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Solar sacrifice: Bataille and Poplavsky on friendship

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ABSTRACT

This article reconstructs the forgotten friendship between Georges Bataille and the Russian émigré poet and philosopher Boris Poplavsky. Comparing their solar metaphysics, I focus on conceptions of friendship, sacrifice and depersonalisation. First, I retrace Bataille's relationship to early Surrealist and Russian circles in inter-war Paris, with a focus on his friendship with Irina Odoevtseva. I then offer a novel reading of Poplavsky's poetry through the lens of Bataille's philosophy, analysing a recurring motif that I call 'dark solarity'. Uncovering a hidden intertextual dialogue between Poplavsky and Bataille, I argue for Poplavsky's lasting impact on Bataille's anti-Icarian sun cult. Finally, my paper demonstrates how Poplavsky's writings on solar sacrifice, excess and friendship left marks on Bataille's vision of a solar community, embodied in the secret society Acéphale. The dialogue between Poplavsky and Bataille, I finally suggest, is a missing piece in the entangled history of Russian and French philosophy, as well as an original contribution to discourses on friendship in twentieth-century continental thought.

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It is more difficult to lose oneself alone.

Bataille, 'Friendship' – 1940

I waited for a friend – now, alas, I wait.

Poplavsky, untitled poem – mid-1920s

Friendship is like the glow of a star that slowly dies. In his notebooks for *Guilty*,¹ Georges Bataille described a soirée at which he and his partner Laure entertained some of their debauched Russian friends:

In December 1937 ... Laure and myself prepared a dinner: we were expecting Ivanov and Odoevtseva. Just as we had planned, the dinner proved no less wild than the wind blowing that day. Odoevtseva, naked, began to vomit (Bataille, 1973, pp. 524–525).²

In the 1930s, Bataille was deeply steeped in all sorts of excesses and obscenities, visiting brothels as if attending church. He would later write: 'My true church is a whorehouse – the only one that gives me true satisfaction' (Bataille, 1988, p. 12). Unsurprisingly, he was drawn to a couple who was infamous in what was known as

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the 'Russian Montparnasse' for their promiscuous lifestyle: the émigré poets Irina Odoevtseva (1895–1990) and Georgy Ivanov (1894–1958).³ The dinner might have been a feast in commemoration of the Marquis de Sade. Just a few days before, on the anniversary of Sade's death, their friend Maurice Heine took Bataille and Laure to the forest where Sade wanted to be buried (Kendall, 2007, p. 143).

As Bataille's notebooks reveal, he did not cook the supper himself but ordered it from his caterer. We do not know what they ate, but Bataille was infamous for serving rotten food. One of his friends remembered how Bataille once bought some rancid wild boar from his butcher – they had to call an ambulance after eating it. We also know that servings of horsemeat, washed down with water, were not uncommon lunches for the secret society of Acéphale (see Surya, 2002, p. 251). Odoevtseva was perhaps offered a similar piece of roadkill before she stripped off and vomited, evoking Bataille's lines: 'I think as a girl takes off her dress. At the extremity of its movement, thought is indecency, even obscenity' (Bataille, 1973, p. 200).

A year after the soirée, Odoevtseva's husband was still upset about his wife's obscenity. In his 1938 prose-poem 'Decay of the Atom' Ivanov insisted that only men can speak about the world, because '[w]oman, as such, does not exist at all. She is body and reflected light' (Ivanov, 2013, p. 89). That is, a woman is a false sun – all rays but no words. Odoevtseva, however, wrote as wild as the wind. Her memoirs *On the banks of the Seine* (1983) chronicle her adventures with Bataille in the underground circles of Russian Paris. Odoevtseva's book opens with a solar epigraph, citing Canto XXXIII from Dante's *Paradiso*, where love is the wheel 'that moves the sun and the other stars' (Odoevtseva, 1983, p. 1). Solarity remained a main theme in Odoevtseva's friendship with Bataille.

Fascinated by the October Revolution, both Bataille and his partner Laure frequented Russian émigré circles since the mid-1920s. Fond of playing Russian Roulette (Surya, 2002, p. 58), Bataille even learned some Russian at the School for Oriental Languages in Paris. Unlike Laure, however, Bataille never visited the Soviet Union.⁴ Instead, he immersed himself into the counterculture of émigrés who lived hand-to-mouth in Montparnasse, building new communities rooted in a stateless politics of friendship. These displaced, in-between people lived the excessive life which Bataille envisioned in his pornographic prose. Bataille's two philosophical masters were both exiled Russians: Alexandre Kojève and Lev Shestov.⁵ Kojève's legendary seminar on Hegel (1933–1939), attended by Bataille, Queneau, Lacan and the Surrealists, paved the way for Bataille's philosophy of negativity and excess. The seminar was also one of the meeting points between Bataille and the Russian diaspora, besides Dadaist and Surrealist venues.

Victory over the sun

Bataille's main Russian contact, however, was the 'vomiting' poet, Odoevtseva (see Galtsova, 1999). In her memoir *On the banks of the Seine*, Bataille features in various sections as one of her closest friends since the late 1920s:

Georges Bataille—a great friend of ours—especially of mine—visits us every weekend. He is still a humble employee of the National Library and an even humbler Surrealist who has just joined the fashionable avant-garde movement—and does not yet suspect the glory that will crown him—especially after his death. (Odoevtseva, 1983, pp. 215–216)

Half a century later, Odoevtseva would look back on her friend with a mix of posthumous glorification and condescension. A librarian in his day job, Bataille dedicated his weekends to orgies with his Russian friends. They also initiated him into the Parisian art scene that was mostly powered by exiled Eastern Europeans. Odoevtseva recalled how in 1928 she 'went to a Surrealist vernissage, accompanied by [Georgy] Adamovich and our common French "avant-garde" friend Georges Bataille' (1983, p. 140). This 'avant-garde novice', Bataille, was 'trying to open new horizons', however, his Russian friends 'were rather sceptical of his discoveries' (p. 140).

