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## Goya's Painting of Saturn Devouring His Son: A Study in Damnation <sup>[1]</sup>

The Story and Symbolism Behind the Most Chilling Image in the History of Western Art



It's one of the most horrific images <sup>[2]</sup> in the history of Western art.

As the myth goes, Saturn (or Cronus, as the Greeks called him) was king of the universe, but was warned by a prophecy that one day he would be overthrown by one of his sons, just as he overthrew his father Uranus. To preserve his own power, he commits the ultimate atrocity, consuming each of his children at the moment of its birth.

The eighteenth-century Spanish painter Francisco de Goya <sup>[3]</sup> gives us an especially jarring depiction of this story that presents the cannibalistic titan as a monstrous alternative to the Christian God. The Nicene Creed explains that Jesus, the Son, is "eternally begotten of the Father." <sup>[4]</sup> The Father pours Himself out to the Son, the Son responds with equal love and fidelity, and from this mutual love proceeds the Holy Spirit. It is this eternal love that sustains all of Creation and that made possible the redemption of humanity. Heaven is nothing more than full participation in that love. In The Problem of Pain, C.S. Lewis writes <sup>[5]</sup> that this "self-giving" love constitutes the "rhythm not only of all creation but of all being."

Now, imagine a malevolent Father, one whose jealousy of His Son drives Him to murder. There would be no Creation, no redemption, no Holy Spirit, and no heaven. Only a lonely God huddled at the center of a cold and loveless cosmos. As Lewis puts it, anything “outside the system of self-giving is simply and solely hell.”

An earlier depiction of the Saturn myth by the Flemish Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens <sup>[6]</sup> depicts Saturn as a cold-blooded murderer and evokes sympathy for the wailing infant, but only Goya captures the awful consequences of the act for Saturn himself.



In an essay entitled “The Mystery of Goya’s ‘Saturn,’” art historian Jay Scott Morgan <sup>[7]</sup> suggests that the best way to understand the horrifying contradictions of this painting is to cover one of Saturn’s eyes and then the other, observing the different emotional states suggested by each eye:



“Cover the right side of the face, and we see a Titan caught in the act, defying anyone to stop him, the bulging left eye staring wildly at some unseen witness to his savagery... Cover his left eye, and we are confronted by a being in pain, the dark pupil gazing down in horror at his own uncontrolled murderousness.”

In his song “Saturn,” based in large part on the Goya painting (see below), Sufjan Stevens expands on the defiance and revulsion Morgan detects in the titan’s eyes. Sufjan’s Saturn, speaking in the first person and aware of the Christian God, repeats a refrain of self-pitying unrepentance: “Tell me I’m evil. Tell me I’m not the name of Love. Tell me I’m evil. Tell me I’m not the face of God.” As a being made in God’s image, Saturn is indeed “the face of God,” but he spends the entire song begging to be let off the hook. Being made in God’s image is both a blessing and a burden. All image-bearing beings share in a common destiny: “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” <sup>[8]</sup> There is no alternative but self-destruction.

An acquaintance of mine once said to me, “I love Jesus, but I’m still going to do my sins”; but for those who seek to think and live coherently, such an idea is nonsensical. If

God exists and His demands upon us are real, we are left with only two options. We can engage in the great dance of self-giving, pouring ourselves out to God and neighbor while allowing God to give Himself to us in the Body and Blood of Christ (a Sacrament Sufjan contrasts with Saturn's infanticidal cannibalism). Or, we can be like Saturn, trying to cram the entire cosmos down his maw lest anything challenge his status as god of his own sorry universe.

"The first rule of the holy game" of self-giving, Lewis writes, is to "touch the ball and then immediately pass it on." By refusing to love his son, Saturn fails this test and casts himself into hell. Look at the grip he has on his child's mangled corpse. He will never let go.

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