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Outlawed Beauty: The (Homo)Erotic Sacrifice in Bataille,
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Introduction

“Beauty is desired in order that it may be befouled” said twentieth-century French librarian, philosopher, and pornographer Georges Bataille (1897-1962). It is desired, he goes on, “not for its own sake, but for the joy brought by the certainty of profaning it” (1986, 144). Beauty and the desire to destroy beauty are also major themes explored in the homoerotic prose of twentieth-century authors Jean Genet and Yukio Mishima. Although their lives and work may seem completely unrelated, this presentation will establish the link between eroticism, ritual sacrifice and notions of beauty in the work of all three. In this presentation I intend to read the concepts of beauty in the works of Bataille, Genet, and Mishima as intimately linked with notions of the (homo)erotic sacrifice – for example the crucifixion. Although Bataille doesn’t make an explicitly homoerotic reading of sacrifice, his theories of beauty are more than appropriate to use when reading the erotic sacrifice in gay twentieth-century literature. This presentation focuses on the concept of ‘the beautiful outlaw’ from the religious – Jesus and Saint Sebastian – to the criminal – Fou-Tchou-Li, Maurice Pilorge, and Eugene Weidmann. All were executed in the most extreme fashions, and all have been read as enduring erotic and homoerotic symbols. In this presentation I argue that the destruction of beauty is the essence of the erotic or homoerotic sacrifice in the works of Bataille, Genet, and Mishima.

Beauty, Eroticism and Sacrifice in Bataille

Bataille has been called a ‘madman,’ a ‘neurotic,’ and a ‘mystic without God.’ His life and work have positioned him as a notorious figure – notorious for his renunciation of the Catholic faith, which coincided with his explicitly pornographic writings; and for his obsession with sacrifice, and creation of the secret society *Acéphale* (‘headless’), where it was rumoured that he intended to be beheaded as part of a sacrifice.

In his book *Eroticism* (1957), Bataille argues that notions of physical beauty vary according to trends, but that the less a person physically resembles an animal, the more beautiful they are. Conversely, he also notes that the image of the beautiful person would be unprovocative if it did not hint at some mysterious animal aspect, namely their genitals (1986, 143). The importance of the separation between human and animal is an integral element to

Bataille's theories. For example, Bataille defines eroticism as the sexual awareness that separates humans from other animals. For Jonathan Dollimore, Bataille's notion of erotic transgression is not simply the erotic attraction to the forbidden, but the belief that prohibition, inhibition, horror, and disgust all heighten the intensity of erotic pleasure (2001, 252). Bataille sees erotic transgression as inexplicably bound up with sacrifice, saying that eroticism is "a violation bordering on death, bordering on murder" (1986, 17). Thus, sacrifice, for Bataille, is a violent event that involves spectators looking on, and, most importantly, desiring to look on, as a sacrificial victim is killed. The participants in a sacrifice, just like the participants in an erotic act, experience the anguish, ecstasy and uninhibited communication associated with the death of the victim, or the 'little death' of orgasm (1986, 22). In both erotic acts and sacrifice, Bataille says that the desire for and the destruction of a beautiful person is integral:

In sacrifice, the victim is chosen so that its perfection shall give point to the full brutality of death [...] Beauty has a cardinal importance, for ugliness cannot be spoiled, and to despoil is the essence of eroticism . . . the greater the beauty, the more it is befouled. (1986, 144-45)

In his 1955 essay "Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice" Bataille critiques not only Hegel's notions of death and sacrifice, but unpacks their differing notions of beauty. Bataille points to *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), where Hegel explores the link between death and beauty. Hegel says that beauty is not able to tolerate death and the negative (1979, 19). Bataille, however, argues that death and sacrifice are intimately linked with beauty and the desire for beauty (1990, 14).