For Russians in Paris, who had seen Futurism, Surrealism held few secrets. For Bataille, it was a new world.⁶ An important precursor of Surrealism, Futurism was the final expression of the avant-garde in pre-revolutionary Russia, culminating in the solar opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913).⁷ Odoevtseva became Bataille's Ariadne, guiding him through the labyrinth of revolutionary radiance:

Bataille admires the Russian Revolution, which does not make us angry, but makes us laugh and does not interfere with our friendship. We find this future great philosopher very handsome, naive and cute, but not too clever. (Odoevtseva, 1983, pp. 140–141)

In Russian Paris, friendship went beyond politics. As her memoirs detailed, Odoevtseva also took the 'naive and cute' philosopher to the theatre. 'Georges Bataille comes to pick me up,' she recalls, 'and the two of us go to see the Pitoëffs' (Odoevtseva, 1983, p. 141). Ludmilla and Georges Pitoëff were Russian émigré actors-directors, who became famous for their radical stagings of Shakespeare and Chekhov. Mentors of a young Antonin Artaud, the Pitoëffs had an important influence on his *theatre of cruelty* (Deák, 1977, p. 353). To see dark theatre in interwar Paris, one went to the Russian productions. Together with Odoevtseva, Bataille might have seen Pitoëff's plays *Hamlet* or *Three Sisters*. While one Russian writer described the 'atmosphere of indifference, vulgarity and filth' in Pitoëff's theatre, a French critic saw a masquerade of 'madness,' another 'a theatre of shocks' (cited in Gitelman, 1985). The Pitoëffs were another debauched Russian couple whose plays depicted lonely, filthy individuals escaping into transgressive madness – just to Bataille's taste. One evening in Odoevtseva's memoir particularly stands out:

Bataille waits patiently. Georgy Ivanov looks at his watch: — Twenty minutes past five, Poplavsky is no longer coming. ... It's disgraceful. I won't let him in. — He must have overslept or forgotten ... — I say conciliatory. — Don't be angry! Georgy Ivanov shrugs his shoulders: — I'll be angry. No big deal. But he begged me to listen to his poems. And he didn't come. Georgy Ivanov opens the door. In front of it, holding in one hand glasses, and in the other a notebook, stands Poplavsky. From surprise he drops his glasses and notebook on the floor. The scribbled pages fall at his feet. — Poplavsky! — Georgy Ivanov cries out in surprise, bending down to pick up the black glasses lying on the carpet. Poplavsky has a completely confused look on his face. It's so funny, I can't help laughing.—Why did you stand there and not call? — I ask, laughing. —'I,' Poplavsky explains in an almost weeping voice, 'have been standing here for a long time. More than half an hour. I came too early. I was afraid to call. Couldn't ...' Finally, all the pages are picked up, and Bataille and I leave. (Odoevtseva, 1983, pp. 140–141)

Who is this strange man Bataille was awaiting? The poet and mystic Boris Poplavsky (1903–1935) was the enfant terrible of Russian Montparnasse, also known as the 'Russian Rimbaud' (Tokarev, 2018, p. 189).⁸ Vladimir Nabokov dubbed Poplavsky 'the first hippy, the original flower child' (cited in Jacobs, 2021). One of the greatest writers of his

generation, Poplavsky's life was cut short at the age of 32, as a result of a heroin overdose in October 1935.⁹ Only a few months earlier, René Crevel's suicide had stirred up the Surrealists.

In his diaries, in the months leading to his death, Poplavsky was obsessed with the spirituality of death. Many friends considered his death a ritualised self-sacrifice. His supposed suicide remains the subject of various myths and legends. The most bizarre, yet intriguing, hypothesis comes from Alexander Goldstein, who claimed that Poplavsky faked his own death in October 1935. It was Poplavsky's final, spectacular performance before starting a new life in Italy, the set of his second novel *Homeward from Heaven* (1935). Goldstein became suspicious of Poplavsky's death watching Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*. Who was that 'A. B.' mentioned in Pasolini's credits as someone with whom the Italian director had a fruitful exchange on the Marquis de Sade? The same A. B. also appeared in Pasolini's diaries, published in 1987.

In the spring of 1974, an old man with a strange Russo-French accent turned up out of the blue at the set of *Salò*. He was shabbily dressed, but his sharp mind attracted Pasolini's attention (Goldstein, 2017, p. 22). Refusing to give his name, A. B. presented himself as a cinephile who regularly published under pseudonym in the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. After spending a few evenings with A. B., Pasolini concluded that this man was 'a Proteus of embodied falseness'. Similarly, Poplavsky's friend Georgy Adamovich recalled Poplavsky's falseness: today he would be a communist, tomorrow a Nietzschean or Buddhist, 'or even just a sporty young man' (cited in Tokarev, 2018, p. 189). When Pasolini asked about his plans, A. B. told him that he was preparing for his 'second death,' but had to go to Africa first to see his favourite boxer, Muhammad Ali, in a championship (Pasolini cited in Goldstein, 2017, p. 23). Goldstein insists that A. B. — Apollon Bezobrazov — was none other than the poet and boxing aficionado, Poplavsky himself.

