SPITTE. — 1. Spittle-Soul. — One can be hit full in the face by a truncheon or an automatic pistol without incurring any dishonor; one can similarly be disfigured by a bowl of vitriol. But one can’t accept spittle without shame, whether voluntarily or involuntarily dispatched. This is not, as one might think, a commentary on the kabyl code, but a straightforward rendering of our way of seeing.

For spittle is more than the product of a gland. It must possess a magical nature because, if it bestows ignominy, it is also a miracle-maker: Christ’s saliva opened the eyes of the blind, and a mother’s “heart’s balm” heals the bumps of small children.

Spittle accompanies breath, which can exit the mouth only when permeated with it. Now, breath is soul, so much so that certain peoples have the notion of “the soul before the face,” which ceases where breath can no longer be felt. And we say “to breathe one’s last,” and “pneumatic” really signifies “full of soul.”

As in a hive, where the entrance hole glistens from the wax inside, the mouth—magically the body’s chief aperture—is humid from the to and fro of the soul, which comes and goes in the form of breath.

Saliva is the deposit of the soul; spittle is the soul in movement. We use it to strengthen an action, for protection, to impress one’s will on an object, to “sign” a contract, to give life.

Thus, Mohammed himself feared the witches’ saliva as they breathed on knots and spat a little to work evil spells. In Great Russia and elsewhere, to seal an oath, one spits. Just about everywhere, the kiss, this exchange of saliva, is guarantee of peace (to seal with a kiss). In Oriental Africa, when opening a door that has been long closed, one spits in order to cast out the demon of the empty house. Finally—and this is a startling demonstration of the theory of the spittle-soul—in Occidental Africa, to confer spirit on the child, the grandfather spits into the mouth of his grandchild several days after his birth.

To summarize: from evil will to good will, from insult to miracle, spittle behaves like the soul—balm or filth.

* From Documents 1.7 (1929)
AFTERWORD:
“FILTH WOULD REPLACE GOD”
Christian Hite

Marcel Griaule’s “Spittle (1. Spittle-Soul)” originally appeared next to Michel Leiris’ “Spittle (2. Mouth Water)” in *Documents* 1.7 (1929), an illustrated magazine of *Doctrines / Archéologie / Beaux-Arts / Ethnographie* founded and co-edited by Georges Bataille (Fig. 1).1 Running for 15 issues through 1929 and 1930, *Documents* became a vehicle for dissident surrealists such as Leiris, Joan Miró, Robert Desnos, and André Masson.2 Indeed, in the “Second Manifesto of Surrealism” (1930), André Breton condemns Bataille as an “excremental philosopher”3 due to the heterogeneous matter embraced by *Documents*—“matter so repulsive,” as Allan Stoekl puts it, “that it resisted not only the idealism of Christians, Hegelians, and surrealists, but even the conceptual edifice-building of traditional materialists. It was . . . an all-out assault on dignity.”4
It would be a mistake, however, to think that Bataille simply privileged “base materialism” over Breton’s pursuit of immediate expression (e.g., “automatic writing”), although the title of his magazine—Documents—does in fact suggest a critique of the latter. As Stoekl crucially notes:

Bataille is not simply privileging a new object (excrement, flies, ruptured eyes, the rotten sun, etc.) over the old one (the head, the king, spirit, mind, vision, the sun of reason, etc.) . . . [since] a theory that simply substituted one hierarchy for another (a hierarchy that favors the high replaced by one that favors the low) would only inaugurate a new metaphysics and a new stabilized allegorical system of meaning. Filth would replace God. (I xiii)

This is, no doubt, the risk we also run with Keep It Dirty, vol. a., “Filth”—i.e., a new metaphysics: “Filth would replace God.” But “filth,” I would argue, does not simply “replace God” in Documents. Not, at least, in texts like Griaule’s “Spittle (1. Spittle-Soul),” where something more paradoxical seems to be going on—i.e., a kind of self-de(con)structive subversion from within, or what we might call automutilation. Take, for example, Griaule’s notion of “spittle” as pharmakon: “balm or filth.”

