Art | Theory | Criticism | Politics

OCTOBER

36

GEORGES BATAILLE

Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Un-Knowing

translated by Annette Michelson
with essays by Rosalind Krauss,
Annette Michelson, and Allen S. Weiss

$6.00/Spring 1986

Published by the MIT Press

OCTOBER

OCTOBER (ISSN 0162-2870) (ISBN 0-262-75186-0) is published quarterly by the MIT Press. Subscriptions: individuals $20.00; institutions $49.00; students and retired $18.00. Foreign subscriptions outside USA and Canada add $4.00 for surface mail or $18.00 for air mail. Prices subject to change without notice.
Address subscriptions to OCTOBER, MIT Press Journals, 28 Carleton Street, Cambridge, MA 02142. Manuscripts, accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope, should be sent to OCTOBER, 19 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003. No responsibility is assumed for loss or injury.
Second class postage paid at Boston, MA, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: send address changes to OCTOBER, MIT Press Journals, 28 Carleton Street, Cambridge, MA 02142.
OCTOBER is distributed in the USA by B. DeBoer, Inc., 113 East Centre Street, Nutley, NJ 07110.

36

Georges Bataille

This special issue is published with the assistance of the J. Paul Getty Trust.

Extinct America

The life of civilized peoples in pre-Columbian America is a source of wonder to us, not only in its discovery and instantaneous disappearance, but also because of its bloody eccentricity, surely the most extreme ever conceived by an aberrant mind. Continuous crime committed in broad daylight for the mere satisfaction of deified nightmares, terrifying phantasms, priests' cannibalistic meals, ceremonial corpses, and streams of blood evoke not so much the historical adventure, but rather the blinding debauches described by the illustrious Marquis de Sade.

This observation applies, it is true, mostly to Mexico. It may be that Peru represents a singular mirage, an incandescence of solar gold, a gleam, a troubling burst of wealth, but this does not correspond to reality. Cuzco, the capital of the Inca empire, lay on a plateau, at the foot of a sort of fortified acropolis. This city was massive, of a heavy grandeur. Tall, thatched houses, built in squares, of enormous rocks with no exterior windows, no ornamentation, gave to the streets a somewhat dreary, sordid look. The architecture of the temples which looked down upon the roofs was equally bare; only the pediment was wholly covered with a plaque of beaten gold. To this gold we must add the brilliantly colored fabrics which clothed the rich and elegant, but nothing could quite dispel the impression of wild seediness and, above all, of deadly uniformity.

Cuzco was actually the seat of one of man's most rule-ridden, thoroughly administered states. After important military conquests made possible by the meticulous organization of an immense army, the Incas' power spread over a considerable part of South America: Ecuador, Peru, northern Argentina, and Chile. Within this area opened up by roads, an entire people obeyed official orders as if soldiers to officers in a barracks. Work was distributed and marriages made by officials, the land and harvests belonged to the state. Celebrations were those of the state's religious festivals. Everything was planned ahead in an airless existence. This organization is not to be confused with that of present-day communism; it was essentially different, since it was based on heredity and on class hierarchy.

Given these conditions, it is not surprising that the Inca civilization is rela-

tively dull. Cuzco is not even particularly striking in its horror. Infrequently, victims were strangled with cord in the temples, in that of the Sun, for instance, whose solid gold statue, melted down after the conquest, retains, in spite of all, a magical charm. The arts, although quite brilliantly developed, are nevertheless of secondary interest: fabrics, vases in the shape of human or animal heads are remarkable. It is not, however, among the Incas in this territory that we must seek a production really worthy of interest. The celebrated Gate of the Sun at Tihuanaco in northern Bolivia already points to an art and architecture attributable to a far distant era; pots and shards are stylistically linked to this thousand-year-old gate. It was, even in the Incas' own time, the coast-dwellers of a far more ancient civilization who produced the most curious objects.

In the era of conquest, Columbia, Ecuador, Panama, and the West Indies were also civilizations whose art today astonishes us. Moreover, many of the fantastic statuettes, the dream faces which are responsible for our present preoccupation with pre-Columbian art, must be attributed to the people of these regions. Nevertheless, we must immediately make clear that, in our view, nothing in bygone America can equal Mexico, a region in which, moreover, we must discern two very different civilizations, that of the Maya-Qui'tche and that of the Mexicans, properly called.

The civilization of the Maya-Qui'tche is generally held to have been the most brilliant and interesting of all in extinct America. It is probably her production which does indeed most nearly approach that which the archaeologists have come to consider remarkable.

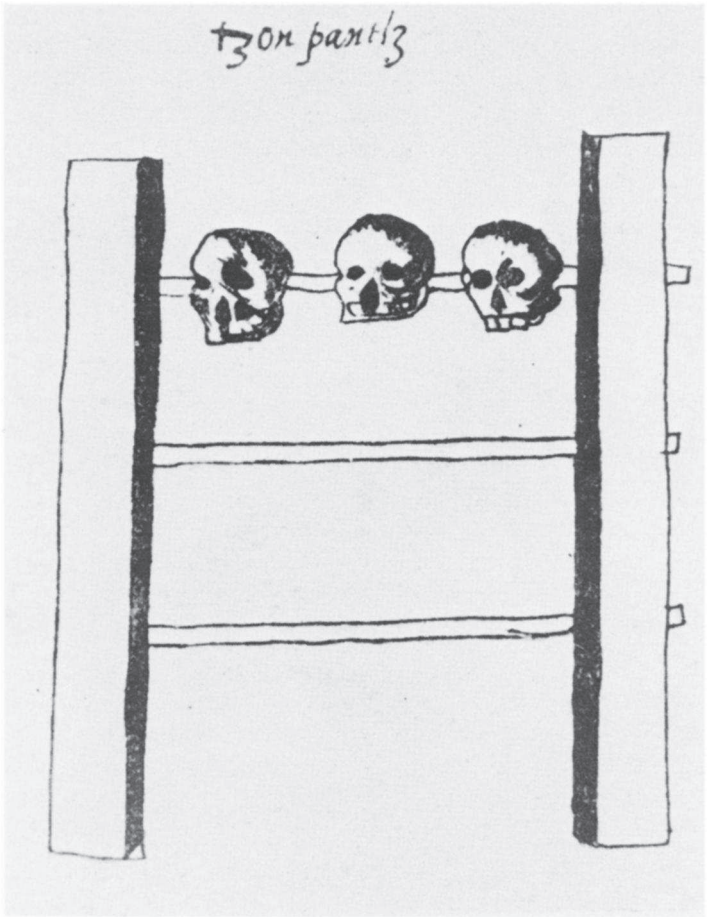
It developed several centuries before the Spanish conquest, in eastern Central America, in the south of present-day Mexico, more precisely in the Yucatan peninsula. By the time of the Spaniards' arrival, it was in full decline.

Mayan art is certainly the most human in America. Despite its lack of influence, it impels comparison with Far Eastern art of that same time, that of Khmer, for example, with its luxuriant and heavily vegetative look. Both, in any case, developed under leaden skies in overheated and unhealthy climates. The gods of Mayan bas-reliefs, although human in form, are heavy, monstrous, highly stylized, and, above all, very uniform. One can see them as extremely decorative. They actually formed part of quite marvelous architectural wholes, enabling the American civilizations to be placed beside the great classical civilizations. In Chichen-Itza, Uxmal, and Palenque, one still finds the ruins of temples and palaces, both impressive and richly wrought. We know the religious myths and social organization of these peoples. Their development was certainly a strong and largely determining influence upon later civilization in the high plains, and yet their art seems somewhat stillborn, plainly ugly, despite the perfection and richness of the work.

For air and violence, for poetry and humor, we must look to the peoples of central Mexico, who attained a high degree of civilization shortly before the conquest, that is to say during the fifteenth century.

The Mexicans that Cortez found were doubtless only recently civilized barbarians. Coming from the north, where they wandered like Indians, they had barely and not very brilliantly assimilated borrowings from their predecessors. Their system of writing was inferior to that of the Mayan, which it resembled. No matter; of the various American Indians, the Aztec people, whose extremely powerful confederation had seized almost all of present-day Mexico during the fifteenth century, was nonetheless the liveliest, the most seductive, even in its mad violence, its trancelike development.

Stockade of skulls. Codex Vaticanus 3738.



The historians who have dealt with Mexico have remained, for the most part, utterly uncomprehending. If, for example, we consider the literally extravagant manner of representing the gods, we find their explanations disconcertingly weak.

> In casting an eye [says Prescott] over a Mexican manuscript, or map, as it is called, one is struck with the grotesque caricatures it exhibits of the human figure; monstrous, overgrown heads on puny, misshapen bodies which are themselves hard and angular in their outlines, and without the least skill in composition. On closer inspection, however, it is obvious that it is not so much a rude attempt to delineate nature as a conventional symbol, to express the idea in the most clear and forcible manner; in the same way as the pieces of similar value on a chessboard, while they correspond with one another in form, bear little resemblance, usually to the object they represent.*

This interpretation of the gruesome or grotesque deformations which troubled Prescott now appears inadequate. If, however, we go back to the time of the Spanish conquest, we find an explication of this point that is truly worthy of interest. The monk Torquemada attributes the horrors of Mexican art to the demon which possessed the Indian mind. "The figures of their gods," he says, "were like their souls in their endlessly sinful existence."

A comparison between the Christian representation of the devil and the Mexican representation of the gods is obviously in order.

The Mexicans were probably as religious as the Spaniards, but their religion included a sentiment of horror, or terror, joined to a sort of black humor more frightful still. Most of their gods were savage or weirdly mischievous. Texcatlipoca seems to take an inexplicable pleasure in a certain sort of hoax. His exploits, as related by the Spanish chronicler Sahagun, form a curious counterpart to the Golden Legend. The honey of Christians contrasts with the bitter aloes of the Aztecs, the healing of the sick with evil pranks. Texcatlipoca walks out amidst the crowd, cavorting and dancing to a drum. The crowd becomes a dancing mob and rushes madly toward chasms in which their bodies are crushed and changed to rock. Another of the Necromancer god's nasty tricks is reported by Sahagun:

> There was a rain of stones and then a huge rock called *techcalt.* From that time on, an old Indian woman traveled through a place called Chapultepec Cuitlapico, offering little banners for sale and calling, "Little flags!" Anyone who had resolved to die would say, "Buy me a little flag," and once it had been bought he would go to the place

* William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, New York, Modern Library, p. 56.

of *techcalt* and would be killed, and no one would think of asking, "What's happening to us?" And they were all as if gone mad.

Clearly the Mexicans seem to have taken some disturbing pleasure in this sort of practical joke. Probably these nightmares and catastrophes in some way even made them laugh. One then begins to have some direct understanding of hallucinations as delirious as those of the gods in the manuscripts. *Bogeyman* or *mute* are the words associated with these violent characters, evil pranksters, brimming with wicked humor, like the god Quetzalcoatl sliding down slopes of the high mountains on a little board. . . .

The sculptured demons of European churches are to some degree comparable (surely they are involved in the same basic obsession), but they lack the power, the grandeur, of the Aztec ghosts, the bloodiest ever to people the clouds of our earth. And they were, as we know, literally bloody. Not a single one among them but was not periodically spattered with blood for his own festival. The figures cited vary, but it is agreed that the number of victims annually numbered several thousands at the very least in Mexico City alone. The priest had a man held belly up, his back arched over a sort of large boundary marker, and with one fell blow of his knife of shining stone, cut open the trunk. The skeleton thus severed, both hands reached into the blood-filled cavity to grasp the heart, wrenching it out with a skill and dispatch such that the bleeding man continued for a few seconds to quiver with life over the red coals before the corpse, flung away, tumbled heavily down to the bottom of a staircase. Finally, at night, when the corpses had been flayed, carved, and cooked, the priests came and ate them.

And they were not always content with a blood bath for themselves, the temple walls, the idols, and the bright flowers piled upon the altars. For certain sacrificial rites involving the immediate flaying of the man chosen, the priest, transported, would cover his face and body with the bloody skin and body. Arrayed in this incredible garment, he prayed ecstatically to his god.

And it is here that the amazingly joyous character of these horrors must be clearly stressed. Mexico City was not only the streaming, human slaughterhouse; it was also a city of wealth, a veritable Venice, with canals, footbridges, ornamented temples, and, above all, flower gardens of extreme beauty. Flowers were grown even in the water, and they decorated the altars. Prior to the sacrificial rite, the victims danced, "decked out in necklaces and garlands of flowers." And they carried flowering and scented reeds which they alternately smoked and inhaled.

One easily imagines the swarms of flies which must have swirled around the streaming blood of the sacrificial chamber. Mirbeau, who had already dreamed of them for his *Torture Garden*, wrote, "Here amongst flowers and scents, this was neither repugnant nor terrible."

Death, for the Aztecs, was nothing. They asked of their gods to let them

Aztec sacrifice. Codex Vaticanus 3738.

receive death in joy, and to help them to see its sweetness, its charm. They chose to see swords and arrows as sweetmeats. And yet these savage warriors were simply pleasant and sociable, like any others, fond of gathering to drink and to talk. There, at the Aztec banquets, one frequently got drunk on one of a variety of drugs in common use.

It would seem that this people of extraordinary courage had an excessive taste for death. They surrendered to the Spaniards in a sort of mad hypnotic state. Cortez's victory was won not by strength, but rather by the casting of a true spell. As if this people had vaguely understood that once they had reached this degree of joyous violence, the only way out, both for them and for the victims with which they appeased their giddy gods, was a sudden and terrifying death.

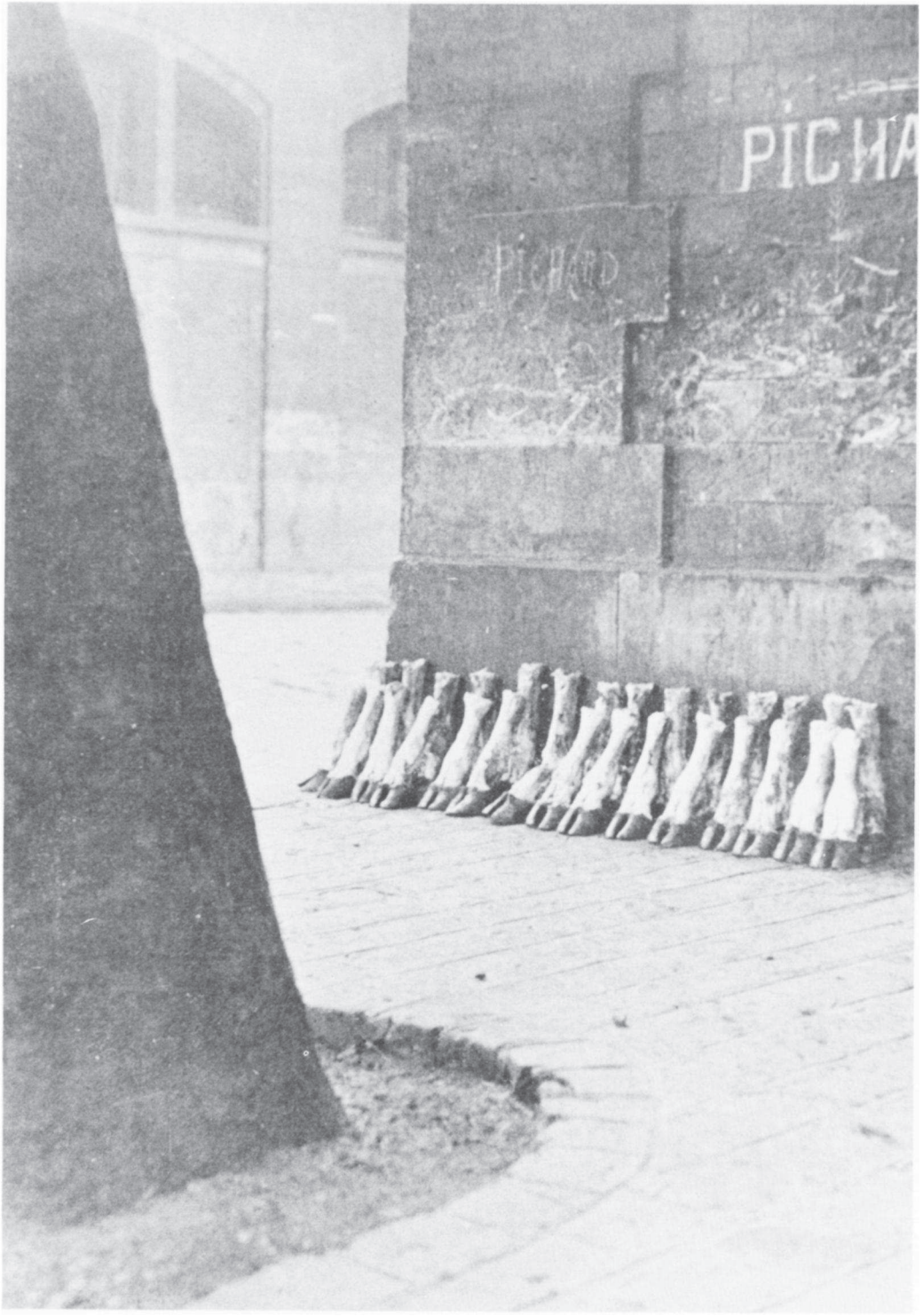
They wished until the end to serve as "spectacle" and "theater" to these capricious characters, to "serve for amusement," for their "distraction." Such was their conception of their strange excitement. Strange and delicate, since they died suddenly, like crushed insects.

