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Poetics of Disintegration in Laure's "Poems before the summer of 1936"

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Abstract

This article examines issues of grammatical gender and symbol in the poetry of Colette Laure Lucienne Peignot. I have focused on the poetics of disintegration in the section entitled "Poems before the summer of 1936," in which we encounter a number of poems written in free verse that reflect different aspects of Laure's notion of the poetic sacred. The poetic sacred, for Laure, relates to the moment when the eternal part of a human being becomes actualized via the engagement of fulfilling a goal while simultaneously being aware of the "weight of death." For Laure, if a person cannot or can no longer experience this emotion, then the person's life is deprived of meaning, deprived of the sacred. Many of the poems in "Poems before the summer of 1936" recount journeys that the speaker, or statement subject "I," embarks upon. Great attention is paid to the grammatical gender of the statement subjects in these poems, although, at times, grammatical gender can be difficult to determine. Sometimes grammatical gender can be discerned in the past tense forms of verbs in the French language, and other times it can be determined by Laure's use of masculine or feminine rhymes in her work. But often, Laure conceals the gender of her statement subjects, choosing instead to focus on represent a rejection of traditional gender roles in her poetry. Ultimately, this article seeks to posit Laure among France's best known writers and thinkers in the early part of the twentieth century, to help close the huge gap in the canon left by the absence of women writers and thinkers between the years 1880-1930.

Keywords: communism, feminism, grammatical gender, French poetry and poetics.

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Colette Laure Lucienne Peignot, also known as Laure, also known as Claude Araxe, lived from 1903-1938.ⁱ Her short life was drastically affected by World War I, during which her father and three uncles died.ⁱⁱ She grew up in an affluent neighborhood, Dammarie, which is too close to Paris to be considered a rural French village. Her mother struggled to keep up the house and gardens after the death of her husband in spite of the bourgeois appearance of their lifestyle. By the time Laure reached adulthood, however, she blatantly rejected her bourgeois background and the Catholic faith, and she became avidly interested in leftist politics, which replaced the bourgeois ideals she had grown up with. Her form of social revolt was writing poetry and contributing to *avant garde* journals, such as *Contre-Attaque*, *La critique sociale*, and the secret society journal called *Acéphale*. Her leftist politics led her to become an active communist for nine years. She studied the Russian language at the prestigious *École des Langues Orientales* in Paris, and she briefly lived in the Soviet Union in 1930.

Relatively little background information on Laure is available in current scholarship. Most of what we know of Laure's personality comes from her poems and political writings and the journals and letters of several of her lovers, such as Jean Bernier, Soviet writer Boris Pil'niak, Boris Souvarine, the founder of the French Communist Party, and at the end of her life, Georges Bataille. Jean Bernier, poet, novelist, journalist, and political chronicler, participated in and supported the communist movement in France, and he inspired Laure's interest in revolutionary ideals. Among his closest friends were Drieu La Rochelle, Boris Souvarine, and Georges Bataille, all of whom were to cross paths with Laure. Bernier's best friend, La Rochelle, was a close friend of the Peignot family. Bernier met Laure at a dinner party in Garches in 1926, when she was twenty-three. Subsequently, they met at various surrealist expositions – one on March 26, and again at the premier gala for the *Ballets Russes* on May 19, 1926 (Bernier 39-40). Thus, socially, Laure moved within several literary and political circles of her day. She was active in the latest artistic, literary, and political movements at a time when, in France, the literary record shows very few women creating verbal art.

When Laure died of tuberculosis at the early age of 35 in 1938, she was living with Georges Bataille. He published the 1939 edition of *Le Sacré* one year after her death, which stands as testimony to how much he valued her as a thinker, writer, and poet. It was an underground publication and the copies were distributed to Laure's friends. Further, her great-nephew Jérôme Peignot decided to publish *Écrits de Laure* in 1977, in which Bataille wrote an appendix to the edition explaining more about Laure's personality, life, and writing. In the appendix, he alludes to Laure's close friendship with Simone Weil after 1936, when Laure and Weil had come out in strong support for the Spanish Civil War.