Born in Moscow, Poplavsky left Russia after the Revolution, transiting through Constantinople, where he became a drug fiend and disciple of Jiddu Krishnamurti. Trained as a painter in Berlin, Poplavsky published poems in Russian émigré newspapers. He was quickly drawn to the Surrealist circles in Paris, where he met Breton, Artaud and Bataille. Besides his poems capturing ecstasy and excess, Poplavsky wrote diaries, novels and experimental philosophy.¹⁰ Briefly after Poplavsky's death, his friend, the Russian émigré writer Gaito Gazdanov wrote an obituary. In *On Poplavsky* (Gazdanov, 1935), Gazdanov described how Poplavsky spent all his money on luxury: gramophones, vinyl records and brightly-coloured ties. He was never seen without a bunch of spiritual devotees following him. He also had a passion for boxing and weightlifting, introducing himself as 'poet and boxer'. When Bataille encountered Poplavsky that night, he looked as strange as Gazdanov recalled him:

He always seemed as if he were returning from a fantastic voyage, as if he were entering a room or a café from an unwritten Edgar Allan Poe novel. Just as strange was his constant manner of wearing a suit that was a mixture of sailor's suit and tracksuit. (Gazdanov, 1935)

In Gazdanov's account, Poplavsky always wore 'sunglasses which completely obscured his gaze and, since it was impossible to see his eyes, his smiles resembled the trusting smile of a blind man' (Gazdanov, 1935). Only once, Gazdanov saw his 'small eyes which were not smiling at all, but were very alien, and incredibly cold' (ibid.). This strange man must have caught Bataille's eye. The trusting smile of

a blind man evokes Hans Bellmer's illustrations of *The Story of the Eye* (Bataille, 1947). The first Russian Surrealist, Poplavsky, was addicted to opium since he was 12 and was infamous for his hedonistic lifestyle.¹¹ His texts reflect a deep interest in all sorts of spiritual and corporeal transgression, from weightlifting, boxing and heroin use to dreaming, excessive prayer and practices of automatic writing.¹²

Dark solarity

One recurring motif in Poplavsky's poetry is the *dark sun*, a symbol of death and transgression. In his notebooks, he excessively drew images of solar rays and circles. Both his visual works and poems are driven by the tension between light and darkness, radiant joy and devastating despair. Like Bataille, Poplavsky was obsessed with solarity. In the 1923 poem 'Eagles', published posthumously in 1938 in *In a Wreath of Wax*, Poplavsky envisions a 'double-headed eagle' at sunset:

Смотрю, глаза от солнца увернув;/Оно в них все ж еще летает, множась./Напудренный и равнодушный клюв/Грозит прохожим, что моргают, ежась.

[I look with my eyes averted from the sun;/It still flies in them, multiplying./A powdered and indifferent beak/Threatens the passers-by who blink and squirm.] (Poplavsky, 2009a, p. 61)

The sun is mirrored by the eye, which infinitely multiplies the image of the double-headed eagle. Poplavsky's poem envisions a solar constellation overlooked by an indifferent bird. In 1929/30, Bataille took up the figure of the eagle, whose 'hooked beak' cuts everything to assert its 'sovereign virility'. Echoing Poplavsky, Bataille's 'solar bird' is the only being that sees the sun eye to eye. The eagle 'has formed an alliance with the sun, which castrates all that enters into conflict with it (Icarus, Prometheus, the Mithraic bull)' (Bataille, 2008, p. 34).

Poplavsky's poem 'Duality' rewrites the Icarus myth by identifying the sun with the wax that it melts. 'From the ghost of the sun,' it reads, death 'drips to the ground like wax' (Poplavsky, 2009a, p. 62). Poplavsky's sun is not a bright source of life but a black abyss of death and decay, an 'underwater sun' (p. 394), whose heat destroys even those whose eyes are turned away. It is an evil, black 'midnight sunstroke' (p. 130), a nocturnal excess of solar generosity.¹³ Poplavsky's midnight sun emits madness through its rays. Radiating hellish happiness, the dark sun illuminates the night:

Вокруг нее сияют годы,/Цветы и снег,/И ночь вращается к восходу,/А солнце — к тьме.

[All around her the years shine,/Flowers and snow,/And the night turns to the sunrise,/And the sun — to darkness.] (Poplavsky, 2009a, p. 114)

The tension between solarity and darkness intensifies in *Flags*, the only poetry collection published during Poplavsky's life in 1928. The poem 'Sorrow' channels a mystical vision of angels, who abandon the earth to sleep across the gates of heaven. Sunrise is linked to the 'rosy hour' of death and resurrection, when souls return from paradise into the 'illuminated world' of their bodies. When the sun rose, at twilight, 'the candle at the table went out' — an intimate encounter between life and death, waking and sleep:

Солнце сияло в бессмертном своем обаянье./Флаги всходили, толпа начинала кричать./Что-то ужасное пряталось в этом сиянье./Броситься наземь хотелось, забыть, замолчать.

[The sun shone in its immortal charm./The flags rose, the crowd began to shout./Something terrible lurked in that glow./I wanted to throw myself on the ground,/to forget, to be silent.] (Poplavsky, 2009a, p. 215)

A terrible death lurks in the sun. Solar despair and loneliness are encapsulated in the returning motif of the flag.¹⁴ Paired with the sun, the flag transcends the boundaries between motion and stillness, inside and outside. In the poem 'Flags' Poplavsky imagines his escape from the devastating sun, when the I wraps himself in a flag to die. In the 1929 'Boy and Angel', the nocturnal sun turns into a fallen sun:

Солнце было низко, низко в небе/В черном мире между черных туч./В золотом своем великолепье/Возвращался в горы мертвый луч.

[The sun was low, low in the sky/In the black world between the black clouds./In its golden splendour/The dead ray was returning to the mountains.] (Poplavsky, 2009a, p. 21)

Poplavsky inverts the celestial order, with the sun hanging low in the sky, sunk to earth. The dark sun awakens the souls like a flame, as bright as white darkness. In the 1926 'Hell's Angels,' Poplavsky depicts a hellish earth illuminated by an indifferent sun, which pours its light 'without a care in the world' (Poplavsky, 2009a, p. 97). This mute sun causes darkness and destruction. It is a 'sick winter sun' (p. 219), both radiant and frozen. In the 1926–1930 poem 'Angelique', on the other hand, the dark sun warms a cold world without ever melting its eternal ice:

Солнце гладит прозрачные льды./Спит лицо восходящей зимы./Солнце греет пустые цветы,/Что растут за стеной темноты./Нежный мир пребывает во льду.