1928

Slaughterhouse

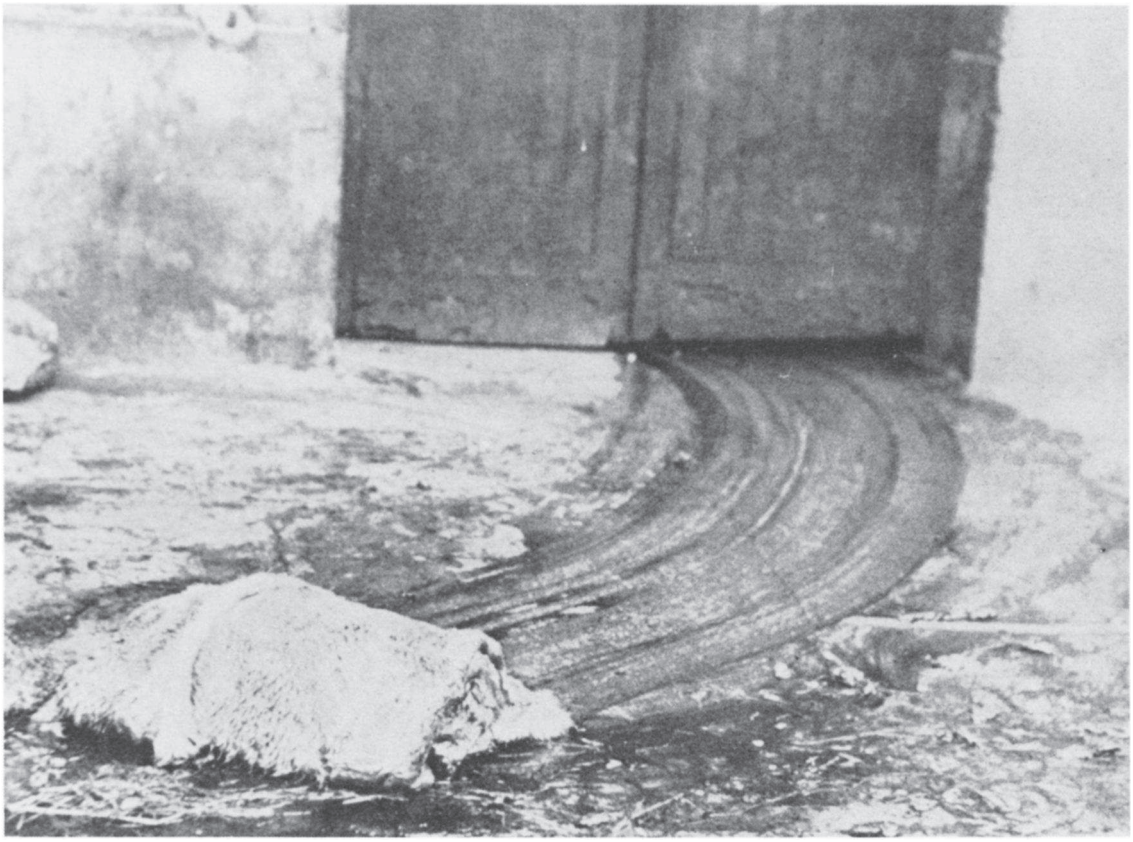
The slaughterhouse is linked to religion insofar as the temples of by-gone eras (not to mention those of the Hindus in our own day) served two purposes: they were used both for prayer and for killing. The result (and this judgment is confirmed by the chaotic aspect of present-day slaughterhouses) was certainly a disturbing convergence of the mysteries of myth and the ominous grandeur typical of those places in which blood flows. In America, curiously enough, W. B. Seabrook has expressed an intense regret; observing that the orgiastic life has survived, but that the sacrificial blood is not part of the cocktail mix, he finds present custom insipid. In our time, nevertheless, the slaughterhouse is cursed and quarantined like a plague-ridden ship. Now, the victims of this curse are neither butchers nor beasts, but those same good folk who countenance, by now, only their own unseemliness, an unseemliness commensurate with an unhealthy need of cleanliness, with irascible meanness, and boredom. The curse (terrifying only to those who utter it) leads them to vegetate as far as possible from the slaughterhouse, to exile themselves, out of propriety, to a flabby world in which nothing fearful remains and in which, subject to the ineradicable obsession of shame, they are reduced to eating cheese.

1929



Eli Lotar. The La Villette Slaughterhouse.

Eli Lotar. The La Villette Slaughterhouse.



Smokestack

When I review my own memories, it seems that for our generation, out of all the world's various objects first glimpsed in early childhood, the most fear-inspiring architectural form was by no means the church, however monstrous, but rather certain large smokestacks, true channels of communication between the ominously dull, threatening sky and the muddy, stinking earth surrounding the textile and dye factories.

Today, when the truly wretched aesthete, at a loss for objects of admiration, has invented the contemptible "beauty" of the factory, the dire filth of those enormous tentacles appears all the more revolting; the rain puddles at their feet, the empty lots, the black smoke half-beaten down by the wind, the piles of slag and dross are the sole true attributes of those gods of a sewer Olympus. I was not hallucinating when, as a terrified child, I discerned in those giant scarecrows, which both excited me to the point of anguish and made me run sometimes for my life, the presence of a fearful rage. That rage would, I sensed, later become my own, giving meaning to everything spoiling within my own head and to all that which, in civilized states, looms up like carrion in a nightmare. I am, of course, not unaware that for most people the smokestack is merely the sign of mankind's labor, and never the terrible projection of that nightmare which develops obscurely, like a cancer, within mankind. Obviously one does not, as a rule, continue to focus on that which is seen as the revelation of a state of violence for which one bears some responsibility. This childish or untutored way of seeing is replaced by a knowing vision which allows one to take a factory smokestack for a stone construction forming a pipe for the evacuation of smoke high into the air—which is to say, for an abstraction. Now, the only possible reason for the present dictionary is precisely to demonstrate the error of that sort of definition.

It should be stressed, for example, that a smokestack is only very tentatively of a wholly mechanical order. Hardly has it risen toward the first covering cloud, hardly has the smoke coiled round within its throat, than it has already become the oracle of all that is most violent in our present-day world, and this for the same reason, really, as each grimace of the pavement's mud or of the

human face, as each part of an immense unrest whose order is that of a dream, or as the hairy, inexplicable muzzle of a dog. That is why, when placing it in a dictionary, it is more logical to call upon the little boy, the terrified witness of the birth of that image of the immense and sinister convulsions in which his whole life will unfold, rather than the technician, who is necessarily blind.

1929

Human Face

Owing to our presumably insufficient data, we can cite but a single era within which the human form stands out as a senile mockery of everything intense and large conceived by man. The mere sight (in photography) of our predecessors in the occupation of this country now produces, for varying reasons, a burst of loud and raucous laughter; that sight, however, is nonetheless hideous. Upon emerging (as if from the maternal womb) from the dreary chambers in which every last detail, including their rank and musty odor, had been provided for by those vain ghosts, we seem to have spent the greater part of our time in obliterating all traces, even the smallest, of that shameful ancestry. In other places, the souls of the dead pursue isolated country-dwellers, assuming the wretched aspect of decomposing corpses (and if, in the cannibal isles of the South Seas, they go after the living, it is for food). Here, however, the unhappy youth who is consigned to mental solitude confronts at every unexpected moment of rapture the images of his predecessors looming up in tiresome absurdity. Upon our visions of seduction they intrude their contaminating senility, in their comic black mass they submit to exhibition our glimpses of paradise, with Satan cast as stage policeman and the maniac's scream replacing the dancer's *entrechât*.

In this deeply depressing, ghostly clash, every feeling, every desire is implicated, in appearances that are somewhat misleading and with no possibility of simplification. The very fact that one is haunted by ghosts so lacking in savagery trivializes these terrors and this anger. Those seeking a way out have, consequently, always transposed their difficulties somewhat. No decision on these grounds can really suit those who persist in their conception of an order excluding total complicity with all that has gone before, with its extremities of absurdity and vulgarity.

If, on the contrary, we acknowledge the *presence* of an acute perturbation in, let us say, the state of the human mind represented by the sort of provincial wedding photographed twenty-five years ago, then we place ourselves outside established rules insofar as a real negation of the existence of *human nature* is herein implied. Belief in the existence of this nature presupposes the permanence

Wedding. Seinne-et-Marne. ca. 1905.

of certain salient qualities, and, in general, of a way of being, in relation to which the group represented in these photographs is monstrous, not aberrant. Were this a matter of some pathological deterioration—that is to say, an accident that could or should be mitigated—then the human principle would be saved. If, however, in accord with our statement, we regard this group as representing the very principle of mental activity at its most civilized and most violent, and the bridal pair as, let us say, the symbolic parents of a wild and apocalyptic rebellion, then a juxtaposition of monsters breeding incompatibles would replace the supposed continuity of *our* nature.

It is, furthermore, pointless to exaggerate the importance of this odd decline of reality. It is no more surprising than any other, since the attribution of a *real* character to our surroundings is, as always, a mere indication of that vulgar intellectual voracity to which we owe both Thomist thought and present-day science. We would do well to restrict the sense of this negation, which expresses in particular two nonrelations: the disproportion, the absence of common measure among various human entities which is, in a way, one aspect of the general disproportion obtaining between man and nature. This last disproportion has already found some expression in the abstract. It is understood that a presence as irreducible as that of the *self* has no place in an intelligible universe, and that, conversely, this external universe has no place within my self except through

the aid of metaphor. But we attribute greater importance to concrete expression of this absence of relation. If, indeed, we consider a character chosen at random from the ghosts here presented, then its apparition during the discontinuous series expressed by the notion of the scientific universe (or even, more simply put, at a given point of the infinite space and time of common sense) remains perfectly shocking to the mind; it is as shocking as the appearance of the *self* within the metaphysical whole, or, to return to the concrete, as that of a fly on an orator's nose.

The concrete forms of these disproportions can never be overstressed. It is all too easy to reduce the abstract antinomy of the self and the nonself, the Hegelian dialectic having been expressly conceived for this sort of sleight of hand. It is time that we take note that rebellion at its most open has been subjected to propositions as superficial as that which claims the absence of relation to be another form of relation.* This paradox, borrowed from Hegel, was aimed at making nature enter into the order of the rational; if every contradictory appearance were given as logically deducible, then reason would, by and large, have nothing shocking to conceive. Disproportions would be merely the expression of a logical being which proceeds, in its unfolding, by contradiction. We must recognize the merit of contemporary science in this respect, when it presents the world's original state (and all successive and consequent states) as essentially not subject to proof. The notion of that which is not subject to proof is irreducibly opposed to that of logical contradiction. It is impossible to reduce the appearance of the fly on the orator's nose to the supposed contradiction between the self and the metaphysical whole (for Hegel this fortuitous appearance was simply to be classed as an "imperfection of nature"). If, however, we attribute general value to the undemonstrable character of the universe of science, we may proceed to an operation contrary to that of Hegel and reduce the appearance of the self to that of the fly.

* By 1921, when Tristan Tzara acknowledged that "the absence of system is still a system, but of the most sympathetic sort," this concession to insignificant objections still apparently remained inconsequential; the introduction of Hegelianism soon to follow, however, could then be expected. The step from this admission to Hegel's panlogism is an easy one, since it is consistent with the principle of the identity of contradictory terms. We may even suppose that once this treachery was committed, there was no way of avoiding this panlogism and its glaring consequences, by which I mean the sordid thirst for completeness in all things, a blind hypocrisy, and, ultimately, the need to serve anything that is determinate. Despite the fact that these vulgar inclinations have, in compromise with a diametrically opposed impulse, most felicitously exacerbated certain agreed-upon difficulties, there is, from this point on, no further reason not to reconsider the futile betrayal expressed by Tristan Tzara. It is impossible, really, to see what can be systematic in the savage opposition to all system, unless a pun is involved, and the word *systematic* is understood in the common sense of mechanical obstination. But this is no matter for joking, and this pun betrays, for once, a fundamental, wretched senility. There is really no difference between humility, of the slightest degree, before the SYSTEM—which is to say, before the Idea—and the fear of God. Moreover, this lamentable statement seems—and with reason—literally to have throttled Tzara, who has since displayed a complete sluggishness. This statement appeared as an epigraph in a book by Louis Aragon (Paris, Anicet, 1921).

Mademoiselle de Rigny.

Even admitting the arbitrary character of this last move, which may pass for a merely logical trivialization of its converse operation, it is nonetheless true that the expression given the human self toward the end of the last century strangely fits the conception thus advanced. This hallucinating meaning is subjective, no doubt—it appears thus to our eyes—but it requires only that we acknowledge our own interpretation as simply clearer than that of that other time. Human beings of that time, living as Europeans have, in a way that is, of course, obscure, come to assume this madly improbable aspect (the physical transformation was obviously unrelated to conscious decision). This transformation carries with it, nonetheless, the meaning now clear to us. And it is the specific nature, only, of this dated human aspect that is here in question. Certain people encountered today can be seen in exactly this way, but we are dealing in those cases with facts common to all times. It was only until the first years of the nineteenth century that the extravagance of involuntary contradiction and of senile paradox had free rein; since then white men and women have, as we know, tenaciously persisted in their efforts to regain, at last, a *human face.* Those wasp-waisted corsets scattered throughout provincial attics are now the prey of moths and flies, the hunting grounds of spiders. As to the tiny cushions which long served to emphasize those forms of extreme plumpness, they now haunt only the ghastly brains of those greybeards, expiring daily beneath their weird grey bowlers, who still dream of flabby torsos strangled in the obsessive play of lace and whalebone. And within the image of the earth's globe seen trampled underfoot by a dazzling American film star in a bathing suit, we may catch the sound, muffled but heady nonetheless, of a cock's crow.

And why blush at that sudden fascination? Why not admit that our few remaining heady dreams are traced by the swift bodies of young American girls? Thus if anything can still draw sobs for all that has just vanished, it is no longer a great singer's beauty, but mere perversity, sordid and deluded. To us, so many strange, merely half-monstrous individuals seem to persist in empty animation, like the jingle of the music box, in innocent vice, libidinous heat, lyrical fumes. So that despite all antithetical obsession, there is absolutely no thought of dispensing with this hateful ugliness, and we will yet catch ourselves some day, eyes suddenly dimmed and brimming with inadmissible tears, running absurdly towards some provincial haunted house, nastier than flies, more vicious, more rank than a hairdresser's shop.

1929

Metamorphosis

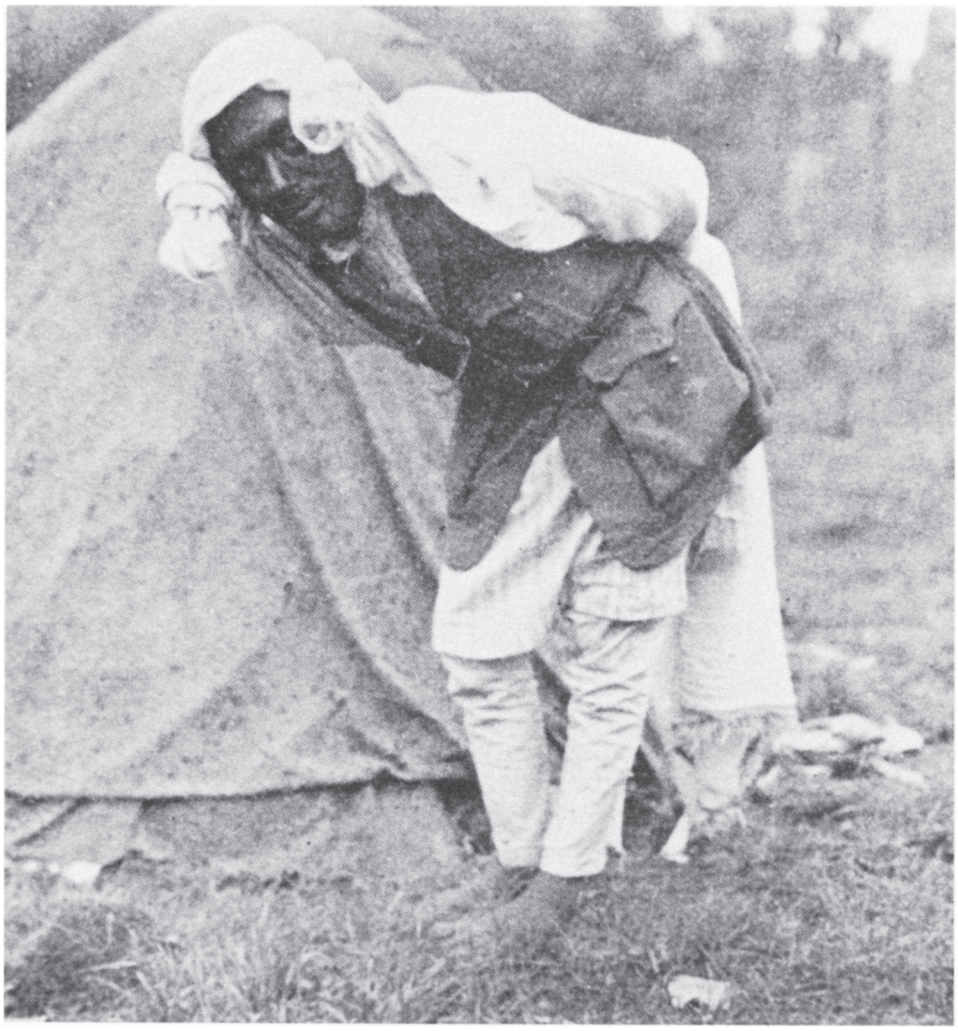
Man's equivocal attitude toward the wild animal is more than usually absurd. Human dignity does exist (it is, apparently, above all suspicion), but not on one's visits to the zoo—as when, for instance, the animals watch the approaching crowds of children tailed by papa-men and mama-women. Man, despite appearances, must know that when he talks of human dignity in the presence of animals, he lies like a dog. For in the presence of illegal and essentially free beings (the only real outlaws*) the stupid feeling of practical superiority gives way to a most uneasy envy; in savages, it takes the form of the totem, and it lurks in comic disguise within our grandmothers' feathered hats. There are so many animals in this world, and so much that we have lost! The innocent cruelty; the opaque monstrosity of eyes scarcely distinguishable from the little bubbles that form on the surface of mud; the horror as integral to life as light is to a tree. There remain the office, the identity card, an existence of bitter servitude, and yet, that shrill madness which, in certain deviant states, borders on metamorphosis.

