika doctrine is also called Soma-Siddhānta, that is, Śiva in union with the Goddess (*Sa + Umā*).

The human participants of the ritual identify themselves with Śiva and Śakti . . . In the bliss of sexual union the human pair realize the divine bliss of Śiva and Śakti . . . salvation . . . is perpetual orgasm, not merely extinction of the cycle of rebirth.⁸²

This radical experience is achieved precisely through ritualized sex—a ritual which, as I mentioned earlier, is also the supreme act of sacrifice, a ritual in which the semen and menstrual blood become sacramental elements. In many forms of Indian Yoga, the goal is to refrain from ejaculating, to prevent the loss of vitality by preventing the loss of seed, or to store it up as a sublimated spiritual power in the head.⁸³ But for the Kāpālikas, on the contrary, the final goal is to 'abandon the semen', and to cast the seed into the fiery womb of the female, as the supreme sacrificial oblation.⁸⁴ As Lorenzen suggests, this ritual practice was probably very similar to and influenced by that of certain contemporary left-hand (*vāmamārga*) Hindu Tantric sects. According to Agehananda Bharati,

the emission of the semen is the highest act of sacrifice, whereby the yogi pours out the oblation of his seed into the fiery womb of his partner:

the idea of sacrifice at the base of every religious act remained focal in Hinduism, though the interpretations changed . . . The ritual ideal . . . is the giving up of all the ingredients . . . no ritual ingredient including that which constitutes the fifth M [*maithuna* or sexual intercourse] can be held back—it too has to be abandoned in the fire of sacrifice.⁸⁵

Now, as I wish to suggest, the semen here is another symbol of the remnant, the excess of the body which is so problematic from the standpoint of orthodox ideas of purity. It is a powerful, dangerous overflow from the closed boundaries of the body, and this is one reason that Indian yogis have for centuries tried to find ways to stop its flow, re-absorb it, raise it to the brain, or transform it from impure matter into divine spirit.⁸⁶ For the Kāpālikas, on the other hand, the goal is not merely to assimilate the remnants, to re-absorb all otherness into the system; on the contrary, the goal is to let loose the dangerous energy of the remnant, as the fiery, violent seed of life.

The loss of semen and the letting loose of the remnant has its symbolic parallel in the Kāpālikas' characteristic symbol, the severed head itself. If, as Obeyesekere has argued, Hindu ascetics wear long matted hair as a sign of their sublimated sexual energy; and if Buddhist ascetics shave their heads as a sign of their complete detachment from sexuality altogether;⁸⁷ then the Kāpālikas have as their supreme symbol the severed head (see Table 2). The severed head is the sign of both sexual transgression (punishment for incest) and of violent excess, as the terrible remnant of the body which is only set free when it falls, like the semen, to the earth. It represents, not sexual sublimation or renunciation, but a kind of violent, bloody, total orgasm. It is a head which is cut off, not simply in order to be put back on again, but rather, in order to release the explosive violence of the remainder.⁸⁸

As such, the fruit of the Kāpālika practice is not simply a denial of life and this world, but rather a very this-worldly power; indeed the Kāpālika is said to acquire the supreme power enjoyed by Śiva himself, including his eight *siddhis* or supernatural abilities—the magical ability to become small or large, levitation, invisibility, irresistible will, control over the elements and fulfilment of all desires. As Lorenzen points out, most Western scholars have down-played the importance of the *siddhis* in Indian ascetic and yogic traditions, by writing them off as a kind of corruption, by-product, or dangerous hindrance to yogic practice. But in fact, they are really of central importance to most yogic schools, and above all, to the Kāpālikas.⁸⁹ According to the Kāpālika in the *Prabodhacandrodaya*,

The might of our religion is such that I control . . . the greatest and the most ancient of the gods; I stop the course of the planets in the heavens, I submerge the earth in water . . . and drink up the waters in a moment.⁹⁰

When we turn to the work of Bataille, we find an even more explicit rejection of any sort of other-worldly transcendence, and an even more powerful affirmation of the problematic excesses of life in this world. The radical experience of the sacred cannot be achieved by trying to assimilate all heterogeneous fragments which comprise human life, nor can it be achieved by trying to subsume the material body into some abstract idealist system. On the contrary, this awesome otherness can only be experienced by letting