[The sun strokes the transparent ice./The face of rising winter sleeps./The sun warms the empty flowers,/That grow behind the wall of darkness./The delicate world remains in ice.] (Poplavsky, 2009a, p. 215)

The motifs of snow and ice become central in the collection *Snowy Hour*, published posthumously in 1936, where the dark sun reappears as a 'false' sun. This false, rotten sun 'comes from the desert' and 'rises on all sides' (Poplavsky, 2009a, p. 203). The 'fading sun was covered with flies and seaweed, and its powerless chariots could no longer drive away the midnight birds' (p. 459). In Poplavsky's solar cosmos, heaven and earth are no longer separated, but one hellscape, 'a terrible place', where 'the sun breathes death' (p. 237).

Angelic men rise 'sadly to the sun from the cold Earth' (p. 213). The sun betrays happiness with its silent shine; it is unfaithful, sick and guilty. In Poplavsky's automatic poems, the sun is associated with various tragic figures: Osiris, the Egyptian king of the dead (p. 363), 'Hamlet-sun' (p. 281), and 'Sun-Judas' (p. 398), the betrayer of friendship. The dark sun embodies an eternal return of falseness, whose 'swaying' is paired with the end of time (p. 376). When the sun is dead, eternity itself passes.

If we follow Odoevtseva's account, Bataille possibly attended Poplavsky's poetry performances at the Ivanovs in the 1920s (see Odoevtseva, 1983). Odoevtseva or Laure might have translated from Russian for him. Bataille would have been drawn to

Poplavsky's dark sun: rotten, inverted, guilty, false. The motif of the dark sun reveals a striking intertextual dialogue between Poplavsky and Bataille. Dark solarity first appears in Bataille's 'The Solar Anus' (2008):

The Sun exclusively loves the Night and directs its luminous violence, its ignoble shaft, towards the earth, but it finds itself incapable of reaching the gaze or the night, even though the nocturnal terrestrial expanses head continuously toward the indecency of the solar ray. (Bataille, 2008, p. 9)

In Bataille's solar mythology, the sun is brought down to earth, decentring the celestial order. Plants rise towards the sun, only to collapse back to earth. Everything circulates, rotates, copulates around this base. 'This great coitus with the celestial atmosphere,' Bataille writes, 'is regulated by the terrestrial rotation around the sun' (2008, p. 7). Bataille's sun is a filthy and fallen parody of the real sun. It is heavenly eye and anus, sick, 'torrid and blinding' (p. 9). Solar love both creates life and destroys it with its *deadly rays*, to echo Poplavsky. The sun is luminously violent, like a volcano (see Timofeeva, 2022). Bataille contrasts solar love with loneliness:

A man who finds himself among others is irritated because he does not know why he is not one of the others. In bed next to a girl he loves, he forgets that he does not know why he is himself instead of the body he touches. ... They can very well try to find each other; they will never find anything but parodic images, and they will fall asleep as empty as mirrors. The absent and inert girl hanging dreamless from my arms is no more foreign to me than the door or window through which I can look or pass. (Bataille, 2008, p. 6)

Bataille plays with the idea of women as inert heavenly bodies.¹⁵ Solar love, on the other hand, is a cosmic event, a gift without return. The sun's great coitus entwines earthly and celestial bodies. Sun rays penetrate all bodies and move them in a senseless circle. Yet, human eyes cannot bear the devastating light. The dark sun blinds its lover.

Anti-Icarus

Under the spell of the Ukrainian Cosmist Vladimir Vernadsky, Bataille put the sun at the centre of his metaphysics, as an excess of energy, sacrifice and surplus. In the late 1920s, Bataille became fascinated by ancient rituals of solar worship. He further explores dark solarity in 'Rotten Sun,' published in *Documents* in 1930, where sun cults are identified with the loss of one's head. Solarity is a violent, bloody sacrifice, associated with the slaying of a bull.¹⁶ Against the Icarian myth of two suns — one that is shining and the other that melts the wax — Bataille calls for a solar excess without elevation. There is only one sun, and it is rotten.¹⁷

Echoing Poplavsky's poetry, Bataille's rotten sun is 'situated at the bottom of the sky like a cadaver at the bottom of a pit'. This dark sun is 'fecal like the eye painted at the bottom of a vase, this Sun, now borrowing its brilliance from death, has buried its existence in the stench of the night' (Bataille, 2008, p. 84). A vomiting hole in the sky, the sun is sick and drunk. In Bataille's reading, the solar myth of Prometheus, 'who stole fire from the wheel of the sun,' confused the sun with the 'eagle-god' (p. 70). The Icarian man who stole the sun merely mutilated his body, without truly sacrificing himself to the sun. Dark solarity, by contrast, is an anti-Icarian revolt — a desire to sink into the abyss and lose one's head.

The anti-Icarian revolutionary is a base materialist, who never rises above the ‘bowels of the earth’ (Bataille, 2008, p. 35). This return from heaven to earth is a final victory over the sun.¹⁸ Poplavsky’s anti-Icarian solarity is best captured in his first novel *Apollon Bezobrazov*. In a letter to Ilia ‘Iliazd’ Zdanovich in 1928, Poplavsky described the text as ‘an attempt to justify our secret, luxuriant life, unusually touching and full of meaning — yet no life at all’ (cited in Jacobs, 2021).