Let me furnish Bataille's argument with an example from his own work. In *Inner Experience* (1954), Bataille describes the photo of a Chinese man who was violently tortured and executed in 1905. Bataille, who was fascinated by Christian mysticism, meditated on the photographs of the Chinese torture victim in the same way as medieval mystic Angela de Foligno. Bataille saw this form of meditation as a way for the mystic to project themselves into the image. Then, by destroying the subject in the image, Bataille believed that the mystic was able to destroy themselves – to experience dissolution of the self and experience compassion and communication with others.

The condemned man in these photos is Fou-Tchou-Li, a Mongol guard who had killed his master. Fou-Tchou-Li was condemned to slow death by *Leng-Tch'e*, a lingering

‘death by a thousand cuts.’ The photos show Fou-Tchou-Li lashed to an upright pole. Deep holes have been carved into his chest, you can see his ribs, his limbs have been – or will be, in subsequent photos – hacked off. He was administered opium and this, as well as the rush of terror and endorphins no doubt flooding his body, might have resulted in the ecstatic expression on his face – as you can see, Fou-Tchou-Li appears to be almost smiling, exalting, in ecstasy. Eventually Fou-Tchou-Li would die from decapitation. Bataille describes these photos as such:

In the end, the patient writhed, his chest flayed, arms and legs cut off at the elbows and at the knees. His hair standing on end, hideous, haggard, striped with blood, beautiful as a wasp. I write “beautiful”! ... something escapes me, flees from me, fear robs me of myself and, as if I had wanted to stare at the sun, my eyes rebel. (1988, 119)

Bataille goes on to describe the condemned man as ‘young’ and ‘seductive,’ and says: “I cannot help but love him, right to the dregs” (1988, 121). What I’m reminded of here is philosopher Michel Foucault’s account of the 1757 torture and execution of Robert-Francois Damiens, which he uses to open his 1977 work *Discipline and Punish*. I believe that there is an obvious influence between Bataille’s account of Fou-Tchou-Li’s torture and execution and Foucault’s fetishised account of Damiens’.

What is so difficult to digest is how Bataille could call Fou-Tchou-Li ‘beautiful’ – this haggard and brutalised and cut up man. For Darren Jorgensen, it is through Bataille’s notion of eroticism that we can make sense of the crowds of onlookers that surround the execution and how we can come to terms with our own seemingly ‘perverted’ attraction to these images. Jorgensen suggests that it is the prohibition and the transgression of prohibition that comes from looking at these images that attracts us to them. It is the moment where extreme ecstasy and extreme horror merge, both in the images and in our desire to look at the image (2008, 5). According to Heinz Kimerle, Bataille believed that the beauty of the image transcends the meditation between the mystic and the object they meditate on, and through the mystic’s dissolution of self a form of sacred communication is created (1998, 230). When Bataille says that: “as if I had wanted to stare at the sun, my eyes rebel,” I believe he is trying to explain the images’ abject beauty. The viewer feels compelled to look away from such brutal, visceral images but they cannot, they are trapped staring in awe. I would like to propose that the beauty in these image can be attributed not only to the ‘seductive’ and

‘young’ Fou-Tchou-Li, but to his complete loss of control, to his complete submission as the ‘sacrificial victim,’ that positions him very much like Christ on the cross.

The Eroticism and Beauty of the Crucifixion

I’d like to use this link to briefly segue into queer theorist Eve Sedgwick’s 1991 book *Epistemology of the Closet*, where she explores, in one chapter, male homosexuality in religion, predominantly in Christianity. According to Sedgwick, the main impact of Christianity on men’s desire for the male body has, unsurprisingly, been prohibited. Taking a particularly Bataillean reading, Sedgwick says that images of the crucifixion always depict an “unclothed or unclothable male body, often in extremis and/or in ecstasy, prescriptively meant to be gazed at and adored” (1991, 140). If we look at Guido Reni’s 1640 depiction of the crucifixion we can make a definite comparison between the naked Fou-Tchou-Li and the barely clad Christ. We can make another comparison between the Christian adoring Christ and Bataille’s adoring Fou-Tchou-Li, whom he ‘loved to the dregs’ and meditated on in the same way as a Christian mystic. Sedgwick says that the scandal of the unclothed, exalting Jesus in a homophobic religion that is dominated by the male gaze hasn’t abated despite artistic efforts of disembodiment of Christ’s body, feminising it, or ‘de-Judeising’ – that is, Europeanising it. What has occurred, she says, has only been a further entanglement of the crucifixion among other various modern figurations of the homosexual. Interestingly, artistic representations of Christ on the cross are only relatively new. Richard Harries says that this is because crucifixion as a form of public execution might have likened Christianity with criminal worship. Harries speculates that at the end of the fourth century, when Emperor Constantine abolished crucifixion as a form of public execution, artistic depictions of Christ on the cross became more popular (2004, 12).