In the section of poetry entitled "Poems before the summer of 1936," we encounter a number of poems written in free verse that reflect the different aspects of the idea of the sacred within Laure's verse. For Laure, the idea of the poetic sacred resides within the moment when the eternal part of a human being becomes actualized via the realization that the person is working toward achieving a goal while simultaneously the person becomes aware of his/her own mortality. The first poem is seven lines, in which the speaker finds him/herself being cannibalized by friends:

De la fenêtre présente et invisible
 je voyais tous mes amis
 se partageant ma vie
 en lambeaux
 ils rongeaient jusqu'aux os
 et ne voulant pas perdre un si beau morceau
 se disputaient la carcasse
 From this invisible window
 I saw all my friends
 Divide my life between them
 In shreds
 They gnawed to the bone
 And not wanting to waste such a lovely piece
 Fought over the carcassⁱⁱⁱ

Although the time frame of the poem is in the past tense, as indicated by the verb *voyais*, which is in the past imperfect tense, the reader gets the sense that the act of looking is prolonged into the present as an unfinished

act. The window that the speaker is looking through is both present and invisible, as is the nature of clear glass. This image can be interpreted as a window into the speaker's mind. At first, the speaker states that its *life* was being devoured. This is a metaphor for someone who overextended him/herself in terms of obligations and duties. But the speaker then goes on to describe how the cannibals divide this *life* between them, shred it, and gnaw it to the bone. The inclusion of a physical body at this point takes the connotation out of the realm of metaphor and posits it within the realm of the real and the erotic. The cannibals are careful not to waste a morsel of the body, and they fight over the carcass, which suggests that at once they treated their meal as both sacred and taboo. Obviously, the allusion to the Holy Eucharist debate comes through this poem. The practice of ingesting the body and blood of Christ is also both cannibalistic and sacred at the same time. The taboo is offset, however, by the greediness of the cannibals who fight over the proverbial last piece. This indicates that the taboo against cannibalism is somehow more understandable than the sin of greed.

The next poem in the text, entitled "Prêtres" further illuminates the speaker's relationship with piety. The speaker distrusts clerics as duplicitous pontificators of piety. Laure used irregular rhyme and meter to give "Prêtres" a spiritually defiant tone.

Prêtres, toutes sortes de prêtres et faux prêtres
 Écoutez moi:
 J'ai dit "non" à la piété
 et ma piété (au visage d'Ange)
 ma piété, votre aureole toute édentée
 a ricané
 Priests, all sorts of priests and false priests
 Listen to me:
 I have said "no" to piety (with the face of an angel)
 My piety, your toothless halo
 Laughed

The speaker employs the imperative mood in the second line with a colon "Listen to me:" This is intended to capture the attention of the speaker's interlocutors. The interlocutors identified in the the first line are priests, and especially "false priests." The third line reveals that the speaker has

rejected what organized religion calls piety in favor of the speaker's own brand of piety. The speaker's brand of piety, which according to the speaker has the face of an angel, causes the "toothless halos" of "listening" priests to laugh. This suggests that the speaker has reinterpreted notions of piety and holiness and adopted those notions instead of Christian doctrine. The "toothless halos" laughing at the revised notions of piety suggest that the priest, as a spiritual advisor, considers new ideas about personal faith caustically.

The speaker, however, manages to gain a balance of equality with the priest when s/he states:

Elle s'est brisée en mille morceaux
 Maintenant seulement vient le temps de la sincérité
 Celui où nous nous regardons en frères.
 It broke into a thousand pieces
 Only now the time for sincerity comes
 When we look at each other as brothers.

The halo is broken into a thousand pieces, and the priest's powers to act as an intermediary between a follower and God are rendered useless. Hence, the priest is brought down to the earthbound plane. The speaker suggests that only with a broken halo can someone understand the serenity that comes from piety and look upon others as brothers.

The next two verse paragraphs depart from the first two. Verse paragraph three is enclosed in quotation marks, as if the speaker is remembering something someone said in the past. The speaker leaves the priest behind as the speaker begins a journey by "taking the last boat" which "reaches no land in the world." This implies that the destination of the boat does not exist on the physical, earthly plane.

"Tu prends le dernier bateau
 Celui qui n'aborde nulle part au monde."
 Alors j'ai chargé ma vie sur mes épaules
 Et suis partie le dos plus solide
 Cette fois-là.
 "You take the last boat
 The one that reaches no land in the world"
 So I loaded my life on my shoulders
 And left, my back stronger

This time.