The obsession with metamorphosis can be defined as a violent need—identical, furthermore, with all our animal needs—that suddenly impels us to cast off the gestures and attitudes requisite to human nature. A man in an apartment, for example, will set to groveling before those around him and eat dogs' food. There is, in every man, an animal thus imprisoned, like a galley slave, and there is a gate, and if we open the gate, the animal will rush out, like the slave finding his way to escape. The man falls dead and the beast acts as a beast, with no care for the poetic wonder of the dead man. Thus man is seen as a prison of bureaucratic aspect.

1929

* In English in the original.—trans.

Hyena.



Museum

According to the *Great Encyclopedia*, the first museum in the modern sense of the word (meaning the first public collection) was founded in France by the Convention of July 27, 1793. The origin of the modern museum is thus linked to the development of the guillotine. Nevertheless, the collection of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, founded at the end of the seventeenth century, was already a public one, belonging to the university.

The development of the museum has obviously exceeded even the most optimistic hopes of its founders. Not only does the ensemble of the world's museums now represent a colossal piling-up of wealth, but the totality of museum visitors throughout the world surely offers the very grandiose spectacle of a humanity by now liberated from material concerns and devoted to contemplation.

We must realize that the halls and art objects are but the container, whose content is formed by the visitors. It is the content that distinguishes a museum from a private collection. A museum is like a lung of a great city; each Sunday the crowd flows like blood into the museum and emerges purified and fresh. The paintings are but dead surfaces, and it is within the crowd that the streaming play of lights and of radiance, technically described by authorized critics, is produced. It is interesting to observe the flow of visitors visibly driven by the desire to resemble the celestial visions ravishing to their eyes.

Grandville has schematized the relations of container to content with respect to the museum by exaggerating (or so it would appear) the links tentatively formed between visitors and visited. When a native of the Ivory Coast places an axe of neolithic, polished stone within a water-filled receptacle, then bathes in that receptacle and offers poultry to what he takes to be thunder stones (fallen from the sky in a clap of thunder), he but prefigures the attitude of enthusiasm and of deep communion with objects which characterizes the modern museum visitor.

The museum is the colossal mirror in which man, finally contemplating himself from all sides, and finding himself literally an object of wonder, abandons himself to the ecstasy expressed in art journalism.

1930

Grandville. The Louvre of the Marionettes.

Counterattack: Call to Action

What is it that keeps capitalist society alive?

—Work.

What does capitalist society offer to him who gives his work?

—Bones to gnaw on.

What, on the other hand, does it offer to the owners of capital?

—All they want, more than they want: ten, a hundred, a thousand turkeys a day, had they stomachs large enough. . . .

And if they can't eat the turkeys?

—The worker is jobless, dying of hunger, and rather than give the turkeys to him, they throw them into the sea.

Why not throw the capitalists and not the turkeys into the sea?

—Everyone is wondering why.

What is needed in order to throw the capitalists and not the turkeys into the sea?

—To overthrow the established order.

But what are the organized parties doing?

—On January 31, Sarraut shouts in the Chamber of Deputies, "I will maintain the established order in the street." The revolutionary parties (!) applaud.

Have the parties gone mad?

—They say they haven't, but they are afraid of M. de la Rocque.

And who is this M. de la Rocque?

—A capitalist, a colonel, and a count.

And . . . ?

—A prick.

But how can this prick frighten people?

—Because in the state of general stupefaction, he is the only one to take action!

Comrades,

A colonel gets excited and shouts that everything has to change; he is the

only one to organize for combat and to claim that he will be able to change it all. He lies, but at a time when disgust with parliamentary impotence is at its height, he is the only one on the political scene who is not a member of parliament! The crowd knows that events must be taken in hand if the revolting spectacle of bourgeois parliamentarianism—its continuous chatter and unspeakable hustling—is to be replaced. The crowd begins to look for a "man," a master, someone from outside parliament. And to many in the general state of distraction, a Colonel de la Rocque already seems to be that man.

That distraction reaches the point at which this character is seen as the "master" able to take charge of events; the crowd sees a "master" in the weakest of "slaves," the slave of the capitalist system, the slave of a mode of production which condemns men to gigantic effort ending only in exhaustion, hunger, or war!

We declare that the time has come to act as MASTERS. The masses have nothing to gain from the impotence of single individuals.

Only the coming REVOLUTION has the power to take charge of things, to impose peace, to organize production and abundance.

1936

The Threat of War

Circumstances are difficult only for those who draw back from the tomb.

—Saint Just

It should prove useful to set forth, in opposition to various denials and evasions, a few unequivocal assertions.

1. Conflict is life. Man's value depends upon his aggressive strength.
2. A living man regards death as the fulfillment of life; he does not see it as a misfortune. Whereas a man who lacks the strength to give tonic value to his death is "dead."
3. If one wishes to follow human destiny to its very limit, one cannot remain alone, one must gather a force that can develop and gain influence. Given present circumstances, such a Church must accept and even desire the conflict through which it affirms its existence. A conflict, however, essentially related to its own interests, that is, to the conditions of a "fulfillment of human possibilities."
4. The war cannot be reduced to ideological expression or its means of development, be it that of war mongering; ideologies are, on the contrary, reduced to means of conflict. A war transcends entirely the words pronounced in contradiction to its motive.
5. Fascism enslaves all value to struggle and work. The sort of Church which we are defining must be linked to values that are neither military nor economic; for existence means combat against a closed system of enslavement. It remains nevertheless alien to national interest and the grandiloquence of democracy.
6. The values of this Church must be of the same order as those traditional values which place Tragedy at the summit (of existence). One cannot consider, independently of political results, a descent of the human universe to hell as entirely meaningless. Nevertheless, of the infernal it should be possible to speak only with discretion, with neither depression nor bravado.

1936

Additional Notes on the War

Disconcerting Reactions to the War

The difficulties inherent in the passage from a state of chaos to one of organic existence and to the right of command are of a complex nature.

Not only are the masses still unaware of the irreconcilable opposition between their own cause and the mental paralysis prevalent in political committees, but the poorly conceived, confused deals concluded among party leaders on all sides have not reduced the general tension; they have led viable movements, one after the other, to a dead end.

As to our foreign complications, the Right is mainly responsible for the policy of enslavement of the German people, and now, when its results are beginning to demonstrate the radical absurdity of that policy, the Right has passed the task of defending it on to the Left. The Left, supported and actually spurred on by the Communist far-Left, has, without a moment's hesitation, assumed the defense of the most inhuman treaty ever imposed upon a free people—and this without even the justification of the effectiveness of the crueler clauses. The Right and the far-Right have thus abnegated one of the essential components of their wretched victory; they cease, in the eyes of their constituents, to embody armed violence, girded for the turbulent expression of the nationalist will to greatness. At the same time the Left, adopting the policy of radical Germanophobia traditional on the Right, abandons its mission of furthering harmony among peoples.

We can even go so far as to say that a human policy, free from that mass excitation which must inevitably end in slaughter, might very well gain from a present minority of those naturally inclined to the Right, a reception lacking within the majority of the masses on the Left.

There is no question of our defending the posture to which French nationalism, in its senility, is driven, that "sacred self-interest" to which it is reduced, that renunciation with which it faces a world clamoring for life. In a time of total disturbance, nothing exceeds the ignominy of that puerile abdication. The very beasts of prey, in their natural cruelty, seem less inexcusable than the

legendary ostrich, reduced to hiding its head to cut off sight. Setting aside that facile agitation that enlists the spineless in organizations such as l'Action Française or La Croix de Feu, those with an appetite for effective action, those hitherto kept aloof by their own interests from the Left's solutions, begin to realize that neither an exhausted nationalism nor a shattered capitalism offers any way out.

Every possible solution finds individual supporters, without any precision of expression or value of attraction which might lead one to foresee its predominance. No effective will compatible with a truly human freedom and no will to freedom compatible with effective will has produced an assembling of even embryonic strength. The balance of opposing forces seems to result in a kind of equilibrium, since no one force is so constituted that it can even tentatively respond to the needs signaled by general anxiety; the situation, tense though it is, must for a long time remain so. There is as yet no really obvious way out, none that tempts the mass in its increasingly agitated state.

Revolutionary Agitation and World Consciousness

It can be asserted that in today's France, political agitation cannot call upon a permanently depressed national consciousness incapable of aggressive action. It is, therefore, only insofar as men appeal to the realities of world consciousness that the mass can be stirred. At first, this appeal is bound to appear trivial. World consciousness, far from evoking strength and the possibility of the organic state, can be expressed only in anxiety.

Born of extreme misfortune, delivered wailing, by cannon fire in the depths of a war-muddied earth, the consciousness of human solidarity still burns and depresses, like fever. Thus far we have known unity among men of different nations only in circumstances of extreme irony, at those moments of universal enslavement in the work of mutual butchery.

But who is to say that the mass of humanity is never to feel that violent emotion which alone can liberate men from the national slavery and frenzy which send them to their death? Who is to say that we shall never see, assembled upon this earth, crowds, caught up together in a trance, rising to end the idiocy of patriotism?

Men today are overwhelmed by an awareness that if nations are allowed to wage wars for the safeguard of interests wholly unrelated to the common interest, life will become wholly impossible. Now, you cannot spread this elementary truth among mankind without proposing that it take up arms directly against oppression. The Russian Revolution took on its full meaning when it liberated the masses from a slaughter that was totally oppressive. A revolutionary cohesion, an organic cohesion will be possible in France only if men know that they are fighting to deliver the world from all those who have given it over to war. What was made possible in Russia by an extreme decline of authority

will, however, be realized here only through a revolutionary increase of authority. Only a firm and coherent power which has eliminated all opposition could face the world with clarity, with unparalleled disinterestedness, with the will to cohesive union among all peoples of the world.

It must be acknowledged as a general principle that an imperative strength develops most fully in relation to a sense of inferiority. The inferiority complex of the leader has always played a role in the development of his determinant action; as a rule, an odd lack of self-confidence on the part of history's dynamic leaders has driven them to those antithetical excesses required to prove to themselves how unjustified this lack of confidence was. Similarly, we can claim that national feeling achieves that extremity of pride and assertiveness only in those countries in which doubt or anguish has arisen; that assertiveness and confidence are thus the function of prior doubt and fear.

We cannot, of course, claim that those who reflect world consciousness are necessarily carried to power by the existence of that doubt and anguish, but the force with which the demand is laid down immediately unshackles them. If a real movement were to be generated by an anguish of this dimension, it would necessarily assume the ardent, unpredictable, highly courageous character of the great religious movements which have in the past overwhelmed whole peoples with the revelation of the universal value of existence. If men were to come forward and declare that the time has come to lift the age-old curse which haunts the human race, can we doubt that their voices would ring out with a sudden, shattering force, that very force now demanded by a whole world in anguish? Out of man's present extreme impotence, tomorrow can bring forth only a POWER containing the resolution of an absurd and ancient destiny—or misfortune in the extreme. . . .*

* The text breaks off here.—trans.

Toward Real Revolution

From Revolutionary Phraseology to Realism

The question of revolution, of the seizure of power, must be stated in terms that are positive and precise, in terms of immediate reality. We are accustomed to considering the future revolution within circumstances that are historically remote and thus insusceptible of any rigorous conception. Laziness inclines us to the vague notion of a replay of past revolutions.

Attention remains fixed on practical day-by-day policy, at the cost of all realistic considerations, and upon a few principles whose value is not subjected to criticism.

Revolutionary politics are entirely dominated by the plan for seizure of power by the proletariat, conceived by Marx as the result of a growing proletarianization.

There exists an obsession with the memory of the great Russian Revolution, in which the decomposition following upon the overthrow of an autocratic regime allowed the proletarian party to seize power. Considerations of this nature never result in any practical application, not even in simple plans of action; party propaganda and electoral contests have consequently become the only real objectives. Revolution has entered the haze of conventional phraseology and decisions of principle.

Revolutionary intellectual activity is tied, on the one hand, to the maintenance of anachronistic theoretical structures and, on the other, to the practical confusion between routine party work and decisive action directed toward seizure of power; it is thereby reduced to the lowest level.

Conceptions, Live and Anachronistic, of the Revolution

The proletariat is not at present large enough to overthrow the established regime.

Nor is it capable of leading the masses in a movement organized, in their own interests, for the destruction of bourgeois democracy.

If we wish to continue the struggle undertaken in its name, we must confront this present powerlessness.

We must search out those conditions in the past which have favored the effective uprising of proletarian minorities against the society of capitalism. We must determine whether or not such conditions are ever again likely to exist. If that seems unlikely, we must waste no time in looking back, but resolutely consider forms of prerevolutionary activity appropriate to the real situation, the present one.

It is only during the development of several classical liberal revolutions that the proletariat's chances have come to the fore. Liberal revolutions are the result of the crisis within autocratic regimes. The crisis within a democratic regime will necessarily result in a revolution of a different type, preceded by a different type of revolutionary situation. The basic error of traditional revolutionary conceptions consists in the failure to recognize these essential differences, to recognize wholly new conditions of struggle, which hold out absolutely no possibility of movements similar to those of the Paris Commune or the Russian Revolution.

Crises in Autocratic Regimes and Classical or Liberal Revolutions

If we wish to characterize the revolutionary situation and the modern revolution, we must first determine the features of classical revolutions.

These we designate as liberal revolutions; their essential keynote and principle of incitement are the abolition of tyranny and the establishment of freedom. With or without bloodshed, they were all organized against power, royal or imperial; each struck down a crowned head.

We must draw attention to the essential and initial role played by those heads struck down by these violent historical movements. A general popular uprising is the necessary condition for successful insurrection. No insurrection has ever effectively developed in a city under control of normal authority unless the population, on the whole, favored it. It is the sovereign himself, whose authority has grown intolerable to the great majority of the people, who unites the rebels against himself. For they are in agreement upon a single point: they want to end his domination over them. If, within a given society, there exists no sovereign irresponsibly and personally exercising power, the concentration requisite for fullest development of the outbreak is not possible. Even in the case of pronounced crisis, suffering and anger create divergent movements.

When, however, a crowned head plays its role in the unification of insurgent crowds, when, after the triumphal insurrection, the divergent movements are produced by the effervescence resulting from the upheaval, then the revolution is deepened; the basic demands of the oppressed masses come forth with increasing strength to confront only the weakness of a provisional, insurrectional government.

Proletarian Uprising Is Possible Only During the Liquidation of Autocracy Preceding Democratic Stabilization

In all liberal insurrections, the proletariat has provided the decisive contribution, not only in number and violence, but also in terms of human value and meaning. Its violent revolutionary impulse, generated by accumulated rage, has on each of these occasions been used by bourgeois and liberal leaders, who have exploited insurrection to seize power. But the power founded on liberal insurrections has always disappointed those masses to which such insurrections owed their very existence.

The possibility of this second insurrection provides the proletariat's chance, the only one possible. The authority against which it rebels is itself founded on opposition to the principle of authority (generally in a first insurrection) and is therefore relatively defenseless. The second phase of a bourgeois revolution thus offers the proletariat an opportunity which cannot recur once the bourgeois democratic regime has been stabilized.

All examples of proletarian struggle conducted in its own name and with some chance of success have occurred precisely within these conditions; without them not even the vaguest attempt at the overthrow of power can be cited.*

Crisis in Democratic Regimes and Modern Revolution

No democratic, stabilized regime has been overthrown by a classical revolution.

No uprising has ever even called into question the existence of such a regime. Not because the institutions of parliament and of the trade unions provide the oppressed with adequate means of pressure; rather because even a general discontent results, in the best of cases, in the formation of two opposi-

* Proletarian attempts have not been numerous. In France, June 1848 and March 1871; in Russia, October 1917; in Germany and Hungary, the postwar movements led by Kurt Eisner and Bela Kuhn; in China, the various movements which developed during the still current period of extreme instability; in Spain, the uprising in the Asturias. These experiences are cited, it must be said, in support of my argument; the data I aim to set forth are not of an empirical nature, but derive from an attempt at a general analysis of the social superstructure and its transformational rules. The impossibility of proletarian insurrection outside certain conditions is a theoretical given, confirmed by experience. I regret having to publish the general conclusions of analytic work unpreceded by the analytical work itself. I consider, nonetheless, that these conclusions as presented are sufficient in themselves.

I must for the moment be content with referring the reader concerned with method to the study published in 1933–1934, in issues number ten and eleven of *La critique sociale*, under the title "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," even though that text is merely a first presentation, quite rudimentary and, unfortunately, difficult to follow, due to the new set of ideas which required succinct presentation.

To these general indications, I would add that analysis of the processes characteristic of the superstructure does not imply that we take no account of the economic realities which condition these processes.

tional currents. Without a crowned head to unite the opposition against it, no lasting union is formed; for if a chief of state or head of government does become the object of a general outcry, the institutions normally at work will eliminate him, thus satisfying a portion of the disaffected.

Political crises within these regimes develop differently and in a radically contrary direction from those within autocracy.

Under autocracy, it is authority which grows intolerable.

In democracy, it is the absence of authority.