I believe that Sedgwick sees Christ as the archetypal male nude – whether he is depicted as suffering or triumphant he is still the desired object in the image, he is the beautiful object that the viewer is meant to gaze at and adore. Like Fou-Tchou-Li, he was stripped naked, or nearly naked, tortured and killed as a criminal. In Reni’s depiction of the crucifixion and we can see that Christ takes on a ‘feminine’ demeanour, his body bent to one side to show the gentle curve of a hip, and though his muscles are toned, there is a pallid softness to his body. His expression is that of one who is gasping more in ecstasy than in agony. As a side note, we can see in both images what eighteenth-century painter William

Hogarth would go on to call the ‘S’ line of beauty. Hogarth claimed that beauty in art was not found through straight lines and strict geometry, but rather through undulating curves that modulate from one gradient to another (1776, 48). The ‘S’ curve denotes liveliness and activity, which I think is fitting considering the death and resurrection motif in the crucifixion.

In his book *The Body of Christ*, James Clifton says that from the fourteenth century, there was a form of eroticised yearning for Christ’s body that became widespread, particularly among Christian mystics like Margery Kempe and Angela de Foligno (1997, 20). Indeed, depictions of Christ with an erection, a symbol of triumph, are not uncommon. Take Maarten van Heemskerck’s 1550 ‘man of sorrows.’ Despite possessing this strong physique, Christ’s body is, again, submissive and sunken, his shoulders have drooped, he looks on the verge of passing out. And yet, our attention is drawn to the questionable bulge beneath his loincloth. Leo Steinberg says that the erection motif in Heemskerck’s images is an integral part of this pictures’ machinery: “the painter must have thought it essential to the urgency of the message – the undoing of death [...] he mobilises the phallus as a sign of resurgent flesh, parades it as the “unconquered,” an anti-death weapon” (1996, 303). Most fittingly, Bataille says that in religious sacrifice, the violence inflicted on the victim is a violence that, because of its association with ‘the flesh,’ is erotic: “the external violence of the sacrifice reveals the internal violence of the creature, seen as a loss of blood and ejaculations” (1986, 91).

What I am attempting to show with these images is the correlation between Sedgwick’s notion of Christ as the beautiful “unclothed or unclothable male body” that commands our attention, and Bataille’s notion of the beauty of the sacrifice; the abject beauty of the body that is ‘hideous and haggard and striped with blood’ – the sort of beauty we can even see in Matthias Grünewald’s grisly 1525 depiction of the crucifixion. Grünewald’s Christ is obviously not beautiful in the same sentimental way as Reni’s or Heemskerck’s, but rather, it possesses the abject beauty of Fou-Tchou-Li.

Beauty and the Erotic Sacrifice in Mishima and Genet

Bataille’s and Sedgwick’s work is important to consider when reading the homoerotic writings of either Japanese author Yukio Mishima (1925-1970), or French author Jean Genet (1910-1986). Mishima was well known for his bodybuilding fetishism; for his proto-fascist political ideology and formation of the self-defence force *Tatenokai* (Shield