The speaker lifts his/her life on its shoulders and leaves, but its back is stronger. These paragraphs are a verse rendering of spiritual journey. In order for one to begin such a journey, one must first question and break what one has taken on blind faith in order to reach a new, different perspective on the spirit and spirituality.

Combien de fois déjà
 m'avez-vous vue
 embarquée pour la mort?
 Au-delà d'un soleil transgressé
 la lune
 à cheval
 Sur des nuages en belier
 me regardait
 Comme une victoire ailée
 How many times already
 Have you seen me
 Set off for death?
 Beyond a transgressed doorstep
 The moon
 Straddling
 On clouds like rams
 Looked at me
 Like winged victory.

When in the fifth verse paragraph the speaker asks, "How many times have you seen me set off for death?" it reinforces the idea that questioning and breaking with traditional notions of piety is a form of death that allows one to go on to a different level of understanding and learning. As the speaker leaves the "transgressed doorstep" s/he looks up and sees the moon "straddling clouds like rams" looking like "winged victory." The symbol of the ram signifies the creative impulse of the spirit at the moment of its inception (Cirilot 18). The symbol of the moon with regard to spiritual journey connotes the different stages of learning and discovery. It also implies that the journey will begin again within a period of time. This suggests that the journey is never "over" but that it

renews itself on a regular basis and that the individual will continue to change and grow, and ultimately become victorious in its efforts.

The next poem of Laure's is an intricately designed poem in terms of Symbolism. The title is simply "8" and in the 1939 edition of *Le Sacré* it is printed in bold face type and it appears on the left hand side of the page. Readers often overlook this title because it does not look like a traditional title of a poem. But, of all Laure's poems, it is the most important title because it adroitly addresses the nature of life as routine. It helps to imagine that, pen in hand, the speaker (and the reader) draws the number eight over and over without lifting the pen from the surface of the paper. The "doodle" of the eight becomes bolder with the passage of the pen over and over, and slightly sloppy as the hand tries to trace the shape of the eight over itself. This exercise illustrates the ideas contained in Laure's poem "8." The verse paragraphs of this poem are highly irregular with very short paragraphs combined with longer ones, and ends with a line taken from the newspapers. In the first verse paragraph, the speaker is identified as feminine on a grammatical level in the first line, "je me suis retrouvée" (I found myself). The reflexive pronominal verb in the past tense is conjugated with the ending "ée," which indicates that the direct object of the verb "me" (and therefore the "I" of the statement subject) is of feminine gender. The ideas conveyed are about quotidian ruts.

Je me suis retrouvée
 Toute enfermée
 Comme en un cercle
 Auquel j'échappe
 Par cet autre
 Qui m'y ramène
 I found myself
 Trapped
 As in a circle
 Which I escape
 By this other
 Which brings me back.

The first verse paragraph is heavily rhymed and irregular in meter. Line one contains six syllables, lines two, five, and six contain three syllables, line three contains five syllables, and line four contains four syllables.

The rhyme of the first four lines is in "aabb" and lines five and six are rhymed "cd." Lines five and six suggest that the speaker is attempting to free itself from "the circle" that traps it.

In the second verse paragraph, the speaker produces a litany of all the ways she has tried to escape the routine of life. The lines have a monotonous tone to them as the speaker explains that, no matter what she tries, the "game" of eight is infinite.

Gestes hiératiques, grimaces ignoble allaient se mêler, se confondre,
S'exclure, s'affirmer doublement...pour s'anéantir.. Et ce "jeu" – là dura
longtemps

J'ai cru monter au ciel (sans rire) au moment même où la vie refermait
sur

Moi son couvercle de plomb.

J'ai joué de toutes les contradictions inhérent à ma nature en vivant
'pour être vrai' tout ce qu'on porte en soi 'jusqu'au bout.'

Je me suis dispersé aux quatre vents avec la certitude orgueilleuse de me
Retrouver toujours au zénith et puis je suis tombée vide, perdue, mutilée
des

Quatre membres.

Je m'en allais sur des routes élevées, sur des chemins tout escarpés, sur
Des rochers survolés d'aigles...