Faced with a generally critical situation, bourgeois parliamentary authority seems incapable of imposing measures of public safety, incapable of opposing authority to the disorder of the capitalist system and the maneuvers of those who represent the special interests of capital's custodians. Political opposition develops simultaneously on both the Left and the Right, forming two increasingly powerful currents, between which the existence of a power unable to command a base, no longer in a position to form a stable parliamentary majority, declines with each passing day.

Anachronistic Character of Movements of the Left During Crises Within Democracy

Movements of the Left, as a whole, take up the demands of the oppressed. Their natural and necessary development, in pursuit of a fundamental struggle against all oppression, creates an opposition of principle between their practice and the idea of authority.

The more or less conscious idea fundamental to their activity is that of the betterment of the human condition as a direct function of the difficulty of imposing authority upon the individual. Movements of the Left instinctively work toward the weakening of public authority and relegate to second place the settling of accounts which must follow this work of liquidation.

Movements of the Left can function only provisionally. They are required for the destruction of outmoded forms of authority, but must sooner or later give way to forces capable of reconstituting, or at least stabilizing, the social structure.

When, within a given society, tension results from the presence of institutions of authority which are no longer adequate to the present situation, the resolution of tension will fall to any movement violent enough to demand and obtain the abolition of these institutions. But if the tension derives from the gangrenous powerlessness of liberal parliamentary institutions—as is the case when a democracy faces basic difficulties—the movement of rage which arises from the Left can be stormy, immense, threatening; it is incapable of remedying a situation which is, on the contrary, thereby aggravated, consequently facilitating the task of the Right.*

* All clear-sighted observers in France are currently aware of the principal danger within the Popular Front of the development of a purely negative force.

The leftist parties continue to conduct themselves, as crisis develops, as if in a crisis of autocracy. For this reason, they have been regularly annihilated; the forces of existence eliminate all that is inopportune.

The Anachronistic Character of Classical Proletarian Movements in Our Day

Communist parties are by no means wholly similar to Left movements. The first of these, formed by the Bolshevik fraction of the Russian social-democratic party, responded far more rigorously than had been possible for the Commune in its time to the need for the reconstruction of a social structure destroyed by confused activity, by the powerlessness of the masses and of social revolutionary and Menshevik leaders of the Left.

The Bolsheviks' organizing of the proletariat, as it turned out, fitted the decomposed state of authority immediately following the overthrow of the autocratic institution of czarism. Its basic orientation, toward the extreme Left, allowed it to contribute considerably to the destruction of all subsisting authority. Its capacities for discipline and coherence, its very radicalism on the social level, placed it outside the other parties of the Left as the only force capable of imposing its violence upon impotent turmoil. Its reconstitution of authority, however, was possible only insofar as the general hatred unleashed against the Right meant that the latter found themselves unable to direct that authority to their own benefit.

The communist parties within the various capitalist countries were formed, under Lenin's leadership, with a view to realizing throughout the rest of Europe a revolution similar to that which had just taken place in Russia. It must be said, moreover, that at the time of their founding, the decomposition in process within many European countries was not so different from that recently exploited by the Bolsheviks. The crowned heads of Germany and Italy had been destroyed. Even in those countries in which nothing of this sort had occurred, the war, by creating within the democracies a state of autocratic force, had generated movements which recall those of the classical revolutions. It seemed possible, after the war, to envisage an intensive, general dissolution of society, and even in France and Italy a disoriented bourgeoisie was then faced with the development of very broad proletarian movements. Nevertheless, the formation of communist parties in a relatively revolutionary situation resulted, in France, in a calming of excitement and, in Italy, in precipitation toward disaster. It must be understood that if a proletarian movement does develop, it is essential that there be, at the same time, a true collapse of the social order; otherwise the repercussions within the right wing of opposition will result in a reconstruction of oppressive forces in new forms.

It is time to declare openly and repeatedly that in a stabilized society in which elements of the Right have not been discredited by a recent exercise of power, the communist operation will not endure; for the Right will, on the con-

trary, reorganize, exploiting the discrediting of democratic institutions, enlisting the support of all conservative forces: army, clergy, aristocracy, capitalism.

The existence of a communist party within a bourgeois democracy has never had any immediate consequence as to revolutionary decision. Today, whatever their political importance or the proven value of their members, those parties are merely one of those anachronistic formations which, in the course of historical development, survive their once favorable conditions. They may remain formidable; they are almost always overwhelmed with ineluctable defeat.

We Must Know How to Appropriate the Weapons of Our Adversaries

Today we see that the most valid revolutionary elements remain subject to the attraction of various solutions of the traditional Left—some purely destructive, others requiring, in order to become constructive, conditions which do not at present exist. Driven by anguish, at a moment when the necessarily tragic end—success or failure—draws near, we must above all forget ready-made concepts and *dare* to look at things as they are, *dare* to demand that others see things as we do, *as they are*. The liquidation of bourgeois society cannot occur as the outcome of a generalized decomposition. That decomposition is not actually happening. It cannot be obtained through political work of any sort.

Bourgeois society is an organization with no true power, which has always relied on a precarious balance, and which now, as its balance weakens, is expiring in powerlessness. It must be fought not as authority, but rather as absence of authority. To attack a capitalist government is to attack a blind, heartless, inhuman, truly unspeakable leadership, which strides helplessly, stupidly toward the abyss. Against this garbage we must use *direct* imperative violence, *direct* construction of the basic force of an uncompromising authority.

The crisis of bourgeois democratic regimes leads neither to the putsch nor to popular uprising; it regularly results in the development of organic movements, movements of recomposition to which important politicians are forced to give way.

This move has until now been undeniably to the benefit of social conservatism of the blindest sort. Only the lackeys of capitalism could and would undertake it. Under the mask of demagogy, they have tried to reconstruct the social structure only the better to curb the oppressed. They have, however, discovered new methods of propaganda fitting to a new situation; they have exploited the sole possibilities of effective action against the dissolving regime. They have, in particular, benefited from the experience of their adversaries, using the methods of combat and organization shown by the Bolsheviks to be of practical value.

We must cease to believe that methods invented by our adversaries are necessarily bad. On the contrary, we must, in turn, use those methods against them.

We must firmly resolve to take the only path open to those wishing to overthrow a regime when that regime is bourgeois democracy. Not that this path is necessarily good, but an analysis-in-depth of the nature of organic movements seen in relation to the present situation in France gives very clear indication of the advisability of recourse to the revolutionary force that can be constructed from them. We must learn how to use for the liberation of the exploited those weapons that were forged for their greater enslavement.

General Character of Organic Movements

To those organizations of coherent and disciplined forces which reconstitute the foundations of the structure of authority within a democracy in the process of decomposition, we can give the generic name of organic movements.

Organic movements differ, in the first place, from those shapeless uprisings which have abolished autocracies and whose coherence was a function of the unity of the authoritarian powers attacked by them. Secondly, they differ from political parties of Right or Left based on unchanging (or largely unchanging) class interests. Their causes are not to be found within permanent frames as within so many divisions of space; they are manifested only in time. Less abstractly put, they are engendered not by direct class interests, but by dramatic historical situations. The range of events controlling these historical situations is such as to affect men of different classes. They differ, therefore, from political parties as the uprisings do, and can be defined as organized insurrections which assume, in organic form, a more or less permanent character.

To a certain degree, they nonetheless retain the insurrection's limitation in time. They constitute an offensive act launched against the regime. This act develops not in the course of one or a few days, but rather over a limited number of years—limited insofar as an organic movement that fails, lacking the permanent base formed by the interest of a given class, decomposes swiftly. Its existence, necessarily linked to its aggressiveness, even remains at the mercy of a simple lowering of aggression.

Like insurrection, moreover, an organic movement develops independently of established political frameworks, in open hostility to parliamentary rule—less from a program shaped by strictly defined interests than from a state of intense emotion. This emotion at once takes on value as a sudden consciousness of superiority. And again like insurrection, an organic movement leads its followers toward violence, organizing them in strict discipline. The union of the exploited as such in consciousness of their inferiority (if such actually is the case) becomes, instead, the union of the exploited who are able to demand power, who, in a word, behave from the start like masters.

The program of an organic movement cannot be abstract and schematic. In its capabilities for immediate realization, it cannot be directly subordinated to rational conceptions. It is necessarily tied to immediate needs which are

partly fortuitous and tentative, to those aspirations which, in fact, motivate a particular mass at a particular time and place.

Organic movements can, therefore, have disastrous consequences, as in the case of those hitherto developed in Italy and Germany (which have, once power has been established, assumed another character, the exercise of power differing regularly from its conquest).

We must, despite disastrous consequences—the general aggravation of the conditions of human existence on earth—bear in mind the fact that these movements have usually carried their protagonists to power. On the other hand, we must consider in a very broad sense the form of political struggle of which the only complete examples are provided by fascism and National Socialism; we must consider them in exactly the same way that we look upon the notion of party in general, in the certain knowledge that the party is a mode of organization open equally to the Right, the Left, or the Center.

We can acknowledge, at least provisionally, that a given form of action is on principle useful in either of two directions, just as a cannon can be directed eastward or westward. Only the analysis of the political situation at our disposal, seen in relation to goals pursued, allows us to decide whether or not recourse to a given form in a clearly defined case is valid.

What Are the Aspirations Which Can at Present Animate an "Organic Antifascist Movement" in France?

An organic movement does not exactly liberate permanently defined aspirations, like those of the proletariat, but rather those aspirations of a mass formed more or less coherently or tumultuously—at a given time or place. This being so, extreme prudence is in order from the start. How is one to know in advance that this mass, caught in an evolution which may somewhat alter its composition, will not, eventually, be propelled by nationalist goals or by forces hostile to workers' freedom? How is one to know that a movement which first appears to be antifascist will not rapidly develop toward fascism?

We are struggling—the goals defined as conditions of that struggle must be precisely expressed—to free men from two systems of blind forces. The first forces them to kill each other in the setting of nation again nation; the second forces them to work for an inhuman minority of producers at a time when the latter have become blind and impotent. We are fighting to transform the impotent world of human society in which we live; we are fighting so that human omnipotence may free itself from a past of misery and freely distribute the world's riches.

Assuming that irreducibly regressive elements will always turn to the Right, we have no reason to believe that the aspirations of the masses in this country are contrary to the movement which has long directed the proletariat toward that freedom.

A certain number of precise considerations are thus relevant.

(1) France has no external claims or conquests to pursue. She has suffered no humiliation, and her nationalists, unlike those of Italy or Germany, have no latent rage to exploit for their own benefit. The vital interests of this country's inhabitants are, on the contrary, linked to peace. Not only is peace indispensable for the preservation of physical existence—from ignoble and pointless death—but war will not, in any case, bring them the slightest material advantage. It is, therefore, anxiety linked to the threat of war which is acting upon this country, and not the angry demands of nationalists. Just as it was possible and necessary in Italy or Germany to reawaken the national humiliation and to play upon the exacerbation of patriotic rage, thereby giving expression to the most active desires within the masses, so in France it is possible and necessary to use the antiwar movement as the basis of revolutionary struggle.

(2) This consideration is confirmed by the fact that the origins of both Italy and Germany as nations are strikingly similar. The development of fascism seems to derive from the problems of nations which were long the victims of the imperialism of their neighbors. Nothing of that sort is possible in France, long since united in a society where the values of patriotism have no further creative role and have become the privilege of stagnant elements.

(3) The recrudescence of these values during the economic crisis is, on the whole, of an absurd and criminal character, which inevitably becomes evident. The slightest change of course in a contrary direction, the slightest success in the violent declaration of the primacy of human values, can provoke a reversal of the situation at a time when nationalist delirium has certainly become excessive throughout the world.

(4) The proletarians are no longer alone in considering the capitalist system of production an evil. An important part of the petite bourgeoisie and even a certain number of bourgeois capitalists have grown aware that the economy must be organized on a different basis.

(5) The masses can no longer be fooled by mere fascist demagogery. The results of promises made to Italian and German workers are too well known. If Croix de Feu fascism spreads to the Left, it will encounter far greater difficulty than its predecessors. An antifascist organic movement will, on the other hand, have as its base the desire for world economic transformation which cannot be satisfied with symbolic measures.

The Transformation of the Popular Front of Defense into a Fighting Popular Front

Thus nothing prevents, and everything favors, the effectiveness of an *organic movement* for the liberation of the exploited, of an *organic movement* not of national consciousness and moral slavery, but of the universal consciousness committed only to the struggle against war and to the hatred of the legacy of past constraints.

The existence of this movement is already implicated in the Popular Front itself, insofar as that vast group of defensive forces necessarily develops within it a will to combat, a will to counterattack and to direct struggle for the seizure of power. The Popular Front itself already possesses some of the essential traits of an *organic movement.* Neither party nor movement, it was generated not by "direct class interest," but by a dramatic historical situation. It was latent in the crowd of February 12, 1934, which, formed by the riotous outbreak of February 6, arose in a kind of insurrectional movement. It was clear from the start that the Popular Front, which is not a class party, could not be considered a permanent formation. Despite the nature of the electoral machination at its summit, we must keep in mind the fact that its base, which was formed in the streets, has a dimension wholly beyond the poverty of parliamentary deals. But this popular force lacks cohesion and toughness. The defensive positions to which it has hitherto confined itself have paralyzed its development. This first formation of the chaotic mass will, in fact, find its cohesion when those staunch elements which are now diffused throughout the crowd rally around the battle commands, when a still formless agitation will condense and congeal into a kind of core. But those who would make this move in regressive fashion, in renunciation of what has already been gained, act, regrettably, in contempt of lived reality. The basic formation of a movement whose aspirations are "those of a given mass, formed in given circumstances," has already taken place. To return to an action directly based on class interests means that one belongs ideologically to the past; it declares one's inability to fit doctrine to present reality. The formation of a movement of struggle must take as its base all of the Popular Front's riotous reality. Only on the Popular Front's expanded base will we gather the strength needed to respond to the blind unleashing of fascism, the strength which is not isolated, which is organized, totally responsible, to which those who govern will one day have to surrender a power that their impotent hands can no longer maintain.

We must merely recognize that the necessary union will attain its full dimension only when the masses of the Popular Front have relinquished the illusions which still prevent them from seeing that a govenment formed under a parliamentary organization can only be weak, ineffective, and disastrous. The crowds of February 12, 1934, of July 14, 1935, and of February 18, 1936, must become aware of their own omnipotence; they must sweep aside impediments to their domination. They must gain awareness of their necessary task: to found the revolutionary authority which will set the capitalists trembling in their banks, which will liberate the exploited, and which alone can bring about the passionate union of the peoples of the world.

1936

Nietzsche's Madness

On January 3, 1889,
fifty years ago,
Nietzsche succumbed to madness:
on the Piazza Carlo-Alberto, in Turin,
Sobbing, he threw himself about the neck
of a beaten horse,
Then collapsed;
When he awoke, he believed himself to be
DIONYSOS
or
HE WHO WAS CRUCIFIED
This event
should be commemorated
as a tragedy.
"When that which lives,"
said Zarathustra,
"is in command of itself,
that which lives must
expiate its authority
and become judge, avenger, and
VICTIM
of its own laws."

I

It is our wish to commemorate a tragic event, and we stand here now, borne up by life. Overhead stretches the starlit sky, and beneath our feet the earth turns. Within our bodies there is life, but within our bodies, too, death makes its way. (A man can always feel, even from afar, the approach of the last gasp.) Above us day will follow night, and night the day. And still we speak, we speak aloud, all unaware of the nature of those beings that we are. And of him who does not speak according to the rules of language, the men of reason that we must be assert that he is mad.

We ourselves are afraid of going mad, and we observe the rules with great uneasiness. Besides, the derangements of madmen are classified, and repeat themselves with a monotony such as to elicit boredom. The madman's lack of appeal insures the grave severity of logic. The philosopher through his discourse, nevertheless, "mirrors the empty sky" with less honesty than the madman, and in that case should he not be eliminated?

This questioning cannot be taken seriously, since it would, if wise, immediately lose its meaning. And yet it is strictly foreign to the spirit of pleasantry. For it is necessary, too, that we know the sweat of anguish. Under what pretext can we reject the embarrassment which produces sweat? The absence of sweat is far less honest than the pleasantries of him who sweats. He whom we term "wise" is the philosopher, but he does not exist independently of men as a whole. That whole is composed of a few philosophers engaged in mutual destruction and of a crowd in a state of inertia and perturbation which knows them not.

At this point, those now in sweat will clash by night with those for whom history in action clarifies the meaning of human life. For truly, in history mutually exterminating mobs provide consequences to incompatibility among philosophies—in those dialogues which are so many acts of slaughter. But completion, like birth, means combat, and beyond completion and combat, what else remains but death? Beyond endless, mutual verbal destruction, what else remains but a silence driving one to madness in laughter and in sweat?

But if the generality of men—or if, more simply, their entire existence—were to be INCARNATED in a single being—as solitary and abandoned, of course, as the generality—the head of that INCARNATION would be the site of inappeasable conflict, of a violence such that sooner or later it would shatter. We can hardly conceive the intensity of the storm or of release attained in the visions of this incarnate being. He would look upon God only to kill him in that same instant, becoming God himself, but only to leap immediately into nothingness. He would then find himself as before, a man as insignificant as any passerby, but with no possibility of rest whatsoever.

He would surely not content himself with thought and speech, for inner necessity would constrain him to live out his thought and speech. An incarnated

being of this sort would know a freedom so great that no language could reproduce its movement (the dialectic no more than any other). Human thought thus embodied can alone become a celebration whose license and exhaltation would find release equal to that of the sense of tragedy and anguish.

This leads to the inevitable acknowledgment that "man incarnate" must also go mad.

How violently within his head the Earth would spin!

How extreme his crucifixion! How like a bacchanal he would be (draw back, all those who fear to look upon his . . .)! But, Caesar, how lonely he would grow, omnipotent and so sacred that no man might conceive him without dissolving in tears. Supposing that . . . how would God not sicken at the discovery of his reasonable impotence to know madness?