Apollon follows a group of Russian bohemians squatting in an abandoned house in Montparnasse. This esoteric society of friends gathers around a spiritual leader called Apollon Bezobrazov — literally *Apollo the Formless*.¹⁹ Apollo is another anti-Icarus, both sun god and formlessness. In the novel, Poplavsky explores a sacred sociology of friendship, centred around the sun. Apollon’s philosophy is based on the principle of solar nobility, that is, *motionlessness*.²⁰ Like the sun, he is the unmoving mover of his universe:

Apollon Bezobrazov could expand astonishingly well on the subject. He loved the idea of motionlessness and considered it the hallmark of spiritual nobility, not a complete motionlessness and non-existence, but another life, similar to the life of flags on towers, where a remote golden process slowly matures and repeats. (Poplavsky, 2015, p. 104)

Once again, the sun is compared to a flag, slowly drifting between inside and outside. A small circle of friends rotates around Apollo, the sun god. They are unemployed refugees, existing in utter poverty, yet with solar nobility. The solar friends spend their days sleeping, dreaming, watching the sun, burning books and strolling around. This impossible community grew from the rotten soil of exile, the world of madness and filth that Bataille perhaps saw in Pitoëff’s plays.

The sun features heavily in *Apollon Bezobrazov* as a radiant source of destruction. Poplavsky’s sun god is formless and false. Apollo is the sickening centre of his ‘Paradise of Friends’ or ‘Republic of the Sun’ (cited in Tokarev, 2018, p. 181). The following lines, as many in this strange novel, could have been written by Bataille: ‘The sun rose, illuminating the beautiful, dead prostitutes of Montparnasse as they floated motionlessly in the water’ (Poplavsky, 2015, p. 109). The rotten sun that illuminates the paradise of friends is both merciless and beautiful.

Solar sacrifice

Surprisingly, the two sun-seekers, Bataille and Poplavsky, never mentioned one another in their diaries. Why would the two friends keep their esoteric communication secret? Even more astonishing if we consider that their paths did not only cross at Odoevtseva’s house. At least once every week, the two friends sat together in Kojève’s seminar on Hegel. In 1934–1935, Poplavsky and Bataille were among Kojève’s most loyal students. Bataille described how he came home from Kojève’s sessions ‘suffocated, crushed, shattered, killed twice ten times over’ (cited in Noys, 2000, p. 7). The group went for drinks after the seminar to continue their conversations into the night.

Under the influence of Kojève’s seminar, Poplavsky developed his idea of a solar ‘paradise of friends’. In the 1935 seminar, Kojève explored the concept of personality as collective transindividuality.²¹ The individual, for Kojève, only realises itself when being recognised by others (Kojève, 1980, p. 235). Individuality is a particular expression of

universal recognition in a utopian state of perfect satisfaction; it is both the loss of the individual, sublated in the collective, and the blossoming of true personality.²²

In his Hegelian novel *Homeward from Heaven*, a sequel finished shortly before his death in October 1935, Poplavsky describes the individual as dissolved into a paradise of friends. Poplavsky's inverted Icarus is a solar, impersonal subject: 'There is no soul, no personality, no I, nothing is mine; from heaven to earth there is only the fiery waterfall of universal existence, inception, disappearance' (cited in Karlinsky, 2013, p. 255). In the 'Dark Night' of solitude, the I has sacrificed its limits. The I is 'an ocean of zeros, and upon it, like the voice of a wireless on an icy mountain, the comical talking parrot of oblivion' (Poplavsky, 2022, p. 97). The solar, transgressive I is 'like a sticky liquid fire' (p. 98), simultaneously dispersed everywhere and nowhere. In the final scene of the novel, Apollon asks the protagonist whether he travelled homeward from heaven:

No, Apollon, I didn't ... The earth wouldn't have me.

So then, are you going back to heaven?

No, neither heaven nor the earth but to the silence of the absolute night ...

So we're friends?

Yes, Apollon, once again in the paradise of friends ... (Poplavsky, 2022, p. 249)

This anti-Icarus is unable to return to earth, caught in the deadly rays of the sun whose meshes create the paradise of friends. Poplavsky's last words were a short essay on his new conception of the solar friend, titled 'On the Substantiality of Personality' [О субстанциональности личности]. The I dissolves into the Republic of the Sun which unites the friends in death. Realising a true communion of friends, the self is depersonalised. The citizens of Poplavsky's Paradise of Friends communicate in a shared overcoming of their fear of death. Under the radiating heat of the sun, they create a new community of ecstasy and death.

The secret of those who are lonely, Poplavsky wrote just before he died, is 'the happiness of not fearing death' (cited in Tokarev, 2018, p. 186). Freedom of fear is a practice of joy before death. The essence of this solar community lies 'at the very surface, in a joyful, shining, real meeting of the one and the other in the plastic-objective birth of the spirit' (p. 195). Solar friendship is an impossible communication, beyond heaven and earth, across space and time.

Poplavsky's Kingdom of the Sun prefigured another esoteric community of sun worshippers, Bataille's *Acéphale* (1936–1939). Founded in April 1936, shortly after Poplavsky's death, *Acéphale* can be seen as Bataille's homage to his friend's solar utopia. Like the Kingdom of the Sun, *Acéphale* was, above all, a society of friends. The headless man, as André Masson saw him, was another anti-Icarian hero. Carrying the labyrinth in his belly, the Acéphalic friend holds a knife in one hand, the flaming heart of the sun in the other. On his chest, a constellation of distant stars.