loose all remainders, by 'affirming loss',⁹¹ and by experiencing the pure excess of life. As Derrida comments, Hegel had dreamt of assimilating all remainders, of devouring every remnant within his all-encompassing rational system: 'religion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* describes the effort to assimilate the remain[s], to cook, eat, gulp down, interiorize the remain[s] without remains (*le reste sans reste*) . . . the scraps of the banquet are reappropriated at the Last Supper scene'. Bataille, on the contrary, wishes to 'let the remainders fall', and even 'to magnify the turd, to glorify what falls'.⁹² The result is what he calls a 'sacrifice without return', a dismemberment without remembering, an orgasm without utilitarian end, which is pure waste and loss. It is the critical moment 'at which . . . death and sacrifice constitute . . . so radical a negativity, . . . an expenditure without reserve, they can no longer be determined as negativity in a process or system'.⁹³

dépense designates an 'expenditure without return'. This expenditure releases 'remains' (*le reste*) that reason works to repress: shit, vomit, farts, laughs, pus, sperm, cries, blood . . . heterology is undeniably transgressive . . . the repressive stranglehold of reason can only be broken . . . by violating every known taboo. Dismemberment cannot lead to remembering; loss yields no profit.⁹⁴

This remnant is both the remnant of the body and the remnant of 'TIME'—the inescapable fact of this temporal, material world, which cannot be resolved into the timeless eternity of Hegel's Absolute Idea. It is the seed of corporeality which is continually reborn and which drives the endless cycle of life and death—'the deleterious absurdity of time'.⁹⁵

Like the Kāpālikas, Bataille envisions true liberation as a very this-worldly experience, a kind of vast cosmic orgasm, in which all of creation is perceived as a grand burlesque of sex and death. In one of his most mystical and perverse works, 'The Solar Anus', Bataille describes his own vision of the cosmos as a giant sacrificial orgy—his own experience of 'joy before death' in which the universe appears as 'an orgy of frozen light . . . Everything that exists destroying itself . . . Ceaselessly . . . consuming myself in a great festival of blood'.⁹⁶ In Bataille's 'pansexual vision of the cosmos', the Sun copulates with the earth, the sea copulates with the land, and all creatures expend and destroy themselves in the sheer ecstasy of existence.

Trees bristle the ground with . . . flowered shafts raised up to the sun . . . their polymorphous coitus is a function of the terrestrial rotation . . . From the movement of the sea . . . comes the coitus of the earth with the sun. The erotic cloud . . . becomes a storm and falls to the earth in rain . . . The sea . . . plays the role of a female organ that liquefies under the excitation of the penis. The sea continually jerks off. Solid elements . . . brewed by erotic movement shoot out as flying fish.⁹⁷

Without suggesting that Bataille's rather twisted description of the entire universe as a great sacrificial orgasm is the 'same' as that of the Kāpālikas, I would submit that it opens up some interesting new insights. Like Bataille, the Kāpālikas are not simply trying to escape the 'remnants' of the body, time and the world, but they are indeed playing upon and exploiting their dangerous, anti-structural energy, and using them to achieve a very this-worldly kind of power. In this sense, they are not unlike the Indian sect of the Hijras, or males who undergo self-castration, whom Serena Nandra has examined: because they transcend the ordinary social divisions of male and female, caste, and family, the Hijras are believed to be extremely dangerous and threatening to the social

order; but for that same reason, they are also regarded as having a strange sort of anti-structural, liminal power, which they play upon and manipulate to their own advantage.⁹⁸ Perhaps in an even more radical way, I would suggest, the Kāpālikas have also seized upon and manipulated that which is most ambivalent, liminal and dangerous in the eyes of mainstream society, precisely because it is also extremely powerful and sacred.

Conclusions

In this essay, I have tried to suggest that, despite the extreme and offensive nature of his writings, Georges Bataille can serve as a very useful methodological tool, helping us to understand some of the more extreme or offensive aspects of religions. Of course, many of our sources we may never know with certainty whether or not the Kāpālikas actually did perform such violent and transgressive deeds; however, even if our sources were purely fictional, I have suggested that Bataille would still give us some key insights as to why generations of Indians might have *imagined* such things, and why these gruesome fears have held such a persistent place in the Indian subconscious. Obviously, I do not mean to say that Bataille provides the definitive solution to the enigma of the Kāpālikas, nor do I wish to exclude other interpretations. Rather, I merely suggest that he helps us to gain a new 'shifting perspective' on their otherwise difficult and disturbing practices.