Heiratic gestures, vile grimaces mix, merge, disappear, reemerge...then
Vanish entirely. And this 'game' will go on a long time.

I thought I was going to heaven (joking aside) just as life again placed its
Heavy lid over me.

I used all my inherent contradictions living 'to be true' all that one carries
Within 'to the end.'

I scattered myself to the four winds with the proud certainty of always
Finding myself at the zenith and then I fell empty, lost, four limbs
mutilated.

I went away over high roads, steep paths, rocks flown over by eagles...

The first line of this paragraph contains a meter that is analogous to the "doodle" of the number eight on a paper as the gestures and grimaces "mix, merge, disappear, reemerge...then vanish entirely." The speaker

states that she thought she was going to heaven and in parentheses states (*sans rire*) – which means “joking aside.” This implies that the speaker of the poem has a true belief in heaven. But instead of going to heaven, life “again placed its heavy lid over me,” despite the speaker’s attempt to “play the game” by adhering to the confines of the repetitive, interlocking circles of the eight. She believes in the promise of heaven if she plays the game of life by the rules, but life itself will not let her out of the game. She continues to explain that she lives “to be true” due to the “inherent contradictions” and “all that one carries within ‘to the end.’” Thus, the speaker endeavors to persevere with all of the knowledge she has gained within life. The speaker then states, “I have scattered myself to the four winds with the proud certainty of always finding myself at the zenith and then I fell empty, lost, four limbs mutilated.” This line is replete with Symbolist themes of the pinnacle of understanding represented by the zenith, the idea of self-mutilation required to reach the ideal, and the image of the body falling through space. It also carries with it the idea of “throwing oneself into one’s work,” only to be consumed by the work and losing the sense of self-totally. The only conclusion to this “scattered falling” would be to continue the journey in an attempt to reconstitute the self. Hence, the last line of the verse paragraph, “I went away over high roads, steep paths, rocks flown over by eagles...” suggests that the speaker, because of the experience, is between the earthbound and the spiritual planes of existence. Nevertheless, the “infernal 8” still holds the speaker in the game. The line “Le 8 infernal revint me prendre au lasso”/ “The infernal 8 came back to lasso me” is separated by a caesura from the second and fourth verse paragraphs of the text in the 1939 edition, which reinforces the idea that, although the speaker tries to escape the confines of the eight, it comes back to lasso her no matter what she does.

In the fourth verse paragraph, the rhyme and meter describe again the lasso of the eight. Additionally, the speaker is physically present within the confines of the eight. She “climbs,” “drifts,” “jumps,” “falls,” and “remains in the middle” of the game. She states, “my face is there” and then goes on to compare the experience with the creepy, slithery,

earthy animals (eel, dolphin, earthworm) that are elongated and glide through their habitats.

Je rampe le long de ses contours
 Je vogue dans ses meanders
 Je sauté hors du cercle
 Et retombe dans l'autre
 Je reste étranglée au milieu
 Mon visage est là
 Figé anguille dauphin ver de terre
 Et qui donc, voyant ce signe fatal
 Songerait à m'y découvrir
 Voudrait m'en délivrer?

"Un prisonnier s'évade en sautant le mur à l'endroit même où il devait être

Exécute." (*Les journaux*)

8 Mai

I climb along its contours,
 I drift in its meanderings
 I jump out of the circle
 And fall back into the other
 I remain in strangled in the middle
 My face is there
 Frozen eel dolphin earthworm

And who, seeing this fateful sign
 Would think of discovering me there,
 Would want to release me?

"A prisoner escaped by jumping the wall at the very place he was to be

Executed." (*The newspapers*)

8 May

The speaker cannot believe that anyone would think to look for her within this monotonous world, and if they did, they would not want to

release her from it. The poem ends with a line from the newspapers. I contend that this line offers a solution to the problem of being trapped in the eight. The idea of a prisoner escaping over the very wall he was to be executed in front of offers insight to the idea that the threat of certain death can be used as a springboard into change, and ultimately, it is used in the poem to escape from the lasso of the eight.

The next poem in *Le Sacré* has no title and consists of two verse paragraphs. Social binary oppositions are addressed in relation to the different roles assigned by others and for others in any community.