Or, similarly, read Bataille’s own essays in Documents—whether commenting on giant photographs of magnified big toes (“The Big Toe”) or exposed plant genitalia (“The Language of Flowers”)—such texts are like parasites that (un)work—from within—against their own organ’s “proper” heading (“Art Review”). But perhaps the best example of this paradoxical automutilation (be-heading?) is Bataille’s inclusion of a Critical Dictionary within Documents, as a kind of parasitical text within a text. This Critical Dictionary—from which Griaule’s “Spittle (1. Spittle-Soul)” is taken—not only provoked the anger of Documents’ more conservative editors (leading to magazine’s folding), but it also foreshadowed one of Bataille’s most provocative gestures: Acéphale.
It is an open question, of course, whether André Masson’s headless “Acéphale man” (Fig. 2) is really just another “Acé-phallic man,” i.e., one whose “higher” head has simply been displaced to a “lower” one—a hol(e)y skull—in some bone(r)head fantasy of Dionysian hyper-virility.8 And yet, in texts like “Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh” (1930), Bataille seems to generalize “automutilation” beyond these virile few. Thus, in the “rite of circumcision,” for example, Bataille finds “a kind of collective automutilation.”9 Which raises the question: What “head” is being severed? And who, or what, is the agent of “automutilation”? Maurice Blanchot has taken up such questions in his reflections on the (im)possibility of the “Acéphale community”:

Privation of the Head thus did exclude not only the primacy of what the head symbolized, the leader, reasonable reason, reckoning, measure and power, including the power of the symbolic, but exclusion itself understood as a deliberate and sovereign act [. . .] There is here a desperate movement to sovereignly deny sovereignty.10

The exclusion of exclusion itself. One senses this “desperate movement” in Bataille’s discussion of the “automutilator” (Van Gogh), who, “free to throw himself suddenly outside of himself” (“the monstrous ear sent in its envelope”), as Bataille says, “spat in the faces of all those who have accepted the elevated and official idea of life” (SM 70-71). It is, perhaps, no coincidence that this gesture of the “automutilator” involves spittle. After all, as Michel Leiris has noted:

Spittle represents the height of sacrilege. The divinity of the mouth is daily sullied by it. Indeed, what value can we attach to reason, or for that matter to speech, and consequently to man’s presumed dignity, when we consider . . . the identical source of language and spittle.11

Notes
3. See André Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism” [1930], in Manifestoes of Surrealism, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 185. Breton’s critique of Documents runs some 10 pages, in which Bataille is characterized as suffering from “psychasthenia” (185) and his magazine is called an “obnoxious return to old anti-dialectical materialism” (183).


8. See, for example, Georges Bataille, “Nietzschean Chronicle,” *Acéphale* 3-4 (1937), and “The Practice of Joy Before Death,” *Acéphale* 5 (1939), where one reads: “Man ‘is’ as soon as he stops behaving like a cripple, [stops] glorifying necessary work and letting himself be emasculated . . . .” (237), etc. And yet, Bataille’s own interpretation of André Masson’s “Acéphale man” in “The Sacred Conspiracy,” *Acéphale* 1 (1936), also deserves consideration:

Human life is exhausted from serving as the head of, or the reason for, the universe . . . . Man however has remained free not to respond to any necessity . . . . Man has escaped from his head just as the condemned man has escaped from his prison. He has found beyond himself not God, who is the prohibition against crime, but a being who is unaware of prohibition. Beyond what I am, I meet a being who makes me laugh because he is headless; this fills me with dread because he is made of innocence and crime; he holds a steel weapon in his left hand, flames like those of a Sacred Heart in his right. He reunites in the same eruption Birth and Death. He is not a man. He is not a god either. He is not me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster. (181)