It is also my opinion that Bataille could be useful in understanding certain other more extreme violent and sexual religious phenomena. Bataille himself wrote a great deal about other forms of violent and/or sexual religious phenomena—Aztec sacrifice, Dionysian sparagmos, Voodoo ritual, Christian erotic mysticism, the licentious Gnostic sects, and witchcraft, to name but just a few of his many diverse interests. Even though Bataille's own research is hampered by the inadequate and often inaccurate evidence available to him, as well as by his own haphazard and generally unscholarly method, I believe that it is still possible to apply his theories in a more careful way to the study of other religious phenomena. One might, for example, use Bataille's theories of sex and sacrifice to shed new light on the Dionysian rituals of sparagmos and omophagia, which have been explored by Marcel Detienne and others.⁹⁹ Or, in a perhaps less obvious example, one might examine the ecstatic and violent experiences of the late medieval women mystics of Europe, such as the Beguines, and their devotion to the Eucharistic sacrifice. Here again, as Caroline Bynum has shown, the woman's body and her bodily 'excesses' or 'oozing and flowing remnants' (blood, milk, tears), were transformed from the depths of abomination and physical debasement into powerful symbols or erotic and mystical union.¹⁰⁰

We could undoubtedly cite many other examples of sexual and violent religious movements here; but I will leave these broader comparative questions for other more knowledgeable scholars to debate. My task has simply been to show that a marginal and disturbing thinker like Bataille can prove surprisingly useful when we try to understand those marginal, disturbing 'remnants' within every religious tradition which continually elude our own conventional theories, those problematic 'excesses' which constantly transgress our own most established methodologies and academic categories.

Notes

- 1 David Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas and Kālāmukhas: Two Lost Śaivite Sects*, Berkeley, University of California Press 1972; Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1971, pp. 296ff. Jonathan Parry, 'Sacrificial Death and the Necrophagous Ascetic', in *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1982. According to

- Parry, in his study of the modern descendants of the Kāpālikas, the Aghorīs, antinomian acts like eating excrement and copulating with corpses 'represent a systematic attempt to escape from time and death' to achieve a 'static condition of non-duality . . . a perpetual state of suspended animation in which he is immune from death . . . ' (p. 14)
- 2 Allan Stoeckl, Introduction to *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1985, p. xi; cf. Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: la mort à l'oeuvre*, Librairie Seguir 1987, pp. 136ff.
 - 3 cf. Michele Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the gift*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press 1982, p. 1. On Derrida's debt to Bataille, see his essay 'From restricted to general economy', *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1978; and Mark Taylor, *Altarity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1987.
 - 4 cf. Richman, pp. xi–ii. On Bataille's secret society, *Acéphale*, see Stoeckel, p. xx. On the Collège de Sociologie, which also included Roger Caillois, see Denis Hollier (ed.), *The College of Sociology, 1937–39*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1988.
 - 5 cf. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1980, pp. 5–7.
 - 6 'Although nearly all of the sources for the Kāpālikas are fictional . . . the overall picture they give is detailed and consistent enough to ensure that it is reasonably authentic' (Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, p. xii). The locus classicus of Kāpālika doctrine is Anandagiri's *Samkara-vijaya* [15th c.], Calcutta, 1968. The most important fictional sources are the dramas of Bhavabhūti, *Mālatī-Mādhava* [8th c.], Bombay, 1905, and Kṛṣṇamiśra, *Prabodha-candrodaya* [c. 1065], V. L. Pansikar (ed.), Bombay, 1965. There is also the Persian *The Dabistān, or School of Manners*, D. Shea and A. Troyer, trans. [compiled 17th c.], Paris, 1843. The major philosophical sources are Mādhvacārya's, *Samkara-digvijaya*, Poona, 1915; and Rāmānuja's, *Śrī-Bhāṣya*. R. D. Karmarkar (ed.), Poona, 1959–62. Three inscriptions from Kāpālika temples have been verified in southern Mysore, from the 9th–10th centuries; more recently one has been found in Andhra Pradesh from 1050 C.E.; there are also two land grants given to Kāpālikas from Western India and Baroda (Lorenzen, *Kāpālikas*, pp. 27ff).
 - 7 Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, p. 86. cf. Apurba Barthakuria, *The Kāpālikas: A Critical Study of the Religion, Philosophy and Literature of a Tantric Sect*, Calcutta, Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar 1984; Elizabeth-Chalier Visuvalingam, 'Bhairava's royal Brahminicide: the problem of the Mahābrāhmaṇa', in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*. Alf Hiltebeitel (ed.), Albany, SUNY 1989; and Sunthar Visuvalingam, 'The transgressive sacrality of the Dikṣita: sacrifice, criminality and Bhakti in the Hindu tradition', in the same volume.
 - 8 Lorenzen, 'New data on the Kāpālikas', in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*. Alf Hiltebeitel (ed.), Albany, SUNY 1989, pp. 231–3; cf. Alexis Sanderson, 'Purity and power among the Brahmins of Kashmir', in *The Category of the Person*. M. Carruthers et al. (eds), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1985; 'Maṇḍala and Āgamic identity in the Trika of Kashmir', in *Mantras et Diagrammes Rituels dans l'Hindouisme*, Paris, 1986, pp. 169–270.
 - 9 Bataille was apparently very fond of Eliade's *Yoga*; he also wrote one brief piece on the Goddess Kālī for the journal *Acéphale* (cf. *Oeuvres Complètes*, D. Hollier (ed.), Paris, Gallimard, 1970; v.1, pp. 243–4), and he briefly mentions other aspects of Hinduism, including Tantrism (cf. *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, San Francisco, City Lights 1986, p. 248). On the usefulness of Bataille for understanding Indian religions, see S. Visuvalingam, p. 435.
 - 10 *Thinking through Cultures: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology*, Harvard University Press 1991, pp. 155–7, 348–52.
 - 11 Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, p. 13; cf. George Briggs, *Gorakhnāth and the Kānpaṭā Yogis*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidas 1973.
 - 12 See Parry, 'Sacrificial death', H. W. Barrow, 'On Aghoris and Aghorapanthis', *Proceedings of the Anthropological Society of Bombay III* (1893), pp. 197–251.
 - 13 On Brahmā's incest, which is carried over from the myths of Prajāpati and Dakṣa, see *Śiva Purāna, Jñānasamhitā* 49.65–80; O'Flaherty, *Śiva, the Erotic Ascetic*, New York, Oxford University Press 1973, pp. 126ff.
 - 14 Diana Eck, *Banaras: City of Light*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1982, p. 191. See *Vāmana Purāna*; Wendy O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1976, p. 279.