Archange ou putain
 Je veux bien
 Tous les roles
 Me sont prêtés
 La vie jamais reconnue

La simple vie
 Que je cherche encore
 Elle gît
 Tout au fond de moi
 Leur péché a tué
 Toute pureté

Archangel or whore
 I don't mind
 All the roles
 Are lent to me
 The life never recognized

The simple life
 That I am still looking for
 Is lying
 In the very depths of me
 Their sin has killed
 All purity.

The opposition of archangel and whore in the first line resounds throughout the first verse paragraph starkly pointing out the different views one could have of the speaker. It also posits the speaker in either a masculine or feminine role – the archangels are all masculine entities, but

the name "whore" is reserved for the feminine. The speaker states that it does not care which name is used due to "all the roles are lent to me" and life is never recognized. The second verse paragraph revisits the idea of the journey that is so prevalent in Laure's poetry as the speaker states that it is still looking for a simple life that resides within the speaker herself. The last two lines of the poem in the 1939 edition of *Le Sacré* appear as they are represented here – like steps leading downward. The idea that "their sin has killed all purity" places the impetus back on a social level rather than on the individual level expressed in the first four lines of the second verse paragraph. The idea of "purity" mentioned in the last line of the poem brings the reader back to the first word of the poem "archangel." This implies that the poem can be read rhythmically as a "circular" poem – when the reader reaches the end of the poem, he or she is put back at the beginning of the poem to read it again. This effect shows that the speaker of the poem is again caught in a circular pattern demonstrating the effort to live within the roles society assigns, and the inability of the speaker to extricate from it.

The last poem in *Le Sacré* to be discussed here is entitled "Le Corbeau." The word *corbeau* in French can have different meanings. First, it means crow or raven. It can also be a pejorative term for a priest. This poem is dated 1936 in the 1939 edition of *Le Sacré* and unquestionably establishes Laure's ties to the secret society called *Acéphale*. Although Georges Bataille claims to have created *Acéphale*, Michel Leiris suggests that Laure was the inspiration behind the idea for the secret society and the journal. In the poem, a forest is mentioned that bears remarkable resemblance to the forest where *Acéphale* meetings took place. There is a forest near Saint-Germain-en-Laye where Bataille and Laure lived. Jérôme Peignot (1977) states that there was a note describing the rule of *Acéphale* meetings found among Laure's papers after she died, the Yveline forest is mentioned (p.99). "Le Corbeau is the longest of all the poems in the 1939 edition except for the prose version of "Le Sacré." It contains eight stanzas of irregular meter and rhyme. The theme of the journey is present in the poem, as it is in many of Laure's poetic works.

C'était dans la forêt
 le silence et le secret
 d'une étoile à multiples rayons.
 Loin, à l'orée du bois
 dans cette allée
 que des arbres bas
 couvrent en arceau
 un enfant passa
 perdu
 effrayé, émerveillé de me voir
 comme je l'apercevais lui-même
 tout enchassé dans une sphère à flacons de neige.

The allusions to *Acéphale* are also present as the journey unfolds. The speaker becomes lost in a "silent" and "secret" forest. The image of the "many rayed star" in the first verse paragraph represents light and knowledge. The presence of the male child in the first paragraph symbolizes the future, and this image counters the image of the old man, which signifies the past. The "frightened" and "astonished" aspect of the child's countenance suggests that the speaker trespasses on the child's privacy. The "sphere of snowflakes" which "encase" the child illustrate that the child lives in a field of austere purity.

In the second verse paragraph, "whirlwinds" approach them "as if to deceive." According to C. G. Jung (1967), wind is often used as a powerful symbol of the active and violent aspects of air and it signifies creative breath or exhalation (p. 31).

Les tourbillons nous rapprochaient
 comme pour se jouer de lui et de moi
 Un soleil violet, hors d'usage
 Et des lueurs d'orage
 Nous glaçaient d'épouvant.
 Les fees et les ogres se disputant décidément
 notre commune angoisse
 voulurent que la foudre déchirât
 non loin de là

un grand arbre
 qui s'ouvrit
 comme un ventre.
 Je brami.
 L'enfant, jambs nues zébrées de froid et capuchin
 bien reel (à tordre)
 rouvrit les yeux.
 A ma vue, il s'enfuit.