Acéphale's rituals could have been invented by Apollon Bezobrazov. The friends always met at full moon, under the light of the midnight sun (Kendall, 2007, p. 135). One rite was the pilgrimage to the Place de la Concorde, to commemorate the beheading of Louis XVI. Another journey led to a forest which had a tree struck by lightning, beheaded and uprooted by cosmic energy. The headless friends of *Acéphale* imagined themselves with an eye on the top of their skull, opened towards the sun, to receive its solar excess face-to-

face. Published in 1935–1936, Bataille's 'The Labyrinth' explores the idea of transindividuality:

Each person can only represent their total existence, if only in their own eyes, through the medium of words. Words spring forth in their head, laden with a host of human or superhuman lives *in relation* to which they privately exist. Being depends on the mediation of words ... which must present it as 'being in relation'. (Bataille, 2008, pp. 173–174)

On their own, each person is insufficient; it only exists in relation, by sacrificing the self. In the labyrinth, inside and outside blur — another image of the bowels of the earth into which the anti-Icarian friend sinks. As a solar being-in-relation, the self is less an 'I' than a 'personless presence,' as Maurice Blanchot put it (Blanchot, 1997, p. 290).²³ The solar I is only itself with its friends. Beyond words, the friends share the secret of death with one another. Bataille's kingdom of friends, *Acéphale*, was obsessed with the idea of sacrifice. Each member was bound to the others by a promise to die. Unlike Poplavsky's sacrifice to the sun, however, the friends survived *Acéphale*. Enacting Bataille's *Solar Anus*, the headless worship a world upside-down, with the dead sun at the bottom of a pit of despair.

Dead stars

In the 1938 'Celestial Bodies' (Bataille, 1986a), Bataille radicalised his ideas on solar sacrifice. Through losing herself, the 'I' regains her free cosmic movement. She 'can dance and swirl in the full rapture of those great swarms of stars.' However, 'in the violent expenditure of self,' she simultaneously 'breathes in the power of death.' In the solar swarm of friends, the self is outside of herself, 'rediscovering the joy of sun and spiral' (Bataille, 1986a, p. 78). Solar friendship is the redirection of the I towards the centre of its communal being: the sun. Like a bunch of sunflowers, the friends are united in a sacred heliocentrism that ultimately causes their death.²⁴

In the inaugural session of the *Collège de Sociologie* in November 1937, Bataille outlined his 'sacred sociology' built on solar subjects. Collective consciousness emerges from being united in facing death. It is this communal aspect of existence that is sacred — not personal life, but impersonalised friendship under the dead rays of the sun. Friendship is like a phoenix, the burning bird that rises from the ashes of life.

For Bataille, every community is a crisis of communication, a 'rupture in communicability in which understanding can nevertheless be shared' (Kendall, 2007, p. 150). Only this impossible communion is communicable among friends, like a letter sent to a wrong address. Friendship is a misdelivery with no final meaning except death. Bataille defined 'the possibility of any community as impossible' (Surya, 2002, p. 314), comparing friendship to the dark midnight sun. Communication is only possible because community is impossible. Solar friendship is this impossible commonality beyond words, a practice of joy before death. With whom do we speak in death?

Communication, Poplavsky wrote, is 'a private letter sent randomly to unknown friends, and it is like a protest against the separation of lovers in space and time' (cited in Tokarev, 2018, p. 200). In the final session of the *Collège* in July 1939, Bataille defined the sacred as 'communication between beings, and thereby the formation of new beings' (Hollier, 1988, p. 338). In their wordless self-loss, the solar friends search for a higher form of community, rooted in sacrifice and solar nobility.²⁵ Like the sun, the friends give

themselves up for the other, releasing an excess of energy through their death. Solar friendship is 'an echo without return' (cited in Surya, 2002, p. 315). As Jean-Luc Nancy put it, 'if the community is revealed in the death of the other it is because death itself is the true community of mortal beings; their impossible communion' (cited in Surya, 2002, p. 314). Solar communication has no words for the shared exposure to death.

In his final essay on personality, Poplavsky introduced the idea of *depersonalisation*. Like melting into the wax of the sun, death is 'solar hermitry' and a final 'reconciliation with the Absolute' (Tokarev, 2018, p. 204). In the impossible communion with friends, in their distant communication, the self finds herself. The Kingdom of the Sun, with its immortal death and 'solar heat' (Tokarev, 2021, p. 195), is a transition into another life. The solar friend, a 'superindividual' person [личность], realises herself in communion with friends. This last exchange of energy leads to solar immortality. For Poplavsky, the death of the I is true *substantiality*, the materiality of selflessness.²⁶ The solar I is not an isolated individual but 'the very essence of the world, or the absolutely common basis of it' (Poplavsky, 2010, p. 18).

The truest expression of personality is, therefore, 'impersonalisation, depersonalisation, the negation of the self as a person' (p. 19). Solar substantiality is the fusion with the absolute – becoming one with the sun. It is the death of the 'ghostliness of individuality'. Self-annihilation is communication [общение] among distant friends. During life, the self sees 'all light ... as through a glass slightly obscured by individuality' (p. 20). In full sunlight, the glass is shattered. The thin layer of individuality is stripped away and the I enters the 'life of friends' (Poplavsky, 2010, p. 21).

