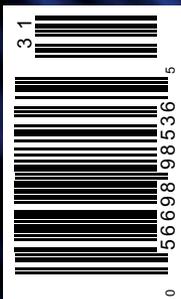
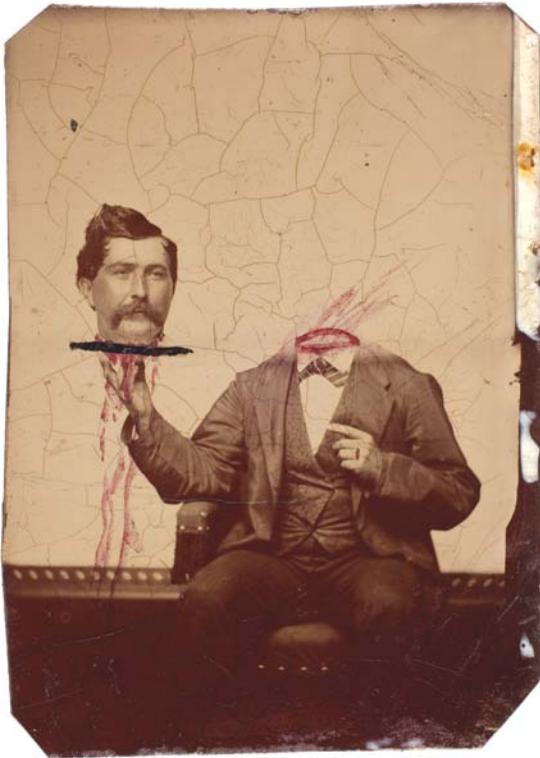


Cabinet

A QUARTERLY OF ART AND CULTURE
ISSUE 49 DEATH
US \$12 CANADA \$12 UK £7





Manipulated image by unidentified American photographer, ca. 1865.
Courtesy International Center of Photography.



Léon Bonnat, *The Martyrdom of St. Denis* (detail), 1885.



William Blake, *The Schismatics and Sowers of Discord: Mosca de' Lamberti and Bertrand de Born*. From Blake's illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, 1824–1827.



Peter Paul Rubens, *The Miracle of St. Justus*, ca. 1629.

LEFTOVERS / CEPHALOPHORIC REASON

EIGIL ZU TAGE-RAVN

Some of your readers will no doubt be familiar with the work of the great French folklorist Émile Nourry (1870–1935), the author of more than a dozen learned volumes and perhaps a hundred articles dealing with many fascinating problems in textual transmission, oral history, cultic paganism, and critical philology. A student of Émile Durkheim, Nourry carved out an idiosyncratic place for himself in the intellectual life of Paris before World War I: he founded his own press, and traded in rare books; as a gentleman-scholar, he rose to the presidency of the French society for folklore studies (a discipline whose breach-birth from the matrix of anthropology he arguably midwived); and, writing under the pseudonym Pierre Saintyves, he gave the world thoughtful essays on the notorious dog-saint Guinefort, the mythic origins of various French surnames, the jackal-headed Egyptian demigod Anubis, and a host of other curious topics.

One can hardly think of a better example of Nourry's idiosyncratic diligence than his exhaustive "Les saints céphalophores," seventy-three closely researched pages documenting, in old French and Latin sources, more than 120 instances of saints engaging in "cephalophory"—i.e., carrying their own severed heads.¹ Paradigmatic here, of course, is the legend of Saint Denis (who after his decapitation reportedly walked, head in hand, to the top of Montmartre, where he sited his own grave). As Saintyves/Nourry impressively demonstrated in this classic piece of scholarship, a deep dive into the Christian hagiographies yielded many less familiar accounts of martyrs taking up their heads, addressing crowds, and moving about the world. Secular-literary treatments of the same phenomenon play a prominent role in the Arthurian tale of Gawain and the Green Knight and in canto twenty-eight of Dante's *Inferno* (where, memorably, a character in the eighth circle of hell addresses Virgil and the pilgrim from a head that dangles lantern-like from his own hand). Related classical allusions appear in Homer and in the Orphean tradition (though these have more to do with loose heads that talk, rather than with cephalophory *per se*, where it is the carrying of the head that is specifically required—the term having its roots in the Greek for "head" and "to bear").

I note with satisfaction that cephalophoric situations have of late come back into vogue as a topic of scholarly interest.² And it is in this context that I write to announce what would seem to be an important discovery.

It is a widely overlooked fact that well before the word *cephalophore* came into common usage in connection with (apparently) supernatural cases of decapitated humans carrying their own heads, the term was a commonplace in zoology and natural history, where it designated a vitally important class of mollusk.³ I have argued for some time that this earlier usage in invertebrate taxonomy significantly informed early twentieth-century scholarship on head-carrying saints, but my efforts to establish this point have been systematically disregarded, even suppressed.⁴

This must now change. I recently acquired, in the course of my own book collecting, a closely annotated typescript manuscript of Nourry's celebrated 1929 article. Stunningly, the margins of this document are adorned with *numerous small diagrams of flatworms*. Internal evidence establishes beyond doubt that these elaborate drawings (and the related notes and instructions) are the work of Marcel Abeloos, the French biologist famous for his work on the regenerative capabilities of the *planarian*, which can, of course, *grow back their own severed heads*.⁵

This remarkable document conclusively demonstrates that Nourry and Abeloos corresponded at some length concerning decapitation among invertebrates, and it even seems that Abeloos witnessed instances of cephalophory among planaria whose heads had been removed. The larger importance of this fortuitous and challenging find will be unfolded in a forthcoming scholarly publication, but it is worth noting, by way of anticipation, that questions of *cerebral regeneration* were much on Nourry's mind as he finalized his *magnum opus*. The implications for the work on Anubis should be clear. The obvious lingering question—did George Bataille, soon to conceive *Acéphale*, learn that Nourry and Abeloos were decapitating *D. gonocephala* (the "gonad-headed" planarian)?—must await further research.

1 Pierre Saintyves, "Les saints céphalophore: Étude de folklore hagiographique," *Revue d'Histoire des Religions*, no. 99 (1929), pp. 158–231.

2 The literature here is large and growing. For an introduction: Regina Janes, *Losing our Heads: Beheadings in Literature and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), and Larissa Tracy and Jeff Massey, eds., *Heads Will Roll: Decapitation in the Medieval and Early Modern Imagination* (Leiden: Brill, 2012). Also relevant: Nicola Masciandaro, ed., *Hideous Gnosis: Black Metal Theory Symposium I* (New York: Create Space, 2010), particularly the striking essay by Evan Calder Williams.

3 Blainville and others used the term for what we would now designate the cephalopods. In botany, the helianthus were sometimes designated as "cephalophores," but this is of no importance.

4 Eigil zu Tage-Ravn, "Marcel Hébert, Elophe, and Libaire: The Invertebrate Origins of Cephalophoric Reason," unpublished manuscript.

5 Marcel Abeloos, "La vitesse de régénération de la tête chez *Planaria gonocephala*," *Comptes rendus hebdomadaires des séances de l'Académie des Sciences*, no. 184 (1927), pp. 345–347.