The "violent inactive sun" is an antithesis of the usual symbolism of the sun – instead of representing light, knowledge, and warmth, the sun in this verse paragraph takes on a eerie, impotent nature. It goes without saying that Laure's conscious choice to bring this image of the sun into the poem demonstrates a departure from traditional Symbolism in favor of an opposite illustration. At the sight of this sun, the speaker and the child are frozen in terror as the whirlwinds whip around them. As they look around, they see fairies and ogres "disputing our shared anguish." Fairies are personifications of the stages in the development of spiritual life or in the 'soul' of landscapes. The folklore of ogres goes back to Saturn, who would devour his children as soon as Cybele gave them birth. The significance of ogres demonstrates that destruction is the inevitable outcome of creation. Ogres and fairies are most often included in "forest folklore," and they are rarely seen acting together as they do in this poem. The ogres and fairies work together to uproot a huge tree with magic lightening. The tree "opened like a stomach" from the lightning strike, which indicates fertility and the birth of creation. The speaker and the child, braving the tempest, are emotionally and physically affected by the violence and cold. The child "reopens" his eyes as he wrings a cowl, which is a monk's hood, sees the speaker, and abruptly runs away.

The speaker, alone now in the forest, gives up on following the child and "picks a strange destiny out of the rut." This line reminds the reader of the earlier poem "8," in which the speaker tries to escape the rut of life. The speaker also elects not to dwell on the incident with the child as it turns and goes back "as though nothing had happened." As the speaker makes its way through the forest, the crow ("l'oiseau aux ailes

noires" – "the bird with black wings") tapes the reader on the shoulder. The symbolism of the crow is huge. According to J.E. Cirlot (2002), Native Americans believe the crow is the great civilizer and the creator of the visible world (71). For the Celts and Germanic tribes, crows have mystic powers. In Siberia, the crow's caw is used as a special part in rites of divination. In Christian symbolism, the crow represents an allegory of solitude. Cirlot (2002) also points out that, in China, the crow is the first of the imperial emblems and represents the *Yang*, or the active life of the Emperor (72). Sometimes crows are featured with three legs, which correspond to the sun-symbolism of the tripod (first light, midday sun, sunset). A. Beaumont (1949) states in his book *Symbolism in Decorative Chinese Art* that the crow signifies the isolation of a person or entity who lives on a superior plane. Because of its black color, the crow is associated with the idea of beginning (as expressed in such symbols as the maternal night, primordial darkness, the fertilized Earth, and death). Because it is also associated with the atmosphere, it is a symbol for creative, demiurgic power and spiritual strength. Because of its flight, it is considered a messenger. The speaker takes solace in its new companionship and "wants [the crow] to accompany" the speaker "everywhere and always to precede me/like a herald his knight." Thus the image of the crow illustrates creative power, strength, solitude, companionship, and protection.

The third and fourth verse paragraphs are concerned with loss and spiritual architecture. Paragraph three finds the speaker even more lost in the woods "stumbling against rocks" and "slipping on dead leaves." As the speaker makes its precarious way, it comes upon an abandoned house with a "smashed in doorway."

Renonçant à le poursuivre
 ramassant dans l'ornière un étrange destin
 somme toute fort logique
 je rebroussai mon chemin
 "comme si de rien n'était"
 mais je sentais à mon épaule
 ce frôlement lourd et discret
 de l'oiseau aux ailes noires
 et le considérant avec douceur

j'eusse voulu que partout il m'accompagnât et
 toujours me précédât
 comme un chevalier son héraut.

De plus en plus perdue
 heurtant les pierres
 glissant sur les feuilles mortes
 m'enlisant dans la vase d'un étang
 j'arrivai à une maison abandonnée
 un puits de mousse et vert de gris
 un seuil défoncé
 j'entraï.

The house is obviously very old, moldy, and rotten. The front doorway is smashed leaving a gaping hole at the front of the house. The door is a feminine symbol that contains all the implications of the symbolic hole, since it is a door that gives access to the hole. Its significance is the antithesis of the wall. Also implied is the idea of a temple door, which has a relationship with the altar as between the circumference and the center; that is to state that even though, in each case, the two component elements are the farthest apart, they are, nonetheless, in a way, the closest since they reflect one another. Consider that this idea is not unlike the architectural ornamentation of cathedrals, where the façade is nearly always treated as if it were a part of the altar. Often the reliefs on the façade reflect or are conversant with the reliefs on the altar. The speaker enters the house, "pushes open doors without hinges," and "opening windows without panes/as though I needed air." The suffocating experience of the house is a journey unto itself.