Bataille's 1940 essay 'Friendship' (Bataille, 2001) reads like a final, distant echo of Poplavsky. 'Friendship' reflects Bataille's own experiments with realising a Kingdom of the Sun. It was written at a time of loneliness, when he felt abandoned by his friends Klossowski, Kojève, Queneau and Leiris. In a letter from January 1935, Bataille wrote: 'My friends avoid me. I frighten, not because of my cries, but because I cannot leave anyone in peace' (Surya, 2002, p. 540). He lost other close friends: Poplavsky died in 1935, Laure and Shestov in 1938, Heine in 1940. In times of war, it was only death that held the friends together.²⁷ 'Friendship' describes the universe as being-in-relation:

Existence is not possible wherever humans consider themselves in isolation: it begins with conversations, shared laughter, friendship, eroticism, that is to say, that it only takes place when *being is passed from one to the other*. . . . But when I realise that that the universe does not resemble any isolated being that is closing on oneself but to what *passes from one being to the other*, when we burst out laughing or when we love *one another*, at that moment the immensity of the universe opens up to me and I become confused with their flight. (Bataille, 2001, p. 13)

Solar friendship is 'a feeling of wild celebration, licentiousness and puerile pleasures' (Bataille, 2001, p. 12). The impossible communication between friends is sacrifice and ecstasy. While the isolated I lives in a world of darkness, friendship offers the impersonal joy of blinding sunlight. 'If a man loses himself on his own, he is before the whole universe', wrote Bataille. Solar friendship is the slow dying of stars, a radiant transfer of intoxication. Friends communicate their self-loss as the intimate substance of impersonal solarity. The paradise of friends is a 'world of dead suns satisfied with a living sun' (p. 10). There is nothing beyond the sun's radiant joy, 'as if a blind man were staring at the sun

with his eyes wide open becoming himself a blinding light' (p. 7). The sky opens up towards a blazing light. Luminous joy in the midst of the dark night. Ecstasy is 'lightning at play' (p. 15) – the communication between friends.

Sunflowers fuse with the sun like a 'woman that is suddenly stripped naked' (p. 6). She offers up her dress and her body loses itself in her nudity.²⁸ 'But how to make ecstasy continuous, how to live in ecstasy, and not just be sick with ecstasy?' (Poplavsky, 2009b, p. 68). Ecstasy is like the 'luminous glow of a star [that] (slowly) annihilates the star itself' (Bataille, 2001, p. 7). Solar friends are dead stars shining over distance. Their communication is a 'constant metamorphosis of the star into heat and light' (p. 7). Like the sun, the friends give without return, until their energy is exhausted. Friendship is solar sacrifice for it is more difficult to lose oneself alone.

Notes

1. The book's working title was originally *Friendship* (Kendall, 2007, p. 189).
2. This and all following quoted non-English language texts, unless otherwise stated, are the author's own translation.
3. In the interwar period, Montparnasse was the home of thousands of Russian and Eastern European émigrés who fled the October Revolution (Rubins, 2015). These exiles imported new artistic and intellectual currents to the French capital, including Surrealism, Futurism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology and Marxism. Montparnasse was the home of Romanian Dada and the Ballets Russes, attracting leading French artists and philosophers on the search for inspiration, including the young Bataille (Surya, 2002).
4. Laure departed for Soviet Russia after her traumatic stay in Berlin with the sadistic doctor Eduard Trautner (see Kendall, 2007, p. 111). She travelled to Leningrad and Moscow in 1930, where she met Victor Serge and Boris Pilniak who became her lover. According to her nephew, Jérôme Peignot, Laure brought back from Stalin's Soviet Union 'a flame that she nourished with her love for Bataille' (in Peignot, 1978, p. 27).
5. Bataille met Shestov, an important early influence, in 1923. Through Shestov, he encountered Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. On Bataille and Shestov, see Kendall (2007), pp. 40–42). On the importance of Kojève, see Surya (2002) and Tokarev (2018).
6. Bataille turned away from Surrealism as soon as it migrated from its exilic underground into the French mainstream, spearheaded by André Breton. As a negative counter-project to his own, Surrealism was at the heart of Bataille's polemics from the mid-1920s onwards (Surya, 2002, p. 140). Many of Bataille's texts from this period can be read as 'a complex riposte to the Surrealist exigency' (Kendall, 2007, p. 82). Against Surrealism's Icarian solarity, Bataille developed a dark mythology of the sun, entwined with visions of a solar community of friends.
7. Aleksei Kruchenykh's revolutionary opera depicts a group of men trying to capture the sun, to extinguish its light with the help of a dust sheet and concrete. Timofeeva read *Victory over the Sun* as an expression of 'a hypermasculine image of humanity as an all-powerful conqueror of the universe' (2022, p. 101). After colonising the sun, a triumph over death, humans create their own artificial suns on earth.
8. Poplavsky was arguably the most interesting and radical Russian poet in interwar Paris. As Simon Karlinsky put it, 'Poplavsky was in a sense a very fine French poet who belongs to Russian literature mainly because he wrote in Russian' (2013, p. 248). For D. S. Mirsky, he was 'the first émigré writer who lives not on memories of Russia, but in a foreign reality' (cited in Karlinsky, 2013, p. 256).
9. In the last year of his life, Poplavsky was infatuated with Hölderlin's 'madness'. In the 1930s, he was regularly institutionalised at the psychiatric asylum Sainte-Anne (Tokarev, 2021, p. 198), the same clinic where Lacan met Artaud in 1937/38. Bataille began attending the

presentation of patients at Sainte-Anne in November 1931 (Kendall, 2007, p. 86), another meeting point between Poplavsky and Bataille.