January 3, 1939

II

This expression of violence does not, however, go far enough; these sentences betray the original impulse if they are not linked to those desires and decisions which are their living justification. Now, it is obvious that a representation of madness at the summit can have no direct effect; no one can voluntarily destroy within himself the expressive apparatus which links him to his fellows, like bone to bone.

Blake tells us in a proverb that *had others not gone mad, we should be so.* Madness cannot be cast out from the human generality, for its completion requires the madman. Nietzsche's going mad—in our stead—thus rendered that generality possible; and those who had previously lost their reason had not done it as brilliantly. But can the gift of a man's madness to his fellows be accepted without return plus interest? And if that interest is not the unreason of he who has received that royal gift of another's unreason, what might the return then be?

There is another proverb: He who desires but does not act breeds pestilence.

Surely the most extreme form of pestilence is attained when the expression of desire is confused with action.

For if a man begins to follow a violent impulse, his expression of it signifies that he is no longer following it, for at least the duration of its expression. Expression requires the substitution of an external figurative sign for passion itself. He who expresses himself must therefore pass from the burning sphere of passion to the relatively cold and torpid sphere of signs. When confronting that expression we must then always ask whether the subject is not headed for a deep sleep. That questioning must be conducted with unfailing rigor.

He who has once understood that in madness alone lies man's completion, is thus led to make a clear choice not between madness and reason, but between the lie of "a nightmare that justifies snores," and the will to self-mastery and victory. Once he has discovered the brilliance and agonies of the summit, he finds no betrayal more hateful than the simulated delirium of art. For if he must truly become the victim of his own laws, if the accomplishment of his destiny truly requires his destruction, if, therefore, death or madness has for him the aura of celebration, then his very love of life and destiny requires him to commit within himself that crime of authority that he will expiate. This is the demand of the fate to which he is bound by a feeling of extreme chance.

Proceeding, first, then, from powerless frenzy to power—just as he must in his life's crisis proceed in a reversal of power to collapse, whether slow or sudden—he must henceforth devote his time to the (impersonal) search for strength. He has seen, in that moment in which the wholeness of life appears as linked to the tragedy which is his final accomplishment, how weakening this relation can be. He has seen those about him approaching the secret—which thus represents the true "salt" or "sense" of the earth—succumb to the torpid dissolution of literature or art. The fate of human existence thus appears as linked to a small number of beings who are totally without power. For some carry within themselves far more than they, in their state of moral decay, believe; when the surrounding crowd and their representatives place in bondage all that concerns them. He who has been schooled to the limit through meditation upon tragedy ought not to take his pleasure in the "symbolic expression" of destructive forces; rather, he should instruct his fellows in the consequences. He should, by his firmness and persistence, lead them to organize, to become, in contrast to the fascists and Christians, other than the degraded objects of their adversaries' contempt. For it is incumbent upon them to impose chance upon the masses who demand of all men a life of slavery—chance, meaning that which they are, but from which, through failure of will, they abdicate.

On Nietzsche: The Will to Chance
Preface

Enter Giovanni with a heart upon his dagger.

Giovanni: Be not amazed. If you misgiving
hearts
Shrink at an idle sight, what bloodless fear
Of coward passion would have seized your
senses,
Had you beheld the rape of life and beauty
which I have acted!—O, my sister!

Florio: Ha! What of her?

Giovanni: The glory of my deed
Darkened the mid-day sun, made noon as night.
—*John Ford,* 'Tis Pity She's a Whore

Do you want to warm yourself near me? I advise you not to come too close; you may singe your hands. For I am much too fiery, you see. I can hardly prevent my body from erupting into flames.

—*Nietzsche*

1

I write, I suppose, out of fear of going mad.

I suffer from a fiery, painful yearning, which persists, like desire unslaked, within me.

My tension is, in a sense, like that of a mad impulse to laughter; it differs little from the passions that inflamed Sade's heroes, and yet it approaches that of the martyrs or of saints. . . .

I am certain that what is human in my nature is accentuated by this transport. But it does, I must admit, lead to imbalance and a painful restlessness. I burn, I lose my bearings, and in the end I remain empty. I can set myself large, necessary tasks, but none is commensurate with my fever. I am speaking of a moral concern, of the search for an object surpassing all others in value.

This object is, in my eyes, incommensurable with the moral ends usually proposed; those ends seem dull and false. But they are precisely those that might be achieved (are they not determined as requirement of definite acts?). True, the concern with a limited good can sometimes lead to the summit toward which I tend. By a detour, however. The moral end is then distinct from the excess of which it is the occasion. The states of glory, the sacred moments which disclose the incommensurable, exceed the desired results. Common morality places these results on the same plane as the aims of sacrifice. Sacrifice explores the depths within worlds, and its requisite destruction reveals its laceration. But the purpose of celebration is banal. Morality is always concerned with well-being.

(This seemingly changed on that day when God was presented as the sole true end. I am certain that the incommensurable of which I speak will be described, when all is said and done, as merely God's transcendence. In my view, however, this transcendence is a flight from my object. When we replace consideration of the satisfaction of human beings with that of the heavenly Being, nothing is fundamentally changed! The person of God shifts the problem, but does not eliminate it. It merely makes for confusion; being as God can claim at will an incommensurable essence. No matter; one serves God, one acts in his behalf; he is thus reducible to ordinary purpose. Were he to be situated in the beyond, we could not serve his gain.)

2

Man's extreme, unconditional yearning was first expressed independently of a moral end or of service to God by Nietzsche.

Nietzsche is unable precisely to define it, but he is driven by it, he assumes it utterly. This burning with no relation to a dramatically expressed moral obligation is surely paradoxical. It cannot serve as a point of departure for preaching or for action. Its consequences are disconcerting. If we cease to make burning the condition of another, further state, one that is distinguished as good, it appears as a pure state, one of empty consumption. Unless related to some enrichment such as the strength and influence of a community (or of a God, a church, a party), this consumption is not even intelligible. *The positive value of loss can seemingly be conveyed only in terms of profit.*

Of this difficulty, Nietzsche was not clearly aware. He must have realized that he had failed; he knew, in the end, that he had been preaching in the desert. In destroying duty, the good, in denouncing the emptiness and the life

of morality, he destroyed the effective value of language. Fame came late, and when it came, he had to shut up shop. No one came up to his expectations. It appears that now we must say: those who read or admire him flout him (he knew it, he says so). *Except myself?* (I simplify.) But to try, as he demanded, to follow him is to give oneself up to the same trial, to the same derangement.

This total liberation, as he defined it, of human possibility, of all possibility, is surely the only one not yet attempted (I repeat: in simplification, except by myself [?]). At this present point of history, I suppose that out of all the conceivable doctrines that have been preached, his teaching has, in some measure, had consequences. Nietzsche, in turn, conceived and preached a new doctrine; he went in search of disciples, he dreamed of founding an order; he hated what he got . . . common praise!

I now think it well to declare my confusion; I have tried to draw from within myself the consequences of a doctrine of clarity, attractive to me as light; my reward was anguish and the repeated impression of being overpowered.

3

I could not, at the point of death, in the least ever abandon the aspiration of which I have spoken. Or rather, this aspiration should not quit me; in dying I should not keep silence any the more (at least, I think not); I would wish for those dear to me that they persist or be stricken in turn.

There is in man's essence a violent movement, a will to autonomy, to freedom. Freedom can surely be understood in several ways, but who, nowadays, is going to be surprised that one might die for it? The difficulties Nietzsche encountered—casting off God and the good while fired, nonetheless, with the ardor of those who have died for God and the good—those difficulties I have, in turn, encountered. The disspiriting solitude he described has disheartened me. But the break with morality gives to the air we breathe a truth so great that I should prefer to live as a cripple rather than relapse into slavery.

4

I admit that now, at this time of writing, a moral quest which takes as its object that which is beyond good will, to begin with, miscarries. One has no assurance of passing the test. This admission, founded in painful experience, justifies my laughter at those who, whether by attacking or by adopting it, confuse Nietzsche's position with that of Hitler. "How high is my abode? Never have I counted the steps while climbing there: where all steps end, there is my roof and my abode."

Such is the expression of a demand focused on no distinguishable *good*, and which consumes him who lives that demand.

I wish to put an end to this vulgar misunderstanding. To see that thought

which has remained ludicrously neglected, and which, for those inspired by it, opens only upon the void, now reduced to the level of propaganda—to see this is horrendous. Nietzsche, according to some, has exerted the greatest influence on our time. This is doubtful; trifling with the laws of morality had begun well before he arrived. He had, above all, no political position. Irritated at being considered as belonging either on the Right or the Left, he refused, when solicited, to choose any party whatsoever. He loathed the idea of subordination to any cause.

His firm opinions on politics date from his break with Wagner, from his disillusionment with Wagner's display of German vulgarity; Wagner the socialist, francophobe, anti-Semite. . . . The spirit of the second Reich, above all in its pre-Hitlerian tendencies, epitomized in anti-Semitism, is what he despised most. Pan-German propaganda was revolting to him.

> And why should I not go all the way? I like to make a clean sweep of things. It is part of my ambition to be considered a despiser of the Germans par excellence. My mistrust of the German character I expressed even when I was twenty-six (in the third Untimely One, section 6)—the Germans seem impossible to me. When I imagine a type of man that antagonizes all my instincts, it always turns into a German.*

On the political level Nietzsche was, if the truth were known, the prophet, the harbinger of Germany's glaring misadventure. He was the first to denounce it. He loathed the closed, smug, hateful folly which, after 1870, took hold of Germany's mind, and which now exhausts itself in the Hitlerian madness. Never has an entire people been so led astray in mortal error, never so cruelly destined for the abyss. From this mass, doomed in advance, he detached himself, however, refusing to take part in the orgy of "self-satisfaction." His inflexibility had consequences. Germany decided to ignore a genius who would not flatter her. Only his reputation abroad belatedly attracted the attention of his countrymen. I know of no finer example of disregard between a man and his country: an entire nation remaining deaf to this voice for fifteen years—isn't that serious? Today, as we witness Germany's ruin, we must wonder that just as she was entering upon the path to disaster, the wisest and most ardent of Germans turned from her in a horror he was unable to restrain. We must, however, recognize on both sides, in both the attempt to flee and in aberration, the dead ends—disarming, is it not?

Nietzsche and Germany, mutually antagonistic, will, in the end, have had the same fate; they were both driven by mad hope, but in vain. Apart from

* Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York, Vintage, 1967, pp. 322–323.

this tragically vain drive, all between them is hatred and destruction. The resemblances are insignificant. Were it not for the habitual jeering at Nietzsche, the transforming of Nietzsche into what most depressed him (a rapid reading, a facile use, made without even rejecting positions inimical to him), his doctrine would be grasped for what it is: the fiercest of solvents. To make him the collaborator in causes devalorized by his thought is to trample upon it, to prove one's ignorance even as one pretends to care for that thought. He who would attempt, as I have done, to go to the limit of the possibility addressed by that doctrine becomes in turn the field of infinite contradiction. He sees, insofar as he would follow this teaching of paradox, that he can no longer embrace an already existent cause, that his solitude is entire.

5

In this hastily written book, I have not developed this point of view theoretically. An effort of that kind might even be vitiated in pedantry. Nietzsche wrote "with his blood"; to criticize or, better still, to test him, one must bleed in turn.

I wrote in the hope that my book would, if possible, appear on the occasion of the centenary of his birth (October 15, 1944). I wrote it between February and August, hoping that the Germans' flight would make publication possible. I began it by theoretically posing the problem (this is the second part, p. 39), but this short exposition is merely a narrative of life experience: an experience of twenty years, finally full of fear. I find it necessary to clear up a misunderstanding on this subject. Nietzsche is supposedly the philosopher of the "will to power"; he presented himself as such, and was received as such. I believe him to be rather the philosopher of evil. It is the charm, the *value* of evil in which, I think, he saw the sense of his intention in speaking of power. If this is not so, how else are we to explain this passage?

> *Spoiling the taste*
> A: "You keep spoiling the taste; that is what everybody says."
> B: "Certainly. I spoil the taste of his party for everyone—and no party forgives that."*

This reflection, one of many, is wholly irreconcilable with the practical, political conduct derived from the principle of the "will to power." Nietzsche had an aversion toward that which, in his lifetime, was disposed towards that will; without the taste, or the sense of the necessity for trampling accepted morality, he would no doubt have surrendered to the disgust inspired by the oppressive

* Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York, Random House, 1974, p. 201.

methods of the police. He justified his hatred of well-being as the very condition of freedom. Personally, although under no illusions as to the consequence of my attitude, I feel myself to be opposed, I *do* oppose, all forms of constraint. For evil is the opposite of constraint, which is exercised, theoretically, for good.

Evil is certainly not what hypocritical misunderstanding has tried to make of it; is it not really concrete freedom, the troubling break with taboo?

I find anarchism irritating, especially the vulgar doctrine which provides apology for the common criminal. The practices of the Gestapo, as clearly revealed, demonstrate the deep affinity between the police and the criminal mob; no one is more apt to torture, to serve the cruel apparatus of constraint than faithless, lawless men. I hate even those weak and confused minds for whom all rights are the privilege of the individual. The individual is limited not only by the rights of other individuals, but, more strictly, by those of the people. All men are bound to the people, all share their conquests or sufferings; all are of the fiber of the living mass (and no less alone in moments of gravity).

I believe that we freely overcome the major difficulties involved in the individual's opposition to the collective, of good and evil, and, in general, of those mad contradictions ordinarily escaped only by denial, by a stroke of chance, obtained in the boldness of play. The depression felt by life lived at the limits of the possible cannot exclude the passing of chance. What cannot be resolved by the wisdom of logic may perhaps be accomplished by a recklessness unbounded, unhesitating, which does not look back. That is why it is only *with my life* that I could write this projected book on Nietzsche in which I wanted if possible to solve the inner problem of morality.

Thus it is only in my life and through its paltry resources that I have found myself able to pursue the quest of that Grail which is chance. And chance has proved to correspond more closely than does power to Nietzsche's intentions. Only in "play" could possibility be deeply explored, with no prejudging of results, with the future alone enjoying the fullness of time, the power usually invested in the firm decision which is merely a form of the past. My book is partly the day-to-day account of the casting of dice, performed, really, with very modest resources. I offer my apology for what is, in this present year, the really comic aspect of private life brought into play by these pages of my diary. I do not suffer through them; I willingly laugh at myself and know of no better way to lose myself in immanence.

6

Although to be laughable and knowing myself to be so is to my taste, I cannot carry this to the point of misleading my reader. The problem essential to this (necessarily) disorderly book is that experienced by Nietzsche, the problem he aimed to solve in his work: that of the whole man.

"Most men," he wrote,

> represent pieces and fragments of man: one has to add them up for a complete man to appear. Whole ages, whole peoples are in this sense somewhat fragmentary; it is perhaps part of the economy of human evolution that man should evolve piece by piece. But that should not make one forget for a moment that the real issue is the production of the synthetic man, that lower men, the tremendous majority, are merely preludes and rehearsals out of whose medley the whole man appears here and there, the milestone man who indicates how humanity has advanced so far.*

But what does this fragmentation mean, or, better still, what is its cause, if not this need to act which specializes and limits the horizon to a given activity? Even if performed in the general interest (and this is rarely the case), activity which subordinates each instant of our lives to some precise result effaces the individual's total character. Whoever acts substitutes for that reason-for-being which he himself is as totality a given purpose of a particular sort in the least specious of cases, the greatness of a state, the triumph of a party. All action is specializing in that all action is limited. A plant is not usually active, is not specialized; it is specialized when swallowing flies!

I can exist totally only by transcending in some way the stage of action. Otherwise I become soldier, professional revolutionary, scholar—not "the whole man." Man's fragmentary state is, essentially, the same thing as the choice of an object. When a man limits his desires, for example, to the possession of power within the state, he acts, he knows what has to be done. It matters little if he fails; he profits from the outset. He inserts himself advantageously within time. Each of his moments becomes *useful.* It becomes possible for him to advance, with each passing instant, toward his chosen goal. His time becomes a progression toward this goal (that is what we usually call living). Similarly, if his object is his own salvation. Every action makes of man a fragmentary being. Only by refusing to act, or at least by denying the preeminence of the time reserved for action, can I maintain the quality of wholeness within myself.

Life remains whole only when not subordinated to a precise object which transcends it. Totality in this sense is essentially freedom. I cannot try to attain a wholeness simply by fighting for freedom. Even though that battle is preferable above all other action, I must not confuse my struggle with inner wholeness. It is the positive exercise of freedom, not the negative struggle against a particular form of oppression which has raised me above a mutilated existence. Each

* Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, New York, Vintage, 1968, pp. 470–471.

of us learns the bitter lesson that to fight for his freedom means, first of all, to alienate it.

As I have stated, the exercise of freedom has its place on the side of evil, while the fight for freedom is the conquest of *good.* Insofar as life is whole within me, I cannot, without dividing it, engage it in the service of a good, whether that of someone else, of God, or of my own. I cannot acquire, but only give, and give without reckoning, without a gift ever having, as its object, another's *interest.* (I see the good of another as a kind of decoy, for if I wish the good of another, it is in order to find my own, unless I identify it with my own. Totality within myself is this exuberance: it is only an empty yearning, the unhappy desire to be consumed for no reason other than desire itself—which it wholly is—to burn. Thus it is that desire for laughter of which I have spoken, that itch for pleasure, for saintliness, for death. . . . It has no further task to fulfill.)