The fifth and sixth verse paragraphs continue the journey as the speaker "climbs a ridiculous staircase" and sees that the walls are covered with writing. The writing accounts for the sins of the speaker's life and asks, "what right did they have? The right of the poor."

Le papier à fleurs et moisi
 ondulait par vagues
 vers un plancher pourri
 une cheminée béante
 exhibait les traces encore intactes d'un feu éteint

cendres, tibias calcinés de frênes et de bouleaux.
 je poussais des portes sans gonds
 dont la chute me terrifiait
 j'ouvrais des fenêtres sans carreaux
 comme si l'air me manquait.

Enfin je montai un escalier dérosoire.
 Les murs, couverts de graffitis étrange, inconnus.
 Jamais vus
 Mettait ma vie à nu
 Avec mon nom en toutes letters mêlés à des crimes:
 "et de quell droit?
 du droit des pauvres." [sic]

As the speaker contemplates the crimes of life, the crow returns to it "with its cry/to thrash the living with its beak/to dismember the dead." These lines lend the crow a vulture-like aspect as the crow "elects a prey." The implication here is that the speaker would be the prey of the crow. As the speaker undertakes the journey and meets the crow, the speaker is amazed by its natural beauty and highly symbolic status within culture. But, as the speaker must face and answer for its crimes, the crow returns as an agent of death still true to its natural instincts.

The seventh verse paragraph finds the speaker magically transported from the house back to the forest. The forest "envelops" the speaker in a "halo of moon" and "rocks" the speaker in a "white, shifting, icy mist."

Dans ce grenier souillé
 l'oiseau me rejoin
 de son cri
 pour fouailler les vivants
 de son bec
 pour dépecer les morts
 l'ombre noire projetée sur moi
 semblait élire une proie

La nuit m'a trouvée
 Étranglée au fond du bois
 Elle m'a enveloppée d'un halo de lune

Et bercée dans la brume
 une brume blanche, mouvante et givrée:
 "Je connais ton étoile
 Va et suis-la
 Cet être sans nom
 Renié tour à tour
 Par la nuit et le jour
 Ne peut rien contre toi
 Et ne te ressemble pas
 Crois-moi
 Lorsque demain à l'aube
 Ta tête sera jetée
 Au panier des guillotines
 Souviens-toi
 Assassin
 Que toi seul
 As bu à mon sein
 "tout le lait de lat tendresse humaine." [sic]

The image of the forest cradling the speaker and rocker her signifies the maternal aspect of nature. The speaker is returned to the natural world, supposedly having faced the crimes of life. The speaker is no less lost than at the beginning of the poem, which suggests that, although crimes are paid for and forgiveness has been granted, the journey is far from over. The forest is endowed with a voice for the first time in the last several lines of the poem: "I know your star/to and follow it/This nameless being/renounced in turn/by night and day/can do nothing against you/and does not resemble you." The forest grants the speaker leave to continue the journey and conveys that the speaker should have nothing to worry about from the "nameless being that renounced the speaker. The nameless being is the crow. The forest continues to speak, stating, "believe me/When tomorrow at dawn/your head is thrown/into the basket of the guillotined/remember/Murder/that you alone/have drunk /'all the milk of human kindness from my breast.'" These last few lines reinforce the feminine gender of "mother nature" as the parent imparting the sentence of death to one of her children. The least of the speaker's worries would be the "nameless being" of the crow. The forest explains to the speaker (and reader) what the crimes written on the walls of the

house were and calls the speaker a murderer. The idea that the forest tells the speaker that death by guillotine is the sentence for this offense reiterates the idea that murder is not only a social taboo, but it is also an offense against nature itself.