- 15 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 2.2.2.8–9. On the implications of this mythic 'beheading' see Hildebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi, v.I: From Gingee to Kurukṣetra*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1988, pp. 373ff.
- 16 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 1.7.4.1–8. O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from Sanskrit Sources*, New York, Penguin 1975, pp. 117–8. On the 'destructive power of the fiery seed' see O'Flaherty, *Siva*, p. 116; Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1981, pp. 53f.
- 17 *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa*, 2.1.2; Jacques Scheuer, 'Rudra/Śiva and the Destruction of the Sacrifice', in *Asian Mythologies*, Y. Bonnefoy (ed.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1993, p. 41.
- 18 *Brahmā Purāṇa*, 2.13.70–3; On Dakṣa's incestuous leanings, see O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil*, p. 276ff.
- 19 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 1.7.4.1–4, *Mahābhārata*, 12.274.36–59. The myth of Dakṣa inverts the ideological underpinnings of the sacrificial ritual and makes sacrificial substitution look ludicrously real' (O'Flaherty, *Other People's Myths*, New York, Macmillan 1988, p. 118). 'Śiva is simultaneously the defender of the orthodox morality (the incest tabu) and the unorthodox interloper (the violator of the sacrifice) . . . the sacrificial beast must be killed, but killers are usually unclean . . . Only Rudra, the killer par excellence, can simultaneously destroy the sacrifice and perform it' (O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil*, p. 275).
- 20 *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1985. 'Even though the world is founded on the destructive violence of sacrifice, the sacrificial order is . . . the rigidly stable order of the universe' (p. 84). On the cosmic level, as Biardeau points out, Rudra-Śiva is called on to perform the violent sacrifice at the end of the yuga, the 'sacrifice in which the three worlds are the victim' (*Le Sacrifice dans l'Inde Ancienne*, Paris, 1976).
- 21 See 'The Case of the Severed Head', in *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, and *The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1993. 'the head is a focus of a . . . rich web of mythological associations . . . The head . . . is associated with . . . a treasure or a secret that is the essence of the universe. Everything depends on obtaining the head, and the gods . . . contend for its possession' (p. 71; cf. David Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*, Princeton, Princeton University Press p. 341).
- 22 'within the Brahminic tradition one finds an attempt to break out of the cycle of violence in the sacrifice . . . to arrive at a state of purity . . . independent of . . . death and rebirth . . . Yet the sacrifice persists as long as life . . . survives' (Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, p. 92–3). Heesterman suggests that there was an 'axial breakthrough which transformed the ancient agonistic sacrifice into the classical, rationalized ritual' (*The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, pp. 91ff).
- 23 See O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes and other Mythical Beasts*, p. 81ff; Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1981, pp. 45ff.
- 24 According to Shulman, the Brahminical sacrifice represents a 'unifying, synthesizing, fertilizing force', and later served as the paradigm for myths of marriage in South India (*Tamil Temple Myths*, p. 91). In the myth of Durgā and the Buffalo demon, for example, the act of beheading is filled with overtones of sexual combat and the castrating power of the dominant female: 'The aggressive woman thus rides astride, like the castrating mare: her sexual supremacy is expressed through a martial image: she holds an erect phallic sword' (O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes and other Mythical Beasts*, p. 83).
- 25 On the 'parallel structure of the myths of the beheading of Brahmā and the castration of Śiva' see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, 'Śiva erect and supine', in *Discourses on Śiva: Proceedings of a Symposium on the Nature of Religious Imagery*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press 1984, p. 292.
- 26 O'Flaherty, *Śiva*, p. 132.
- 27 *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*, 1.2.27.1–64a, 91b–97, 101–23; O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths*, pp. 141ff.
- 28 *Śiva Purāṇa*, *Dharmasamhitā* 49.23b–46, 74–86; O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths*, pp. 138ff.
- 29 See Charles Malamoud, 'Observations sur la notion de "reste" dans le Brāhmaṇisme', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd und Ostasiens*, 16 (1972), pp. 5–26. cf. Visuvalingam, 'The Transgressive Sacrality of the Dikṣita', p. 429f. 'The symbol of the new life produced from the sacrifice is the fiery seed, which is . . . the remainder (*vāstu*), that part of the sacrifice which is left after all oblations have been made. The remainder contains the germ of a new birth. Like