7

A problem this strange can be understood only through experience. Its sense is easily contested; we can say that we're faced with an infinity of tasks. Precisely now, at the present time. No one dreams of denying the facts. It is still true that the question of man's totality—as inevitable end—now arises, and for two reasons. The first is negative: specialization is emphasized on all sides to an alarming degree. As to the second, tasks of an overwhelming nature are nevertheless in our time seen within their exact limits.

The horizon was once dark. The object of grave import was first the city's well-being, but the city was one with the gods. The next object was the soul's salvation. Action was aimed, on the one hand, at a limited, understandable goal and, on the other hand, at a totality defined as inaccessible down here (transcendent). Action under modern conditions has precise goals, entirely adequate to possibility; man's totality no longer has a mythical character. Clearly accessible, it is consigned to the accomplishment of tasks materially set and defined. It is distant (these tasks, in dominating the mind, fragment consciousness) but it is, nonetheless, discernible.

This totality, aborted within us by the need to work, is nonetheless provided in this work. Not as a goal (the goal is to change the world, to adjust it to man's measure) but as an ineluctable result. At the end of this change, the man-attached-to-the-task-of-changing-the-world, who is but a fragment of man, will himself be changed into whole-man. This result seems distant for humanity, but it is specified in the *defined* task; it is not transcendent, like the gods (the sacred city), or the soul's survival; it is immanent to the attached-man. . . . We can put off thinking of it; it is close nevertheless. Although men cannot be clearly aware of it in common existence, they are separated from this notion neither by being men (and not gods) nor by not being dead; it is a temporary necessity.

So must a man in battle "temporarily" think only of reducing the enemy.

There is surely no fierce combat which does not allow for the introduction, during moments of calm, of peaceful concerns. But immediately, these preoccupations seem minor. The tough-minded allow for these moments of relaxation and see to it that their gravity is dispelled. They are in one sense mistaken; is not gravity really the cause of bloodshed? But it makes no difference; it is necessary that the blood be serious, it is necessary that the free life, without struggle, unfragmented and detached from the necessity of action, appear in the guise of frivolity. In a world delivered from gods, from the concern with salvation, "tragedy" is a mere distraction—relaxation dominated by goals directed only toward activity.

This mode of entry—by the back door—into man's reason-for-being does have several advantages. The whole man is, in this way, revealed first in immanence, on the level of a frivolous life. We must laugh at him, even though he be tragic, deeply so. This perspective is liberating; the utmost simplicity, nudity are his. I feel sincere gratitude toward those whose posture of gravity and whose life, near to death, define me as a man of emptiness, a dreamer. (I sometimes take their part.) Essentially, man is only a being in whom transcendence is canceled, no longer separate from anything: part puppet, part god, part madman . . . this is transparency.

8

The accomplishment of my totality in consciousness requires my relation to the immense, comic, painful convulsion which is that of all men. This is a movement in all directions and all senses.* This incoherence is surely traversed by meaningful action in a definite direction, but it is precisely this that is responsible for humanity's fragmentary character in my own time (as in the past). Forgetting for a moment this defined sense, I see rather the Shakespearean, tragicomic sum of vagaries, madness, lies, pain, and laughter; I begin to understand totality, but as a rending movement; all existence is now beyond sense; it is man's conscious presence in the world insofar as he is nonsense, with nothing to do but be what he is, unable to transcend himself to take on sense or direction in action.

This awareness of totality is related to two antithetical uses of a single expression. *Non-sense* is usually a simple negation, it is what we say of an object that is to be eliminated. The intent which rejects that which is lacking in sense (or direction) is really the rejection of being whole; it is insofar as we reject it that we remain unaware of the totality of being with ourselves. But if I say *non-*

* Bataille's use of the word *sens*, as meaning both "direction" and "sense," establishes the basis for discourse on sense and non-sense. —trans.

sense while searching, on the contrary, for an object free of sense, I deny nothing, I utter the affirmation in which *all of life* is finally revealed in consciousness.

The tending toward this consciousness of a totality, toward this total amity of man with himself is quite correctly held to be fundamentally lacking in gravity. In following this path, I become absurd. I take on the inconsistency of all men, considered generally, bracketing that which leads to major changes. I would not account in this way for Nietzsche's sickness (insofar as it seems to have been of somatic origin); nevertheless it is true that the movement toward wholeness begins as madness. I cast off good, I cast off reason (sense), I open beneath my feet the abyss from which action and its consequent judgments have separated me. At the very least the consciousness of totality begins in despair and inner crisis. When I abandon the framework of action, my perfect nakedness is revealed to me. I am without recourse in the world, without support, I collapse. There is no possible outcome other than an endless incoherence in which chance is my only guide.

9

An experience so disarming is obviously to be made only when all others have been tried and completed, when all possibilities have been exhausted. It is, consequently, only in extremis that it can become the action of humanity as a whole. It is, in our time, accessible to only a very isolated individual, through mental disorder conjoined with unquestionable vigor. He can, if chance is with him, discern in incoherence an unforeseen balance. Since this divine state of balance expresses in the bold simplicity of its ceaseless play the discordance, the imbalance of the dancing equilibrist, I take it to be inaccessible to the "will to power." In my understanding, the "will to power," considered as a goal, means a return to the past. In following it, I should be returning to the bondage of fragmentation, accepting once again duty and the good, be dominated by power. Divine exuberance, the lightness expressed in Zarathustra's laughter and his dance, would be lost; in place of the joy in suspension over the abyss, I should be inseparably bound by gravity, by the servility of strength through joy.

If we set aside the "will to power," the destiny conferred by Nietzsche upon man places him beyond anguish; no return to the past is possible, and that is the source of the doctrine's deep inviability. In the notes to *The Will to Power*, projected action, the temptation of formulation of goals and politics merely end in a labyrinth. The last completed text, *Ecce Homo*, declares the absence of goal, the author's insubordination to plan of any kind. Nietzsche's work, seen from the perspective of action, is an abortion—a strongly defensible one; his life is a failed life, like that which attempts to put his writing into action.

10

Let no one doubt for an instant! One has truly not heard a single word of Nietzsche's unless one has lived this signal dissolution in totality; without it, this philosophy is a mere labyrinth of contradictions, and worse; the pretext for lying by omission (if, like the fascists, one isolates passages for purposes which negate the rest of the work). I wish at this point to be particularly attended to. The foregoing criticism is the masked form of approval. It is a justification of that definition of the whole man: "the man whose life is an unmotivated feast"; it celebrates, in every sense of the word, a laughter, a dance, an orgy which knows no subordination, a sacrifice heedless of purpose, material or moral.

The foregoing introduces the necessity of dissociation. Extreme states of being, whether individual or collective, were once purposefully motivated. Some of those purposes no longer have meaning (expiation, salvation). The well-being of communities is no longer sought through means of doubtful effectiveness, but directly, through action. Under these conditions, extreme states of being fell into the domain of the arts, and not without a certain disadvantage. Literature (fiction) took the place of what had formerly been the spiritual life; poetry (the disorder of words) that of real states of trance. Art constituted a small free domain, outside action: to gain freedom it had to renounce the real world. This is a heavy price to pay, and most writers dream of recovering that lost reality. They must then pay in another sense, by renouncing freedom in the service of propaganda. The artist who restricts himself to fiction knows that he is not a whole man, but the same is true of the writer of propaganda. The domain of the arts does, in a sense, embrace totality, which nevertheless escapes it.

Nietzsche is far from having resolved the difficulty. Zarathustra is also a poet, and a literary fiction at that! Only he refused ever to accept. Praise exasperated him. He thrashed about in all directions, seeking a way out. He never lost that Ariadne's thread which means *having no goal* to serve, no cause; he knew that a cause clips one's *wings.* But, on the other hand, lack of a cause casts one out into solitude; it means the sickness of the desert, a cry dying away in a vast silence. . . .

The understanding which I solicit leads surely to the same point of no exit; it implies the same fervent torture. I believe that we must, in this sense, reverse the idea of the Eternal Return. Our anguish derives, not from the promise of infinite repetition, but from the following: the moments grasped within the immanence of return suddenly appear as ends. Remember that *in all systems* those instants are considered and assigned as means: morality always says: "let every instant of your life be *motivated.*" The Return *de-motivates* the instant, frees life from purpose and is thereby, first of all, its downfall. The Return is the whole man's dramatic mode and his mask; it is the desert of a man whose every instant is henceforward unmotivated.

There is no point in seeking an expedient; one must choose at last between

the desert and a mutilation. Affliction cannot be disposed of like a package. Suspended in a void, my extreme moments are followed by depression wholly unrelieved by hope. When I nevertheless arrive at a clear awareness of what is thus lived, I cannot look for an exit where none exists. (I have therefore insisted on my criticism.) How can we not draw the consequences of the purposelessness inherent in Nietzsche's desire? Chance—and the quest of chance—represents inexorably the sole remaining recourse (whose vicissitudes are described in this book).

If it is true that the man of action cannot, in the generally understood sense, be a whole man, the whole man does retain a possibility of action. On condition that action is reduced to principles and to goals which are his own (in a word, to reason). The whole man cannot be transcended (dominated) by action; he would lose his totality. He cannot, on the other hand, transcend action (subordinate it to his purpose); he thereby defines himself as a motive, entering and being annihilated in the machinery of motivation. We must distinguish between the world of motives, in which each thing has sense (rational) and the world of non-sense (free of all sense). Each of us belongs partly to one, partly to the other. We can distinguish clearly and consciously that which is bound only in ignorance. Reason can, in my view, be limited only by herself. If we act, we wander beyond the motives of equity and the rational action. Between these two domains, there is only one acceptable relation: action must be rationally limited by a principle of freedom.*

The rest is silence.

1949

* The share of fire, of madness, of the whole man—the rejected share—accorded (conceded from without) by reason, in line with liberal and reasonable norms. This means the condemnation of capitalism as an irrational mode of activity. As soon as the whole man (his irrationality) sees himself as outside of action, when he recognizes all possibilities of transcendence as traps and as loss of his totality, we give up irrational domination (feudal, capitalist) in the sphere of action. Nietzsche no doubt foresaw the necessity of its abandon without discerning the cause. The whole man becomes possible only if he refrains from positing himself as the end or object of others; he enslaves himself if he goes past those limits, restricting himself to the limits of feudalism or of the bourgeoisie, short of freedom. Nietzsche, it is true, still insisted on social transcendence, on hierarchy. To say that there is nothing sacred in immanence means the following: that which was sacred must no longer serve. The advent of freedom means the advent of laughter: "To witness the fall of tragic natures and to be able to laugh. . . ." (Would we dare to apply this proposition to current events? instead of committing ourselves to new moral transcendences. . . .) In freedom, abandon, the immanence of laughter, Nietzsche did away in advance with that which still linked him (his youthful immoralism) to vulgar forms of transcendence—which are forms of enslaved freedom. The bias in favor of evil is that of freedom, "the freedom from all constraint."

Van Gogh as Prometheus

How is it that towering figures, reassuring in their power of persuasion, emerge among us? How is it that within the chaos of infinite possibility certain forms take shape, radiating a sudden brilliance, a force of conviction that excludes doubt? This would seem to happen independently of the crowd. It is quite generally agreed that once one stops to linger in contemplation of a painting, its significance in no way depends upon anyone else's assent.

This view stands, of course, as a denial of everything that obviously transpires in front of canvases placed on exhibition; the visitor goes not in search of his own pleasure, but rather the judgments expected of him by others. There is, however, little point in stressing the poverty of most viewers and readers. Beyond the absurd limits of present custom and even through the rash confusion that surrounds the paintings and the name of Van Gogh, a world can open—a world in which one no longer spitefully waves the crowd aside, but our own world, the world in which, at the arrival of spring, a human being discards, with a joyous gesture, his heavy, musty winter coat.

Such a person, coatless, drifting with the crowd—more in innocence than in contempt—cannot look without terror upon the tragic canvases as so many painful signs, as the perceptible trace of Vincent Van Gogh's existence. That person may, however, then feel the greatness that he represents, not in himself alone: he stumbles still at every moment under the weight of shared misery—not in himself alone, but insofar as he is, in his nakedness, the bearer of untold hopes for all those who desire life and who desire, as well, to rid the earth, if necessary, of the power of that which bears no resemblance to him. Imbued with this wholly future greatness, the terror felt by such a man would become laughable—laughable, even, the ear, the brothel, and "Vincent's" suicide; did he not make human tragedy the sole object of his entire life, whether in cries, laughter, love, or even struggle?

He must perforce marvel to the point of laughter at that powerful magic for which savages would, no doubt, require an entire drunken crowd, sustained clamor, and the beating of many drums. For it was no mere bloody ear that Van Gogh detached from his own head bearing it off to that "House" (the

troubling, crude, and childish image of the world we represent to others). Van Gogh, who decided by 1882 that it was better to be Prometheus than Jupiter, tore from within himself rather than an ear, nothing less than a SUN.

Above all, human existence requires stability, the permanence of things. The result is an ambivalence with respect to all great and violent expenditure of strength; such expenditure, whether in nature or in man, represents the strongest possible threat. The feelings of admiration and of ecstasy induced by them thus mean that we are concerned to admire them from afar. The sun corresponds most conveniently to that prudent concern. It is all *radiance*, gigantic loss of heat and of light, *flame*, *explosion*; but remote from men, who can enjoy in safety and quiet the fruits of this great cataclysm. To the earth belongs the solidity which sustains houses of stone and the steps of men (at least on its surface, for buried within the depths of the earth is the incandescence of lava).

Given the forgoing, it must be said that after the night of December '88, when, in the house to which it came, his ear met a fate which remains unknown (one can only dimly imagine the laughter and discomfort which preceded some unknown decision), Van Gogh began to give to the sun a meaning which it had not yet had. He did not introduce it into his canvases as part of a decor, but rather like the sorcerer whose dance slowly rouses the crowd, transporting it in its movement. At that moment all of his painting finally became *radiation*, *explosion*, *flame*, and himself, lost in ecstasy before a source of *radiant* life, *exploding*, *inflamed*. When this solar dance began, all at once nature itself was shaken, plants burst into flame, and the earth rippled like a swift sea, or burst; of the stability at the foundation of things nothing remained. Death appeared in a sort of transparency, like the sun through the blood of a living hand, in the interstices of the bones outlined in the darkness. The flowers, bright or faded, the face of depressingly haggard radiance, the Van Gogh "sunflower"—disquiet? domination?—put an end to all the power of immutable law, of foundations, of all that confers on (many) faces their repugnant aspect of defensive closure.

This singular election of the sun must not, however, induce absurd error; Van Gogh's canvases do not—any more than Prometheus's flight—form a tribute to the remote sovereign of the sky, and the sun is dominant insofar as it is captured. Far from recognizing the *distant* power of the heavenly cataclysm (as though only an extension of its monotonous surface, safe from change, had been required), the earth, like a daughter suddenly dazzled and perverted by her father's debauchery, in turn luxuriates in cataclysm, in explosive loss and brilliance.

It is this that accounts for the great, festive quality of Van Gogh's painting. This painter, more than any other, had that sense of flowers which also represent, on earth, intoxication, joyous perversion—flowers which burst, beam, and dart their flaming heads into the very rays of that sun which will wither them. There is in this deep birth such disturbance that it induces laughter; how can we ignore that chain of knots which so surely links ear, asylum, sun, the

feast, and death? With the stroke of a razor Van Gogh cut off his ear; he then brought it to a brothel he knew. Madness incited him, as a violent dance sustains a shared ecstasy. He painted his finest canvases. He remained for a while confined within an asylum, and a year and a half after cutting off his ear, he killed himself.

When all has happened thus, what meaning remains for art or criticism? Can we even maintain that in these conditions, art alone will explain the sound of crowds within the exhibition halls? Vincent Van Gogh belongs not to art history, but to the bloody myth of our existence as humans. He is of that rare company who, in a world spellbound by stability, by sleep, suddenly reached the terrible "boiling point" without which all that claims to endure becomes insipid, intolerable, declines. For this "boiling point" has meaning not only for him who attains it, but for *all*, even though *all* may *not yet* perceive that which binds man's savage destiny to *radiance*, to *explosion*, to *flame*, and only thereby to power.

1937

Sacrifice

To those who have followed me thus far I owe a full explanation. I offer an inhuman image of man, and I know that the air about me grows irrespirable. In saying that the bloody fantasies of sacrifice had meaning, I have justified our Molochs at their darkest. Although my voice does blend with those of untold choirs throughout time, it has, I am certain, a hostile ring. No one, of course, is going to claim that I wish to start new cycles of holocaust; I am only supplying the meaning of ancient customs. The cruelties of the past filled needs which we can satisfy in ways other than those of savages. I do, however, say that life is worth the gift of the self, and that the gift leads to mortal anguish. I am of that number who pledge men to something other than a constant increase of production, and who provoke men to sacred horror. And this demand, in conflict with common sense, must be justified by something more than vague notions about the stars.

And yet I can reverse the positions! Although possibly wanting in common sense, I can, in turn, when called to account, question "the quiet, reasonable man." If I am mad, I am, nevertheless, through my choice of direction, in agreement with those who once did offer sacrifice. Were I alone, I should be the first to offer explanation. But the fathers of "the quiet man" did offer sacrifice. And I have just remarked of these massacres of men and beasts—which did take place—that they are the enigma he must solve, if he has the will to survive, if he wishes to remain as he is: a quiet, reasonable man! How was it that everywhere men found themselves, with no prior mutual agreement, in accord on an enigmatic act, they all felt the need or the obligation to put living beings ritually to death?