Although not much is known about the exact interests of *Acéphale* since it was a secret society, certain rules for participation are reprinted in Jérôme Peignot's (1977) *Écrits de Laure*. They were found among her papers after her death. In volume two of Georges Bataille's *Oeuvres Complètes* (1970), the rules are also reproduced. The rules themselves explain when, where, and how to prepare oneself for attendance at a meeting of the secret society. For example, rule one states that one should "only enter the part of the Yveline forest that used to be called 'fore Cruye' under conditions that exclude any possibility of conflict with the character of sanctuary this area will have for you." This is to state that, at the least, one should enter into the forest with a clear conscience. Rule two states that members are not allowed to enter into the "restricted sanctuary to be determined later except during *Acéphale* meetings. Rule three commands that members cannot say anything to anyone about the meetings unless it is absolutely necessary "as the absolute need for them becomes apparent and only after this is determined." Rule four states that the things discussed will only be documented in a secret, internal Journal of *Acéphale*, and that only those who accept and conform to the rules will be privy to the journal. Rule five states that members must "observe all restrictions specific to each meeting" and entreats them not to speak, meet with others, or wander off in the forest without specific instruction. There is also a strange reference to "not opening envelopes until the appointed time" in this rule. Rule six states that these rules can be changed later. Rule seven states that those who organize the meetings when necessary will lift the rules. Laure's list goes on to indicate that all involved must agree on the boundaries for the forest's restricted area, and that members will go to this area in groups no larger than two. Another point included involves the use of sulphur. It reads:

Sulphur is a substance that comes from the Earth's interior and is issued only from the mouths of volcanoes. This is

clearly in relation to the chthonic character of the mythic reality that we are pursuing. It is also significant that the roots of a tree plunge deep into the Earth.

According to René Alleau (1986), sulphur connotes a more profound purification, reason, and intuition, the male principle, and transcendence (p. 196). The nature of the *Acéphale* rules indicate that the secret society wanted to recreate a form of ritual heavily based in traditional symbolism.

Far from being an exhaustive discussion of Laure's contributions to the Symbolist movement, this examination engages her ideas and texts on a level of explication and inclusion within the discourse of European Symbolist writers. I seek to bring together the original threads of research intended to posit Laure among France's best known writers and thinkers in the early part of the twentieth century. While conducting research for this topic, I found it incredibly difficult to find a woman Symbolist poet in the French literary tradition writing between 1880-1930. When I discovered her work, I put together the pieces of her biography based upon correspondence and journals of her lovers, because very little information on her life and poetry is available in current scholarship. At first, I believed this lack of information to be a symptom of her leftist politics and nine year alliance with communism. While that might be true to a degree, I discovered that her family was just as much against publication of her works and personal papers as anyone. The fact that Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris were responsible for the posthumous publication of *Le Sacré* illustrates that, not only did they consider Laure's poetry and poetics to be important contributions to the literary fashions of the day, but also that Bataille in particular is her theoretical counterpart. Jérôme Peignot, her great-nephew and a poet in his own right, edited the 1977 edition of *Écrits de Laure* much to the chagrin and against the wishes of the rest of his family. Obviously, the emotional reaction of the family to Laure's life, lifestyle, and writing almost forty years after her death still ran very deep.

Working with the French language in terms of symbol and gender is slightly more difficult than working with them in any other language, particularly Russian. Laure's choices, however, bespeak a similar effort

to avoid social gender assignments either by using verb tenses that do not necessarily betray the gender of the speaker, or by tackling the gender assignments head on and giving her speakers feminine genders. When Laure chooses the latter of the two, the speaker often addresses the very nature of social gender assignment by offering binary oppositions of social feminine roles. Laure also reconfigures traditional symbols to the inverse of their meaning in order to contest the world she attempts to change, but nevertheless must live in.

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ⁱ Colette Peignot preferred to be called simply Laure at the end of her life. When Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris decided to publish *L'histoire d'une petite fille* and *Le Sacré* in 1939, they published the works under this preferred *nom de plume*. She used a different *nom de plume*, Claude Araxe, in 1933-1934, when she wrote for the journal *La Critique Sociale*. The name Araxe comes from a large river in Armenia known for its unpredictable, unstable riverbed and the inability to build a bridge over it.

ⁱⁱ The street in Paris named *Quatre frères* was named in honor of the Peignot brothers who died during World War I.

ⁱⁱⁱ All translations of all poems reproduced in this article are mine.