- leavings generally in Hinduism, the remnant of the sacrifice is impure and polluting; yet at the same time it is a . . . life-giving substance . . . The remainder of the sacrifice belongs . . . to Rudra, the sacrificial butcher . . . the god who performs the violent act of sacrifice wins the *vāstu* . . . and the titles *Vāstavya* and *Vāstoṣpati* (Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, p. 90–1).
- 30 *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London, Routledge 1966, pp. 145, 190, ‘The danger risked by boundary transgression is power. The vulnerable margins . . . which threaten to destroy order represent powers in the cosmos . . . Ritual which can harness these . . . is harnessing power indeed’ (p. 190).
- 31 *Atharva Veda*, XI.9; Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, p. 120. In the Purāṇic tradition, the remnant also has a cosmic dimension, identified with the serpent *Śeṣa* who is left over after the great sacrifice at the end of the *yuga*.
- 32 Shulman points out that the impure remainder is often associated with the impure elements of social order, the Untouchables: in both the ritual and in society, the element of impurity (the outcaste) is necessary to the preservation of purity (the Brahminical order): ‘The Untouchable . . . deals professionally with the threatening forces of impurity released . . . at the Brahminical sacrificial ritual’ (Shulman, ‘The Enemy within: Idealism and Dissent in South Indian Hinduism’, in *Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy and Dissent in India*. S. N. Eisenstadt and D. Shulman (eds), Berlin, 1984, p. 17).
- 33 *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, 3.33–4; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 1.7.4.9; cf. Scheuer, p. 40. In some texts, Rudra himself is called the *Vāstu*, or what is left behind: ‘The relation of Rudra and the *vastu* is very close. The *vastu* itself, the sacred site . . . and whatever had been . . . left over (*vāstu*) . . . are Rudra’s . . . he himself had been left behind on site’ (Kramrisch, pp. 61–2).
- 34 On the connection between the ‘remnant’ and the severed head, see Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, p. 90ff, 115; Hildebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī*, v.II, p. 149. On the *liṅga* as a sacrificial remnant, see Shulman, p. 118f.
- 35 Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, p. 347
- 36 cf. *Śiva Purāṇa*, 3.8.36–66; 3.9.1–57; O’Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil*, p. 281–3. ‘Śiva, who invented Brahmanicide, also invented the vow to expiate Brahmanicide’.
- 37 cf. Eck, pp. 192ff; Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, p. 75.
- 38 Lorenzen, ‘Śaivism: Kāpālikas’, p. 19. See the descriptions of the sect in Rāmānuja’s *Śrī-Bhāṣya*, (ii.2.35–7), and Kṛṣṇamiśra’s *Prabodhacandrodaya* (act III, vs.12).
- 39 Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, p. 83; cf. Barthakuria, p. iii.
- 40 Eliade, p. 297.
- 41 Kṛṣṇamiśra’s *Prabodhacandrodaya* in Eliade, p. 298; cf. *Mālatī-Mādhava*, act V, vs.25.
- 42 *Śaṅkara-digvijaya*, xi.9–42; Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, p. 32–4. A similar story appears in the 12th century Tamil text, the *Periya Purāṇa*; cf. Lorenzen, ‘Śaivism: Kāpālikas’, p. 19.
- 43 Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, p. 87.
- 44 *Kāṇhapāda*, Song no. 10, Dasgupta, p. 103–4.
- 45 Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, p. 92, my italics. See Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, Delhi, 1972, pp. 259–60. See also *Kulārṇava Tantra*, v.79–80 and the *Vāmamārg*, in Bharati, p. 264–5. Lorenzen suggests that the Kāpālika sexual ritual was probably similar to that of left-hand Tantric sects of the medieval period.
- 46 cf. *Theory of Religion*, New York, Zone Books 1992, p. 35–6. Bataille’s ‘Copernican revolution’ shifts the basis of society away from ‘production’ and instead toward ‘consumption’ and ‘expenditure’—the ‘effervescence of life’ (*The Accursed Share: An essay on general economy*, New York, Zone 1991, v.I, p. 9–10).
- 47 Hegel is, in Bataille’s eyes, the most sophisticated representative of the dream that runs through all Western philosophy, the dream of assimilating all heterogeneity within a rational system. Bataille sees it as his life’s purpose to destroy that system, to release ‘the laughter tearing apart the fabric of which man is made . . . my efforts undo Hegel’s *Phenomenology*’ (*Inner Experience*, Albany, SUNY 1988, p. 129).
- 48 On the theory of gift-exchange in Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, see *The Accursed Share*, v.II, p. 41ff; Richman, p. 9.
- 49 cf. *The Accursed Share*, v.II, pp. 129, 61.
- 50 The practice of potlatch appears in Indian tribes like the Tlingit and Kwakiutl of the Northwestern coast: Bataille thought that it destroyed Mauss’ theory of the gift and proved his theory of expenditure (‘The Notion of Expenditure’, in *Visions of Excess*).