"The quiet man," before replying, has only to hear me out. He must feel the weight of this enigma—as strongly as I do. He must recognize, with me, that he has a link with death, tragic terror, and sacred ecstasy; he must admit that for want of an answer, men have remained ignorant of *what they are.*

We must not linger over answers already received. The ancients thought that the divine world's good will could be acquired by payment or presents; it was from them that the Christians derived this view. Sir James Frazer, an

Oxford don, developed the idea of those who saw in the immolations a way of obtaining abundant harvests.* The French sociologists saw that the sacrificial rites formed a social link and founded communal unity among men. These explanations accounted for the effects of sacrifice; they do not tell us what forced men to kill their own kind in religious ceremonies. The latter, it must be said, precisely situate the enigma, which is the key to all human existence.

All other subsidiary explanation which reduces the why of things to contingency must be ignored. The question of sacrifice must be stated as *the ultimate question.* Correlatively, any attempt to answer *the ultimate question* must obviously resolve, as well, the enigma of sacrifice. Discourse on being, metaphysics, is meaningless if it ignores life's necessary game with death.

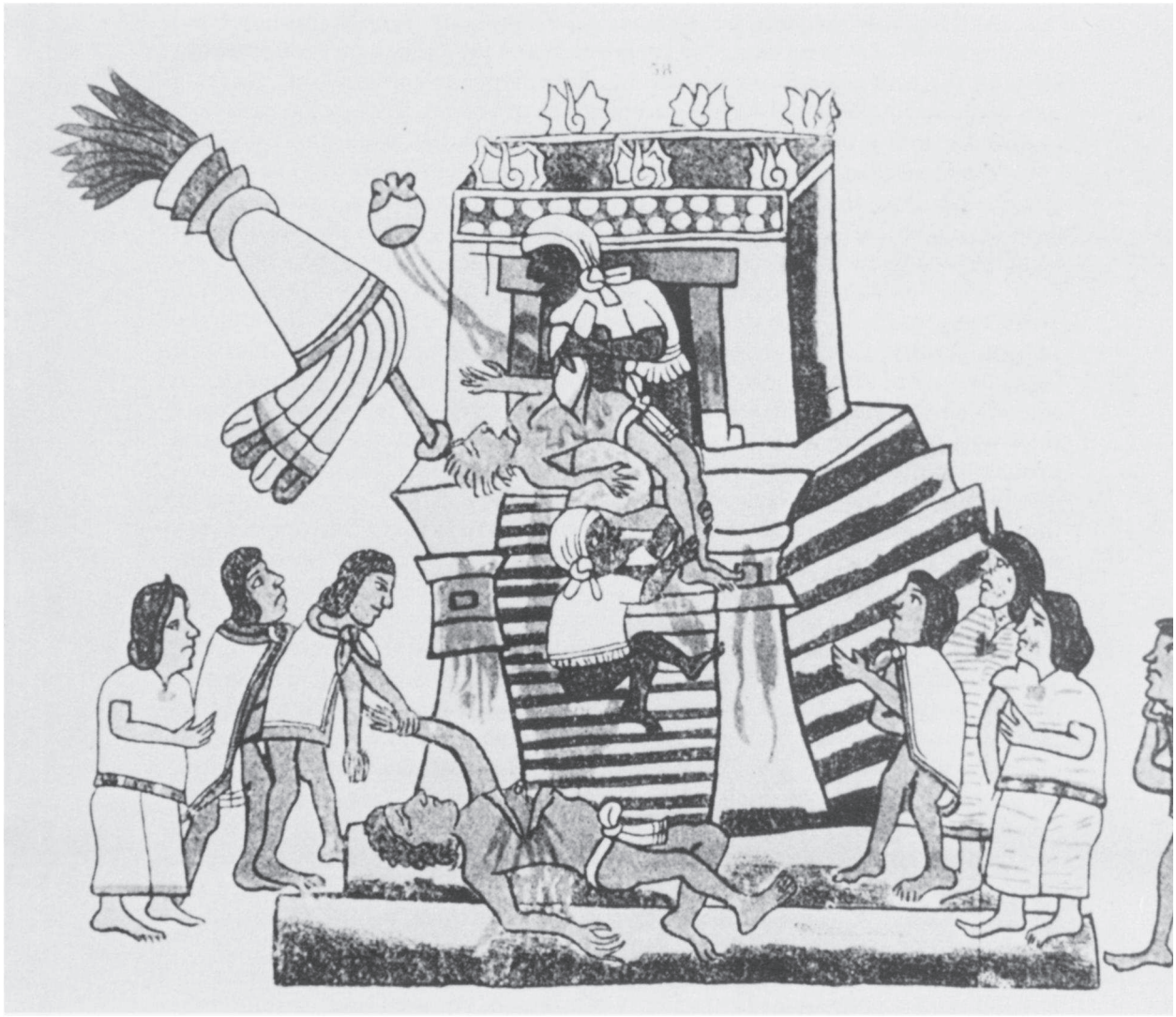
The problem of the ritual killing of live beings must be related to that of their structure. The time has come to get to the bottom of things, without fear of difficulty or discouragement. I deliberately adopt as my point of departure the conceptions formed by "French sociology." French sociology, which stresses the importance of the study and interpretation of sacrifice, relates that work to the conception of the "social being." This conception is generally startling, but it is readily acceptable once we agree that this being is composite. A clan, a city, a state are like persons, beings in possession of a single consciousness. The idea of a "collective consciousness" runs counter to the principles of a unified psychological entity. But those principles are not easily defensible. Consciousness is surely a mere field of concentration, the ill-defined field of a concentration which is never complete, never closed; it is merely a gathering of reflections in life's multiple mirrors.

Or, more precisely still, it appears as a multiple action, each *reflection* generated when this reflection, this game of mirrors, passes from one point to another, from one man to another, or from one sensitive cell to another. The point of arrest in this game can never be grasped; there is constant movement, activity, passage. Being, in man's definition and as instantiated by him, is never present in the fashion of a pebble in the river, but rather as the flow of water or that of electric current. If there does exist some unity within presence, it is that of eddies, of circuits which tend toward stability and closure.

An inner change of state is easily grasped when I communicate with another—when I talk or laugh, or lose myself within some turbulent group. And any man embracing the woman he loves knows it. This change is caused by the passage of a live current from one to the other, but in most cases these passages occur without forming stable circuits, such as a clan, city, or state. Now, we can speak of existence only when subsistence over time is assured, as in the case

* This bias does not wholly deprive *The Golden Bough* of all significance. This book, in its demonstration of the richness, amplitude, and universality of sacrifice, has the merit of linking them to the rhythm of the seasons.

Aztec sacrifice. Codex Magliabecchi.



of a social formation which unites numerous individuals (in approximately the same way as an animal is a union of numerous cells).

These considerations, based on ideas made familiar by French sociology, I intend to develop so as to bring into play the ultimate question of existence. Sociologists relate them to the analysis of religious phenomena externally perceived; they are unable to orchestrate the themes thereby introduced.

If, however, we follow changing states of existence, if we watch the groups which form these states compose and then dissolve, we then discover the path traced by those religious acts which culminate in the moment of sacrifice.

And not only the path, but that necessity of passing through this point and not another. There is no cause for surprise. When man's meditation upon himself and the universe attains its extreme limit, it recovers the blind, unerring gait of those undistracted by the complexities of reason. It is in the satiety of knowledge that a man comes to recognize himself in his distant ancestors.

We must take our stand on the fact that all existence known to us is composite. We do, when necessary, speak of elementary particles (electrons or others), but we can say little of their nature; the phenomena explained by them sometimes suggest the effect of corpuscles or of clearly distinct particles of energy, sometimes that of continuous, wavelike movements. The description of elementary particles appears even more obscure if we consider their tenuousness of identity. Elements must, it seems, attain a high degree of complexity if we are to say of any of them: "this one, not that other one, which although absolutely similar, is not the same." Of a particular electron, we can say no more than of a particular wave. Insects, as isolated units, obey the law of general probability. Let us suppose we have two similar flies in a cage bisected by a mobile partition—one slightly spotted with blue, the other with green. Assuming that no factor of attraction draws the flies into a given part of the cage, when one closes the dividing partition, four distributions are equally possible. The two flies will both be on the left, or on the right; or the green will be on the left, with the blue on the right. Lastly, the blue may go to the left, the green to the right. Electrons are not subject to the same law. In an equivalent experiment, all other things being equal, three positions only are possible: two electrons on the left, or two on the right, or one to the left while the other is to the right. This means that there exists no logically distinguishable difference between the two cases: on the one hand, electron A to the right, with electron B to the left, and, on the other hand, A to the left and B to the right. This absence of difference means that A cannot really be distinguished from B, any more than two waves can be distinguished from each other. Wave B will, a few instants after the passage of wave A, raise the same mass of water. Is it wave B which retains the identity of wave A at the same point, or does this identity belong to the movement of that wave which follows?

There is no precise and meaningful answer to this question. But then the possibility of a permanent confusion is eliminated. An organism, a solid frag-

ment, represents so many elements which can be isolated once and for all: an electron, a wave, can, on the other hand, be isolated, but within a given time—not once and for all, but once only, for this given period of time, and no other. On this side the reign of separation, of isolation, develops and on the other, the reign of communion, of fusion, in which elements are not separated except in a fleeting appearance. Man's path to fundamental truth is set by a law similar to that which regulates probability in the position of electrons. The imprisonment in isolation completed by man's rigorous reflection (as when he declares, *I think, therefore I am*, thereby relating the *I* to thought as to its elementary particle) is not the law of all nature, but only of a limited aspect of that nature.

Furthermore!

It appears that within the corpuscular realm the aspect of communion prevails over the weakly established isolation of corpuscles. In the world of solids and of stable organic unities within which human thought has taken shape, the contrary is entirely the case; activities are, for the most part, traceable to clearly distinct causal centers (persons and/or forces). But just as in a world of limitless communication the separation of elements is already marked, so this world, compartmentalized by individuals, is unceasingly driven by the concern with maintaining those compartments and by a contrary concern with communication; each of us must constantly surrender to that loss of self, partial or total, which is communication with others. A first opposition between two worlds (a world of light and electric force, a world of men and solids) is complicated by the second opposition which each of us carries within him. But for us within a world of men and solids, the opposition is not abstract, we live it; it is the combat of our life and our death, prodigality and greed, the conquest and gift of the self.*

Each of us is as if sunken in narrow isolation. Nothing counts for us but ourselves. What we sense as coming from the exterior is often reduced to the fortunate or unfortunate impression received. Death is the sole radical limit of

* On principle, considerations based on scientific data, far from offering any foundation for the intellect, serve principally to provide more space for its nomadic mobility. If thought completes the circle, returning to the elements of its origins, it has, at best, a chance of momentary escape from the particularities which distance it from the nakedness of its object. When we tamper with "scientific data," it goes without saying that thought, starting from a distorted element, cannot, on its own, recover naked contact with the object in its grip. It is only insofar as thought itself distorts all objects that this operation nevertheless takes on full meaning. Thought can certainly recover nakedness, but it is primarily the mere clothing with which we cover objects. Thought's development and recovery therefore presuppose that having clothed (the object) it will then strip it. If by luck, "scientific data" does strip off and tear the fabric responsible for this object's deceptive aspect, it can then be used for ends which are not proper to it, but which have been long and steadily pursued: the destruction of that which separates man from an outer world which is his truth, the thought of his object. Recourse to science, to its discoveries, represents a mere detour within this enterprise. If one day this detour ceased to be negotiable—if human science, ever unstable, were to withdraw the possibilities presented throughout the course of its variations—this would be of slight importance.

this basic solitude; it is the only serious denial of illusion, for if I die, the world is no longer reducible to my spirit which reflects it. Everything has given me to understand that I alone mattered. But death warns me that this is a lie. For I count for nothing; it is the world only which matters. I matter insofar as I am in the world, not as a stranger in closure and self-isolation, but as a particle of energy blending into the light. Thus I see that if I am to live, it is on the following tragic condition: that, relinquishing this life of mine, I give myself to that which knows nothing of me, to that which is exterior to myself. At the same time, though, I feel the absurdity of a loss which, considered from my position of inevitable solitude, amounts to the annihilation of the entire universe.

Thus each man must consider both confining himself in isolation and escaping from that prison. He sees, on one side, that which is foundation, that without which nothing would exist, a particular existence, selfish and empty. He sees, on the other, a world whose splendor is that of communicating elements that fuse with each other like the flames of a hearth or the waves of the sea. Deep within him lurks a steadfast awareness: outside is the precipitation of blind movement and life's excess. Between these irreconcilable poles a man is necessarily torn, since he cannot decide for either direction. He can renounce neither his isolated existence nor the exuberance of a world which cares nothing for that existence and is prepared to annihilate him. A daily dispute between tiny enclosure and free space goes on: first of all, between others and one's self, between generosity and greed. But to get from inside to outside, man must cross through that narrow passage whose name is anguish.

The sphere of isolation is comparable to a prison which protects from outside danger even while it confines. This prison is not entirely closed; a narrow conduit has been contrived, hidden in the wall. But the conduit is not really a way out; it is almost impassable. The prisoner who tries to enter is cruelly wounded; outside, armed sentinels are on watch and ready for the kill; the storm rages. The bottleneck connecting the inner being with free space is, of course, rarely death itself, but always its adumbration or its image, its beginning. That which will later appear as life's decisive victor appears first as threatening horror to this isolated being who, in the depths of his isolation, believed himself to be the necessary condition of all that is.

Life in communication, not in isolation

Internally, what am I? The activity uniting the many elements of which I am composed, the continuous inner communication of these elements. My organic life is one of contagions of energy, of movement, or of heat. It cannot be localized at a given point; it is produced by rapid passage from one point to another (or from multiple points to others as numerous), just as within a network of electric forces. As soon as I try to grasp my substance, I sense only a sliding.

If I now consider my whole life, I see that it is not limited to this inner mo-

bility. Its traversing currents flow not only inside but outside as well; it is also open to forces directed toward it, coming from other beings. I can view this life of mine as a relatively stable vortex; this vortex constantly clashes with others like it, which modify its movement, as it modifies that of others. The exchange of force or light between myself and others matters no less (it ultimately matters more) than the inner convulsion of existence. Speech, movement, music, symbols, rites, gesture, and attitudes are so many paths for this contagion among individuals. An isolated person does not count (his point of view is not admissible) beside movements which become meaningful for the many. Personally, I am as nothing compared to the book I write; if the book communicates that which consumed me, I will have lived in order to write it. But the book itself, if restricted to an isolated domain, such as politics, science, or art, is a small matter. Communication can bring into play all of life, and in the face of a possibility of that dimension, others, of a minor sort, pale.

If we consider, among other types of communication, those which form relations between no more than two individuals, and in particular the love of Isolde and Tristan, each of the two lovers is likely to seem no more significant than any others, when viewed outside the passion which binds them together. It is their love, not their identities, from which their very names derive their power. This intercommunication of their entire beings would, nonetheless, carry less meaning for us if we did not perceive that through it their entire lives were thereby at stake, that they were consumed unto death. Communication matters less insofar as it is limited, and even that of Tristan and Isolde, convulsive though it was, appears narrow when compared to the ecstasy of the solitary individual or to the passions which unite whole peoples.

Each of us, in the limitless movement of all worlds, is a mere point of arrest, which allows for rebound. Our isolation allows for arrest, but the arrest finds meaning only in the increased intensity of resumed movement. Separate existence is merely the condition of retarded but explosive communication. Were there only unimpeded communication, were there no eddies hindering and slowing the swift currents, that multiple retreat into the self which *is* our consciousness would not be possible. This relatively stable order of things, the seemingly ultimate construction of isolation, is essential in the formation of the reflective consciousness. Movement itself can be reflected only if the mirror is relatively fixed. Error begins when this reflecting consciousness takes seriously the small interval of rest granted by circumstance. This interval is merely an interval for recharging. Consciousness itself has meaning only when communicated. The intensity of communication's movement when recommenced is due not only to the explosive form imposed by the temporary obstacle of isolation: arrest confers upon communication the deep meaning of the anguished consciousness of a solitary man. We find, in moments of communication which unite us with our own kind, a slow, conscious, and mortal anguish. They are

most acute when communication brings all of existence into play, when to them are linked the life of a people and the presence of the universe.

Laughter

There is a major sort of communication by which everything is violently called into question. Only when death is at stake does life seem to reach the extreme incandescence of light. Nevertheless the strict and ever-tense search for such moments leads to heaviness of spirit. Insistence is likely to go contrary to the assuaging need to lose one's self; when my life is dominated by an obsessive concern with ecstasy, I may wonder if that ecstasy, attainable only through loss of self, is not the object of my will to possess it as one possesses a power which deserves admiration. When the need to communicate through loss of self is reduced to that of possessing more, then we realize that nothing sublime can exist in man without its necessarily evoking laughter. Now, of all the sorts of intense communication, none is more common than the laughter which stirs us in (each other's) company. In our laughter, our lives are quite constantly released in a facile form of communication—and this despite the possibly isolating effect of our concern with sublime forms of communication.

If I am to find an answer to the enigma of sacrifice, I must be deliberate and shrewd. But I know and have never for an instant doubted that an enigma as dangerous as this one lies outside the scope of academic method; the sacred mysteries must be approached with craft, with a show of boldness and transgressive power. The enigma's answer must be formulated on a level equal to that of its celebrants' performance. It is my wish that it become part of the history of sacrifice, not of science. This general wish may account for my proposing to solve the enigma—in laughter. In so saying, I merely introduce a second enigma: what passes within those who burst into laughter upon seeing a fellow man take a fall? Can it be that their neighbor's misfortune brings them such joy?