10. Poplavsky's major works are the poetry collections *Flags*, *Snowy Hour* and *In a Wreath of Wax*, as well as two novels, *Apollon Bezobrazov* and *Homeward from Heaven*. For an overview of Poplavsky's writings, see Karlinsky (2013); Livak (2001); Menegal'do (2007); Tokarev (2011).
11. His older sister Natasha introduced him to drugs in their teens. After the Revolution, Natasha travelled widely before her opium related death in the late 1920s (see Karlinsky, 2013, p. 261).
12. Poplavsky's automatic poems (Poplavsky, 1999), only posthumously published and still untranslated, are among the most radical experiments by a Surrealist writer. As a fragmented, mechanistic medium, the automatic poem gave expression to Poplavsky's absurdist, deeply mystical vision of life.
13. The sunstroke as a solar gift is a returning motif in Poplavsky's poems. Characteristic is his play with various ideas close to Bataille: the constellation between the sun and an egg, but also the sonic affinity between sunstroke [солнечный удар] and the gift without return [У! дар] (see Poplavsky, 2009a, p. 155).
14. Tokarev (2018) interprets the flag in Poplavsky as a 'plastic-objective expression of the soul, its movements, its "self-sacrifice.'" Pointing to a different type of materiality, the flag transcends the inner-outer divide. It is 'nothing but a surface' (p. 195). Tokarev argues that the motif of the flag was borrowed from Hölderlin, who associated it with silence and the cold winter sun (Tokarev, 2021, p. 200).
15. Reminiscent of Ivanov's earlier mentioned 'Decay of the Atom'.
16. Bullfighting and ancient Mithraic rituals of bull sacrifice were crucial to Bataille's notion of the sacred. In 'Rotten Sun', the bull with a slit throat is another image of the sun, as is the slaughtered cock with its 'solar cry' (Bataille, 2008, p. 57). Besides his own visits to Spain, where he witnessed the bloody corrida, Bataille developed his passion for bullfighting in dialogue with Laure, Michel Leiris and Sergei Eisenstein. A visual source of influence are Pablo Picasso and André Masson's illustrations for the 1933–1939 journal *Minotaure* (see Skira & Eleftheriadis, 1981).
17. Timofeeva (2022), p. 11) argues for Bataille's preference for the dark, evil sun, which melted the wax of Icarus's wings.
18. The final novel of Bataille's friend, the Surrealist writer Raymond Queneau, was ambiguously titled *Le Vol d'Icare* (Queneau, 1968), meaning both flight and theft. After drinking absinthe with prostitutes in Montparnasse, Queneau's anti-Icarus rises above the Seine before falling to his death. Arguably in dialogue with Bataille and Poplavsky, the sun was a recurring motif in Queneau's early Surrealist texts: 'Le soleil: ô monstre, ô Gorgone, ô Méduse/ô soleil' (cited in Thiher, 1985, p. 21). In the early 1930s, Queneau was working on an essay titled 'The symbolism of the sun,' in which he analysed solar mythology with regard to the Minotaur and to the Gorgons. Another solar friend, Queneau also identified the dark, maternal sun 'with excrement and woman' (p. 21.). For both Queneau and Bataille, solar philosophy was linked to the myth of the Minotaur, a solar hero trapped in a labyrinth resembling bowels. The Surrealists were fascinated by this anti-Icarian reversal of solarity.
19. Bataille, too, was interested in formlessness. In the dictionary entry 'Formless,' he argued that the formless brings 'things down in the world' (Bataille, 2008, p. 31), similar to the fallen sun and the anti-Icarus. *Apollon Bezobrazov*, an oxymoronic name which means both formlessness and ugliness, showcases Poplavsky's and Bataille's shared attempt to radicalise and subvert Nietzsche's solar philosophy. Poplavsky empties Apollo from everything Apollonian, turning him into a fallen Dionysus, a god of the dark sun. Bataille suggests that humanity 'has only rarely encountered friendship, until Nietzsche' (2001, p. 15). If God is dead, only the sun sees the earth.
20. Jon Auring Grimm pointed to an important contrast between Poplavsky's motionless Apollo and Bataille's quest for excessive Dionysian movement.
21. Tokarev has argued that Kojève's seminar left traces in Poplavsky's final writings and was 'a possible source for Poplavskiy's philosophical vision of suicide' (2018, p. 185). In his 1935 seminar, Kojève interpreted the suicide of Kirillov in Dostoevsky's *Demons* as a demonstration

of absolute freedom in a Hegelian sense. Dostoevsky was an important reference point for Poplavsky, who also attended and spoke in sessions on the writer at the *Studio Franco-Russe* (p. 190). In his readings of Poplavsky in the light of Kojève, however, Tokarev omits another, even more important theme in Kojève's seminar, namely his original concept of *individuality*. Kojève's notion of a communal individuality was crucial for both Bataille and Poplavsky's conceptions of solar friendship in the mid-1930s.

22. Kojève's conception of subjectivity arguably integrates non-individualistic notions of personality [личность], that were widespread in late nineteenth-century Russian religious philosophy, most notably Vladimir Solovyov, who was the subject of Kojève's early work.
23. Bataille's friendship with Blanchot, whom he meets in this time of crushing loneliness, in 1940, is another important turning point in his intellectual life.
24. The sunflower is an important theme in Bataille's solar philosophy. A recurring motif in Vincent Van Gogh's paintings, the 'sun-star' or 'sun-flower' is a withered, dead plant. Its 'large disk haloed with short petals recalls the disc of the sun, at which it ceaselessly and fixedly stares throughout the day' (Bataille, 2008, p. 63).
25. In Bataille's 1939–1940 essay 'Sacrifice' (1986b), death is described as the only limit of solitude. The self can only escape its existential isolation through 'intercommunication' with others (p. 67). The most transgressive form of togetherness, *laughter*, is associated with the sun: it is an intoxicating 'window of light' (p. 68), an infinite source of radiant joy. Laughter, like sacrifice, is like a 'sunset which continues, after nightfall, to dazzle eyes unaccustomed to darkness' (p. 73).
26. Poplavsky was strongly influenced by Buddhist conceptions of self-abandonment, such as *anattā*, which can mean non-self or substancelessness.
27. Inspired by Bataille, Derrida wrote: 'I do not survive the friend, I cannot and must not survive him, except to the extent to which he already bears my death and inherits it as its last survivor' (Derrida, 2020, p. 13).
28. Bataille here most likely refers to both Odoevtseva and the woman clothed with the sun in the Book of Revelation (KJV, 1769/2008, 12:1); about to give birth, with the moon under her feet and a crown of stars on her head.

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