Society); and his absurd *coup d'état*, which climaxed with his ritual suicide atop the Tokyo Headquarters of Japan's Self Defence Force. Genet was famous for his openly homoerotic writing which he scribbled on scraps of paper in prison; for his youth spent as an orphan, a petty thief, and army deserter who was often thrown into prison. Both Mishima and Genet's homoerotic writing expound their notions of male beauty through sacrificial and specifically Christian imagery. Indeed, in their writings, sacrifice begets beauty. Stephen Snyder's review of Annie Cecchi's comparison of Mishima with Bataille says that for Bataille,

the body becomes a site for degradation and negation, while for Mishima, beauty was inextricably bound up with tragic death, particularly the sort of death experienced by heroes [...] the erotic fascination with pain, blood, and death [was] to be played out in the muscled body of a young male, which remains a thing of beauty and a site of purity. (2001, 277-78)

Comparatively, Edith Wyschogrod says that in Genet's writing: "when blood is shed and is linked with transgressive ritual, beauty results. Even if beauty is not the goal of the sacrifice, it is its outcome" (1993, 113). I would like to explore Mishima's and Genet's notions of beauty through the works of Bataille and Sedgwick.

In the same way that Bataille meditated on the Chinese torture victim, both Mishima and the protagonist in his novel *Confessions of a Mask* (1948) were infatuated with Guido Reni's 1616 depiction of the beautiful, and well-recognised gay icon, Saint Sebastian. Saint Sebastian (256-288 AD) was a Christian saint and martyr who was killed during the Roman emperor Diocletian's persecution of Christians. Sebastian was shot with arrows (as he is most commonly depicted in art and literature) but surviving this, was eventually clubbed to death. Comparatively, both Bataille's, and Mishima's meditation focuses on young male outlaws that were persecuted and viciously tortured. Held side by side, it is impossible to overlook the similarities in their expressions - of agony and of ecstasy, the similarities of their near nakedness, and of their submissive positioning as the sacrificial victim. I believe we can draw an even greater comparison by bringing in Reni's depiction of the crucifixion. Sedgwick said that depictions of Christ show an "unclothed or unclothable male body, often in extremis and/or in ecstasy, prescriptively meant to be gazed at and adored." The same can be said about Fou-Tchou-Li, and Saint Sebastian. Richard Kaye's reading of Sebastian in art is incredibly similar to Sedgwick's, with Kaye saying that "[t]he martyred Sebastian's "feminine" demeanour as the object of a subjectively determined "gaze" – both a metaphorical and literal target – collapsed into his role as the homosexual male's personal

saint” (1999, 271). In chapter two of *Confessions of a Mask*, the protagonist, Kochan, masturbates and has his first orgasm while looking at Reni’s depiction of Saint Sebastian. For Kochan it is not merely the youthful, muscular beauty of the saint’s body that arouses him, but it is also the destruction of this beauty: “[t]he arrows have eaten into the tense, fragrant, youthful flesh and are about to consume his body from within with flames of supreme agony and ecstasy” (1960, 39). Here, Mishima transmutes suffering into pleasure, making Sebastian’s torture read like something out of an S&M scene. Like the crucifixion, the depictions of Saint Sebastian as a beautiful youth are only relatively recent. The earliest mosaics of Sebastian, from around the year 628 AD show a bearded man in court dress, and it was only during the Renaissance that Sebastian began being depicted as a youth.

Christian imagery in twentieth-century literature has been nowhere more present than in the fictions of iconoclast Jean Genet. Henry Yeager says that the thieves and murderers in Genet’s fictions “correspond to the saints and angels of Christianity” (1965, 215). Indeed, since the age of ten when he was mistakenly publically labelled a thief, Genet became obsessed with concepts of ‘the outlaw,’ and infatuated with the murderers Maurice Pilorge and Eugene Weidmann, whom he eroticised in his fictions. Genet opens his first novel *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943), which Sartre aptly called ‘the epic masturbation,’ with a tribute to Weidmann’s fractured beauty. Weidmann was shot in the head before being arrested and eventually executed in 1939, the last public guillotining in Paris. Genet also salutes the beautiful murderer Pilorge who was executed by the guillotine a few months before Weidmann. For Genet, beauty and saintliness are interwoven with one another. In his novel *Thief’s Journal* (1949) Genet says that Weidmann and Pilorge were “isolated [from society] by their beauty alone” (1967, 213), and that “like beauty – and poetry, with which I merge it – saintliness is individual” (1967, 174), is isolated.