- 51 Bataille, 'Attraction and Repulsion', in Hollier, *The College of Sociology*, p. 103. cf. *The Accursed Share*, v.II, pp. 98ff. 'Religion in its entirety was founded upon sacrifice. But . . . the religious horror disclosed in sacrifice becomes linked to . . . the last shuddering tears that eroticism alone can illuminate' (*Tears of Eros*, San Francisco, City Lights 1989, p. 207; cf. *Theory of Religion*, pp. 48–51; *The Accursed Share*, v.II, p. 106).
- 52 *Visions of Excess*, p. 250.
- 53 cf. T. Goudriaan, S. Gupta, D. Hoens, *Hindu Tantrism*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1979, p. 32. 'In the modern world . . . religion no longer involves transgressive excess; it has become domesticated' (Taylor, *Altarity*, p. 141; cf. *Tears of Eros*, p. 149).
- 54 Richman, pp. 81–2.
- 55 *Erotism*, in Joseph Libertson, *Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication*, The Hague, Mouton, 1982, p. 20.
- 56 See Stoeckel, p. xix–xx: 'the secret society is a group of adepts, operating on the margins of (and acting against) official society . . . The Acéphale group was . . . subversive yet not intended to lead an organized mass movement. The activities of the group would help stimulate the values Bataille had espoused . . . expenditure, risk, loss, sexuality, death . . . its goals were the rebirth of myth and the touching off in society of the primitive communal drives leading to sacrifice . . . Of the mythic figures Bataille proposes . . . the acephalic man is the most important . . . There was talk of an actual human sacrifice . . . but it was never carried out'.
- 57 *Visions of Excess*, p. 201.
- 58 *Visions of Excess*, p. 181. The image of a 'man slashing his own throat', or 'an anthropomorphic being deprived of a head' represents 'the summit of elevation . . . confused with a sudden fall of unheard-of violence' (p. 58; *Inner Experience*, p. 46).
- 59 *Visions of Excess*, pp. 199–200: 'The acephalic man expresses . . . the death of God . . . the headless man emerges with . . . the superhuman, which IS the death of God. Superman and acephalic man are bound with a brilliance equal to . . . the explosive liberty of life'.
- 60 According to Bataille, the idealist system transforms bodily and sexual energy into a kind of 'capital' or a 'commodity'—an idealized abstraction which is held in reserve like an erect phallus (Hollier, *Against Architecture*, pp. 122–7). The phallus and the head represent 'the height of erections, military power . . . the ruling sacred' (ibid, p. 132; cf. Taylor, *Altarity*, p. 119).
- 61 Stoeckel, p. xii–xiii; my italics.
- 62 ibid.
- 63 cf. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, University of Nebraska Press, 1986, p. 236. Derrida, following Bataille, seeks 'the vomit of the system', the 'remains', or what 'falls' (pp. 69, 169, 183). 'for Hegel, true knowledge leaves no crumbs, permits no debris, tolerates no remain(s)' (Taylor, *Altarity*, p. 285). On Levinas' notion of the 'trace' see his 'The Trace of the Other', in *Deconstruction in Context*, M. Taylor (ed.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1986.
- 64 See *The Accursed Share*, v.II, pp. 97ff, cf. pp. 79–80. 'la part maudite . . . means the accursed part' . . . a remainder which is not eliminated by negativity . . . The sacrificial victim is one explicit incarnation of the *part maudite*' (Libertson, *Proximity*, p. 65, cf. p. 69).
- 65 On Bataille's 'political scatology', which appeals to the 'social waste' of the lower classes, see Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 125. 'the lowest strata of society can . . . be described as heterogeneous, those who provoke repulsion and can in no case be assimilated to the whole of mankind. In India, these classes are considered untouchable . . . they are characterized by the prohibition of contact analogous to that applied to sacred things' (*Visions of Excess*, p. 144).
- 66 Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille*, p. 48. On taboos surrounding menstrual blood, see *The Accursed Share*, v.II, pp. 64–5, 91.
- 67 Taylor, *Altarity*, pp. 124, 134. 'The homogeneity of the world, which is the dream of Western philosophy . . . is for Bataille, a nightmare. Confronted with systems—philosophical, religious, social, and economic— . . . Bataille attempts to expose an alterity that can never be domesticated. Always searching for *radical* difference, Bataille asks, What remains after the System digests everything? . . . The excrement of the system constitutes the 'blind spot' of Hegelianism' (p. 121; cf. *Visions of Excess*, p. 121). On bodily remainders which spill out through its orifices and transgress its limits, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, Cambridge, 1968, p. 26.
- 68 On the 'schizophrenic' attitude of Tantric sects, who maintain both an exoteric, pure identity and an esoteric, transgression identity, see Edward Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic*