While decapitation and crucifixion are two very different forms of execution, Genet uses beheading as a corresponding image with saintliness and beauty. In the opening of his novel *Miracle of the Rose* (1946), Genet talks of execution by the guillotine, saying “my love of beauty (which desired so ardently that my life be crowned with a violent, in fact bloody death) and my aspiration to a saintliness of muted brilliance [...] made me secretly choose decapitation” (1966, 6). Genet is not alone in his fascination with beheading. Bataille dreamed of being decapitated as part of a ritual sacrifice, and Bataille’s own obsession, the beautiful Chinese torture victim Fou-Tchou-Li was eventually killed by decapitation. There is

one more significant link between decapitation, eroticism and beauty that must be discussed, and this link was made by Mishima.

Mishima, as I have said, ended his life in a brilliant fashion when he staged a coup. He ended his life by *seppuku*. *Seppuku* is a traditional Samurai mode of suicide. Once considered an honourable way to die, *seppuku* had come to be seen as completely absurd by the time Mishima took his life. The mechanics of *seppuku* consist of cutting open of one's stomach, before being ritually decapitated. Mishima's obsession with dying a glorious death paradoxically drove him to fake illness to avoid army service in his youth. In his 1970 nonfiction work *Sun and Steel* Mishima says that a glorious and tragic death is only possible if the dead person has a beautiful body. For most of his life Mishima felt that he "lacked, in short, the muscles suitable for a dramatic death. And it deeply offended my romantic pride that it should be this unsuitability that had permitted me to survive the war" (1971, 26). Indeed, in *Sun and Steel*, he also claimed that communal suicide was "beauty [...] by men in general, in an ultra-erotic sense" (1971, 55). At thirty, Mishima began body building, and eventually created the beautiful body that he had long desired and eroticised in his writing. With his body made beautiful, Mishima began posing for photo shoots, often appearing nearly naked or nearly dead. In close proximity to his fictions, Mishima appeared in the 1966 film adaptation of his short story "Patriotism," which ends with a young general committing *seppuku*. In 1968 Mishima posed for a photo shoot as Saint Sebastian, the very figure he and his protagonist in *Confessions* had obsessed with. In 1970, just two months before his attempted coup and suicide, Mishima posed for a series of *seppuku* themed photos. Although Mishima is known to have possessed the fascistic ideal of the body outliving the spirit, he is also known to have called himself 'beauty's kamikaze' (2006, 51), a phrase that is almost completely synonymous with Bataille's belief that "beauty is desired in order that it may be befouled."

Conclusion

Austrian poet Rainer Rilke said that "beauty is but the beginning of terror which we can just barely endure. What we admire about it so is that it calmly disdains to destroy us" (1992). For Mishima, this notion was explored in the majority of his literary works, none more than his 1956 novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*. The novel which follows the life of a disenchanted Buddhist acolyte who is so caught up in his belief that the Golden

Temple is the symbol of ideal beauty that the only way to free himself from this obsession is to burn the temple down – to destroy it. By paralleling sacrifice with eroticism and beauty in the works of Mishima, Genet, and Sedgwick, I have attempted to outline the very basis of Bataille's notion of erotic transgression. That is, that it is possible to experience forms of erotic behaviour that "transform guilt into joy, pain into pleasure, torture into ecstasy, and (most miraculously of all) the wish to die into an overwhelming and unspeakable feeling of love" (1993, 89). One might add to this mix, as Jonathan Dollimore has, the transformation of the horrific into the beautiful. This is what Bataille did in his meditation on Fou-Tchou-Li, and what Sedgwick, Genet, and Mishima have subsequently done in their homoerotic reading of the beauty of religious sacrifice.

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