- Mysticism in the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā Cult of Bengal*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1986, p. 109.
- 69 Lorenzen, *Kāpālikas*, p. 70, 87f. cf. *Prabodhacandrodaya*, act III, vs.13. On the dialectic of transgression and purity see Visuvalingam, 'The Transgressive Sacrality of the Dikṣita', p. 451
- 70 Lorenzen, *Kāpālikas*, p. 7; cf. *Kulāṇava Tantra*, viii.101.
- 71 Douglas Brooks, *The Secret of the Three Cities: An Introduction to Hindu Śākta Tantrism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1990, pp. 30–1. 'By maintaining a . . . secret practice and . . . a public 'Vedic life', [the tantric] could practice the 'double norm', that is, be both Tantric and Vedic without . . . casting doubts on his morality'.
- 72 cf. *The Accused Share*, v.II, p. 90. 'I am not one of those who seek the ignoring of sexual prohibitions . . . the human possibility depends on these prohibitions' (preface to *L'Impossible*; in Alexandrian, *Histoire de la littérature érotique*, Paris, 1989, p. 357).
- 73 *Erotism*, p. 64. cf. *The Accused Share*, v.II.
- 74 *Erotism*, p. 48. 'the prohibition renders divine that to which it outlaws access' (*La Littérature et Mal*, Paris, 1957, p. 20).
- 75 *Erotism*, p. 39. cf. *The Accused Share*, v.II, pp. 89ff. 'the orgy is . . . incongruous sexual behavior, tied to that feeling of topsy-turvydom which is produced by . . . lifting of prohibitions' (p. 131). On 'upside down acts' see Roger Caillois, 'Festival', in *The College of Sociology*, p. 298.
- 76 *Erotism*, p. 112. 'taboo . . . consists in the expulsion of certain objects into a region that is impossible to penetrate . . . it is corpses, blood, especially menstrual blood . . . The objects . . . are impure and untouchable, and they are sacred' ('Attraction and Repulsion', II, in *The College of Sociology*, p. 121).
- 77 *Visions of Excess*, p. 94: 'Sexual activity . . . defecation, death and the cult of cadavers . . . taboos, cannibalism, sacrifice . . . omophagia . . . religious ecstasy . . . heedless expenditure . . . present a common character in that the object of the activity is . . . treated as a foreign body'. See also Hollier, *Against Architecture*, pp. 98, 131–2.
- 78 *The Blue of Noon*. H. Mathews, transl., New York, 1978, pp. 77ff; cf. *The Story of the Eye*, New York, 1977. *My Mother*, A. Wainhouse, transl., London, 1972, pp. 11, 18–30. 'An unassimilable remainder (*reste*), the corpse is a grotesque monstrosity that is disgusting yet fascinating . . . Violating every taboo, this man, who devotes his life to excess, has sexual intercourse with the corpse of his mother. . . . The body (*corps*) of the mother (*mater*) is for Bataille the non-logical difference of matter (*mater-ia*)' (Taylor, *Altarity*, p. 127).
- 79 Introduction to *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, p. 14.
- 80 Eliade, pp. 300–1.
- 81 *Prabodhacandrodaya*, act III, vs.16.
- 82 Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, p. 90.
- 83 Eliade, pp. 248–9; G. M. Carstairs, *The Twice-Born: A Study of a Community of High Caste Hindus*, London, Hogarth Press 1957, pp. 84–5. 'Loss of semen is loss of power . . . Exposure to sexual stimulation arouses this power controlled . . . like steam in a boiler' (Dimock, p. 157).
- 84 Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, p. 92. See Mādhava's, *Śaṅkara-digvijaya*, xv.28 and Ānandagiri's *Śaṅkara-vijaya*, xxiii.
- 85 Bharati, p. 266; Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, p. 92f.
- 86 On the attempt to escape all 'remains' and thereby escape rebirth, see Malamoud, p. 23; On the connection between semen and the 'fiery remnant', see Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, p. 115.
- 87 Hindu ideas of celibacy pertain to withholding sex to conserve semen, the wellspring of vitality . . . the Buddhist monk . . . renounces sex in all its manifestations . . . the Buddhist monk is sexless, neuter . . . this idea is represented in the castration symbolism of the shaven head, while matted locks are a denial of castration' (Obeyesekere, p. 38).
- 88 'The magical powers that the Kāpālika seeks to attain are symbolized by the Pāśupata missile equated with the Brahmaśiras or Head of Brahmā . . . in the form of the skull bowl . . . such powers are unleashed by the violation of . . . taboos symbolized by the decapitation of Brahmā's fifth head' (Visuvalingam, 'Bhairava's Royal Brahminicide', p. 171).
- 89 *The Kāpālikas*, pp. 93–4. On the release of 'power through transgression', see Visuvalingam, 'The Transgressive Sacrality of the Dikṣita', p. 434.
- 90 *Prabodhacandrodaya*, Eliade, p. 298.
- 91 Richman, p. 61.

- 92 Derrida, *Glas*, pp. 236–7.
- 93 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 259. '[sacrifice] liberates heterogeneous elements and breaks the habitual homogeneity of the person, in the same way that vomiting would be opposed to . . . the communal eating of food' (Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes*, v.I, p. 269–70).
- 94 Taylor, *Altarity*, p. 134.
- 95 *Visions of Excess*, in Taylor, *Altarity*, p. 120.
- 96 *Visions of Excess*, p. 238.
- 97 *Visions of Excess*, p. 7–8.
- 98 'the hijras have used their position as sexually ambiguous figures outside the normal framework of society to . . . exploit the cultural norms . . . to their own advantage. As a group at the lowest end of the social hierarchy . . . Hijras are stigmatized by their outrageous behavior . . . but this stigma functions as an effective strategy of economic adaptation' (Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, Belmont, Wadsworth Publications 1990 p. 51, cf. p. 23).
- 99 *Dionysos Slain*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press 1977, pp. 68ff. As Detienne argues, the Greek sacrifice was based on an elaborate system of social exchanges, which defined the boundaries between humanity and nature (cooked vs. raw), and also constituted the relationships between different classes of society (who gets which portion of the victim, based on social rank). The Dionysian ritual of omophagia—the devouring of a wild, uncooked animal—therefore represents a radical transgression of the established social system, and even an escape from social order altogether: it 'annihilates the barriers erected by the politico-religious system between gods, beasts and men' (p. 88).
- 100 *Fragmentation and Redemption: Gender and the Body in Medieval Religion*, New York, Zone Books 1992; *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Berkeley, University of California Press 1987. In the medieval world-view women were generally identified with the physical body and particularly with body fluids or 'openings or exudings and spillings forth'. Yet at the same time, 'marginal and disadvantaged groups' like women mystics could also 'appropriate that society's dominant symbols . . . in ways that revise and undercut them' by manipulating the symbolism of the female body as a source of empowerment (*Fragmentation and Redemption*, pp. 220, 16–7, 7).

HUGH B. URBAN is pursuing graduate studies in the History of Religions at the University of Chicago's Divinity School.

1367 E. 53rd Street #302, Chicago, IL 60615, U.S.A.