In the second enigma, I think, the terms of the first are shifted. The man who unwittingly falls is substituting for the victim who is put to death, and the shared joy of laughter is that of sacred communication. While we have never known the Mexican's emotion in the presence of a man's death at the hands of a priest, we have all laughed at the sight of a fellow man's fall. Even though we were told, as children, that "there is nothing to laugh at," we nonetheless burst into laughter. We had nothing more serious to say of the reasons for our joy than the Mexican had of his own satisfaction. The only element of clarity was the communicable spell experienced. We laughed as one—a full, remorseless laughter—in which, together, we penetrated into the secret places of things. The joy of laughter became one with the joy of living. The spellbinding spark of roaring laughter came to mean, in a way that was crucial, a kind of dawn, a strange promise of glory. We must take care always to articulate the radiance discovered in laughter; that intoxication opens a window of light which gives

onto a world of flagrant joy. Actually, the brilliance of this world is such that men swiftly avert their eyes. He who wishes to keep his attention focused upon this sliding, dizzying point needs great strength. In learned treatises, laughter is considered a mechanism. Tired scholars endlessly dismantle its minute gear system, as if laughter were really foreign to them; they avoid the immediate revelation of the nature of things and of their own lives in their own laughter.

The gates of laughter are constantly opening within the spirit of the elderly scholar as in that of the naive child. Even though laughter does grow tired and worn (as man sours and, in bitterness, withdraws into himself), it brings, to those who do laugh, a movement of communion so sudden that they stand abashed. This radiant spell of laughter in which we lose ourselves has no exact location; it has no precise point of departure, no definite direction, but when it occurs, the separation of the withdrawn individual from a world of sudden flashing movement instantly ceases. An individual's fall has only to reveal the illusory nature of stability, and the witnesses of that fall pass, with him, from a world in which all is stable to one of slips and slides. Barriers collapse, and the convulsive moments of those laughing break free and reverberate in unison. Not only does each man participate in the limitless streaming of the universe but his laughter mixes with that of others, so that a room will contain not several laughs, but a single wave of hilarity. The icy solitude of each laughing individual is, as it were, refined; all lives are waters flowing into a torrent.

So strong, however, is the transport of this community that the most human among them could not, of his own will, act in a manner more paradoxical or profound. All are aware that their condition is, in its strangest and most exciting aspect, linked to the unfortunate fall. To all these men, this fall is as a radiant divinity, transporting, and adored unquestioningly in an expressible intimacy. Other than that achieved by a man and a woman alone together, there exists no other form of harmony so visibly authentic. Even he who arrives late, not having seen the fall, succumbs to the contagion! Laughter has the quality of provoking laughter. Hilarity discloses the fall—which has just occurred—or some equivalent cause of joy, the certain presence of prospects of the spirit's release. This invitation is difficult to resist. Isolation is always the effect of gloom, of fatigue, or heaviness; when invited to join in the "mad dance of release," the spirit rushes in heedlessly.

When I suddenly encounter someone whom I know but rarely see, we laugh in mutual recognition, in sudden release from solitude and in communication, although remaining isolated amidst those unfamiliar to us, with whom we have no interchange. When, as a child, my belly was tickled, the tickling imparted sudden, involuntary movements to that belly, which, as they escaped, made me laugh out loud. I was released from my withdrawal as they were released from me. My tickler and I entered into a shared convulsion at that moment when the little belly had escaped the stability I believed in. The laughter increased if the tickling itself did, to the point of hurting, and the closer I came

to shouting in distress, the more I laughed. In laughter, the moment of release lies not so much in its beginning as in its increase to the point of a wonderful intensity. At that moment, the distress which usually paralyzes action increases the violence of an excitement which can no longer be stopped. The laughter of recognition never rebounds, for an agreeable encounter has little chance of developing the open discomfort which makes the laughter increase. Anguish is not the cause of the laugh. If I laugh upon meeting a friend, it is, on the contrary, because a tension close to anguish has arisen; one sometimes laughs quite animatedly if the meeting occurs following real anguish, if a long-threatened danger has been averted (in which case the encounter does not even have to be surprising). Obviously, anguish does not release laughter, but anguish in some form is necessary: *when anguish arises, then laughter begins.*

"Procedures" for dispelling anguish do not complicate laughter. If, in a car, I laugh on reaching maximum speed, it is because within me the pleasure of going fast is far greater than the valid anxiety about danger (I would not be laughing if I were more accustomed to speed or if wholly closed to fear). I can laugh a lot, if it is not my fear that is involved, but that of someone else, such as a pretentious old lady, wholly antithetical to that world of intense movement which is to my taste. The more she protests, the faster the car is driven. The anguish at stake is not mine, but that of another; I might feel it, but given my hostility, I do not. Under ordinary conditions an imperceptible anguish can be dispelled by pleasure. Children laugh heartily at the fall of someone they fear—when stealing apples, they will laugh at the owner shouting in pursuit of them. What is dispelled is the possibility of anguish, rather than a real, true experience of it. Still, were they not aware of the fall as downfall, children would not laugh. The law of coincidence (already discussed in the context of the gift of life) holds true for laughter.

The loss, the downfall does not usually elicit laughter from the individual who falls; he gains nothing by it. The child who witnesses a fall, on the other hand, gains in seeing himself as superior, for he remains upright. This helps to dispel that anguish which might make him see a resemblance between the falling man and himself, and that he himself might fall. Indifference or hostility are required (or an evident absence of gravity in the fall). In the consent to loss, as in the loss itself, a given proportion of profit to loss must be observed. If loss be excessive or profit either nonexistent or too small, anguish is not dispelled; acceptance of loss is then impossible. A young Englishwoman greeted with pathological laughter news of the death of persons she had known. This behavior—abnormal in view of her good breeding and pleasant disposition—clearly underscores that which is revealed in our laughter; a fundamental accord between our joy and an impulse to self-destruction. The difficulty of that accord, however, is also underscored.

This young woman's laughter was, I should think, directed less at the deaths as announced than at the anguish caused by the idea that she must, at

all costs, stop laughing when she was utterly unable to do so. In the same way an actor can, against his will, begin laughing in a way that is intolerable on stage. This second anguish, which in stifling laughter intensifies it, is stronger than the first. It may suffice that the young woman at first not wholly realize the overwhelming meaning of death. On later perceiving it, she has begun to laugh, and a laugh already begun has, even more than a beginning laugh, the power to dispel anguish. If it is true that laughter is an impulse by which anguish is dispelled, it will continue or increase, if the reasons for suppression do not cease (or increase); for the impulse must constantly dispel the unceasing return and renewal of anguish. This process, which cannot take place in those encounters in which recognition at one fell stroke eliminates boredom, also eliminates both source and extension of laughter. It can take place in the laughter of tickling (the first tickling, relatively light, elicited only a meaningless anguish, easily dispelled, but it could quickly become aggressive). According to my interpretation of the young woman's funereal laughter, the anguish develops of itself within the laughing person. But the process is more evident and more complicated in the gratuitous intention of word play and comic scenes.

I have until now spoken only of natural laughter. Now men have cultivated laughter as though it were the flower of life. No twists, turns, or artifices are spared for its increase and extension. The procedure consists in renewing the source of laughter in somewhat the same way as we make a fire. We feed the fire with fresh fuel, and the higher the heat already generated the faster it burns. The successive portions of fuel are generally only additive and of the same kind, but sometimes the convulsion of uncontrollable laughter impels him who has provoked it to go to the limit, to the point of vertigo, of nausea. I should now like, in order to make myself clearly understood, to elicit such a state, and am forced to recall a passage from a film (*The Gold Rush*).

In a mountainous landscape, two absurdly childish characters are fighting inside a small wooden shack (so grotesquely that they are, to begin with, irresistibly laughable); suddenly the house, shaken by the brawl, slides down the snowy slope on which it was precariously sitting, and slips swiftly to the edge of a precipice on which it sways, remaining finally suspended, blocked by an old tree stump. This vertiginous situation should, in itself, produce only extreme discomfort. It is true that the characters threatened with death are unaware of it; they continue to jump about in their blindness as if on solid ground. Their error, the illusion of stability maintained when the abyss is opening beneath their feet, is in itself a comic element like the others, which feeds the laughter already begun.

But in those situations which normally provoke laughter, the stress is never on the element of anguish but always on the error, and especially if a threat of death is involved. This threat, stressed, renewed as insistently as imaginable, even produces an intolerable dizziness. As the vertigo increases, intensifying the threat of capsizal, the convulsion of laughter reaches a limitless

intensity. To him who is, in this sort of crisis, uprooted from his very life, the possibility of worlds unlimited opens to the point that he dies. For in that kind of beyond into which he now emerges—into which, against his will only, he can enter—he can no longer distinguish himself from that which is most fearful to him; he is no longer separable from death, from that which is mortal to him, since by an inextinguishable, rending laugh he has crossed the threshold, entered into this dreadful unison.

If this is not so, it is almost so. It is not exactly so, for to lighten the anguish, a ruse was needed. Threat is introduced not only within the world of fiction (or that would not matter: for other, imaginary characters I can tremble), but in the disparaged world of the comic; it weighs upon the unserious (I have my place within a world in which I have weight insofar as I laugh at them). When, however, I was under the effect of a redoubled laughter, which went too far, these differences ceased to matter in the same way; I perceived nothing clearly except my voluptuous inner harmony of laughter and of vertigo. In the intense laughter, the lifting of anguish does not entail a balance of accounts between profit and loss. One can, by momentum, go relatively far in the direction of loss. When a convulsion entailing loss of some kind begins, the presence of some profit—the sense of superiority—is required, but when convulsion reaches its giddy intensity, awareness of this can no longer function in this way. The characters under threat of death certainly continue to be "not serious"—otherwise the laughter is paralyzed, and anguish and vertigo win out—but he who laughs ceases to feel more serious than the objects of his laughter. It is in this sense that he is truly carried away into the "immeasurable, limitless beyond" that he first saw from on high. His incursion into the sphere of the divine, his dying unto himself do not take place quite as I have said; they do have their full meaning insofar as he who laughs no longer belongs to the world of seriousness. They do happen exactly as I have described, but are considered in advance as inferior; they will be null and void for the serious man that the laughing man will again become.

(Marginal notation: to become God—my laughter beneath an umbrella.)

I should, at this point, emphasize the automatic, incontrollable nature of these reactions as they develop. That which we control, which we can modify at will, has, relatively speaking, little meaning. If we could no longer consider our reactions of open laughter as inferior, our state would be changed; we could construct another world. But we lack the strength; we are bound. We can neither eliminate the weight of gravity nor modify the conditions under which we laugh. The rules are really so clearly defined that if anyone should happen to modify them, we could no longer quite say of him that he is a man—he would then differ as greatly from man as a bird does from smoke.

To understand me fully, one must boldly focus attention—at least in the memory of their representation—on those moments when laughter intensifies.

In moments such as those, could he only sustain them, a man might feel that he becomes God. But he can never, exactly, capture them; in believing that he does he merely deludes himself. He may cease to consider laughter as an inferior mode of being only if he takes it seriously. Now, to laugh and to be serious at the same time is impossible. Laughter is lightness, and we miss it insofar as we cease to laugh at it.

In this state of suspension—on the borderline between laughter and the deep gravity of anguish—I feel compelled to enter, and to break open, the enigma of sacrifice. The laughter that has wholly overpowered me I remember in any case, like the sunset which continues, after nightfall, to dazzle eyes unaccustomed to darkness. But the consciousness of sacrifice is a kind of lingering attachment to death; it can only dishearten us. No matter how strong our daring and ingenuity, the silence of anguish begins.

When I laughed, what was communicated to me by the laughter of others was the canceling of anguish. If, on the other hand, I approach sacrifice, I am, as among laughing men, dependent upon the emotions of my fellow men; but the participant in a sacrifice communicates only the anguish itself to me, without lifting it. The performer of sacrifice and its witnesses behave as though there were only one meaningful value, only one that possibly matters: anguish. This anguish of sacrifice may be weak; all things considered, it is really the strongest possible, so strong that were it to be slightly more so, the onlookers could no longer be gathered, the sacrifice would have no further meaning, would not take place. Anguish is maintained at varying levels of tolerance; *sacrifice being the communication of anguish* (as laughter is the communication of its dispersion), *the sum of anguish communicated theoretically approaches the sum of communicable anguish.* Overintense reaction renders the operation ineffective; those subject to it abandon sacrifice.

Sacrifice has a history, and its variations trace the manner in which the level of tolerance eventually became more difficult. The horror felt at the immolation of other men grew in time. The deer and the ram which Calchas and Abraham slew in place of Iphigenia and Isaac means that the sacrificers must have attributed to their gods the will of men to whom the sight of human holocaust finally became intolerable. Biblical narrative, although avoiding explanation, expresses the tragic grandeur of this debate.

The immolation of animals later ceased to dispose in the same way of the sum of anguish required. But intolerance then began to come to terms with the desire to put an end to blood sacrifice. Men looked for less shocking religious postures. Some now felt only disgust at the sight of bloodshed. Their anguish was, in a certain sense, less excessive than inadequate. They imagined divinity in a less human form. It came to seem crude that Jehovah would rejoice in the odor of grilled meat. At the origin of Christianity, a repast of communion, in which sacrifice was merely the commemoration of death, was, moreover, charged

with an anguish that was relatively great compared to that provoked by the immolated animal.

It was natural that at the moment when bloody action was abandoned. . . .*

1939–40

The text breaks off here. — trans.

Celestial Bodies

Man makes his appearance on the surface of a celestial body in an existence commingled with that of plants and of other animals. This celestial body appears at some point of empty space, in that immensity revealed at night, driven by a complex movement of dizzying speed: gun shells are a million times slower than the earth in gravitation around the sun and the set of planets encircling the central galaxy.

To represent the reality of Earth as unrelated to this projection into space would be wrong; for the movement of celestial bodies is no less real than their mass. Now, the sun, carrying its swarm of planets along with it, performs so prodigious a revolution that even at 200 miles per second it has lasted at least 250 million years. If, however, you want the full sense of man's interest touching this voyage of his, you must do more than imagine its speed and the size of its orbit. If the sun were driven by a steady movement of gravitation around a center, the universe to which Earth belongs could, on the whole, be considered analogous to the closed system of our planetary revolutions (only the order of magnitude would have changed). Whereas the movement described by the sun and its planets about the galactic center opens, as it were, into and through the sky. When, indeed, we do perceive this movement within infinity—driving universes like our own—it in no way resembles the stable and geometric rings of Saturn; it seems hurled into space like a whirling explosion.

The galaxy to which we belong is composed of hundreds of millions of stars whose average size is equal to that of the sun. Its surface is so vast that light—at the speed of 186,000 miles per second—takes 100,000 years to cover its entire distance. Earth, which revolves somewhere in the middle region, is situated 30,000 light-years from the galaxy's axis, and earth dwellers would certainly never have known the form of this universe without the revelation, by means of very powerful telescopes, of worlds quite like ours, far beyond the cloud of stars within which our planet is buried. These worlds in the farthest distant parts of the sky appear rather like disks with swollen centers. Seen in profile, they look like Saturn with its two-ringed girdle, but on a much larger scale, and with a central sphere that is quite flat. But those visible head-on look

stranger: they develop, rather like a Medusa's head, a number of luminous extensions winding from the core out into space (whence the name of spirals given them by astronomers). Each of these threads is really composed of specks of what has been described as "stellar gas," that is, luminous matter formed by the accumulations of multitudes of swirling suns as distant from each other as the stars of our immediate sky. The whole system suggests the swirling suns of our light shows, and appears rather like a dazzling explosion of fireworks which vanished after a few seconds into the night. This image may be erroneous, and it is obvious that this swift violence, when transcribed into a chronology commensurate with the immensity of the revolving worlds, still takes the billions of years represented by a few dozen revolutions. According to Eddington (*The Rotation of the Galaxy*, Oxford, 1939), however, the precariousness of a universe like ours is reflected in the way it looks, and the immensely long detonation time of the spiral within which we rotate is due merely to the incomparable immensity of space involved. The underlying nature of the world from which we come is that of an explosive rotation of matter, nonetheless.

These considerations about ourselves have been made possible as knowledge developed (and they will surely vary, as that knowledge varies, as science advances). They are, in any case, wholly contrary to those representations which have established man and his earthly base as the seemingly immutable seat of human life—as the center and foundation of all possible reality. It would appear that man's natural anthropocentrism bears a relation to the galactic universe which is that of a feudal power to the over-distant center of imperial power. A domain has been marked off directly with the galaxy's whirlwind, such that it appears constituted as not subject to the reality of the universe, as entirely autonomous, to the point of perfect immobility set within the mad spin of it all. And even if human existence is really in the process of now discovering the universe that sustains it, this existence must acknowledge the universe as a spectacle external to it or else deny itself. How, indeed, can it claim to identify with the rapture of the heavens, acknowledging itself as spectacle viewing itself, when the fact of looking presupposes that the viewing subject has somehow escaped from the rapturous movement of the universe? All that we recognize as truth is necessarily linked to the error represented by the "stationary earth."

The spirals or galaxies, which unfurl their gigantic tentacles of light through the darkness of space, are composed of innumerable stars or stellar systems united in a "movement of the whole." Stars may be simple or complex. The solar system is no exception in the sky's immensity, and the stars may therefore be accompanied by a planetary whirlwind; in like manner, the planets known to us are often doubled by satellites. The sun is a star, as the earth is a planet or the moon a satellite; and if to this cycle we add comets, four sorts of heavenly bodies appear thus united by a "movement of the whole" within the galaxy. But each of these heavenly bodies possesses a "movement of the whole" particular to it. A star such as the sun, central core of the system to which it belongs, radi-

ates—that is, constantly projects part of its substance in the form of light and heat through space. (The considerable quantity of energy thus expended may originate in constant internal annihilation of the star's very substance.) This extraordinary loss is that of a star; whereas the radiation of a planet such as Earth is so weak as to be considered negligible. Earth, as a heavenly body, differs indeed from a star insofar as it is cold and does not shine. So that the movement of the whole which activates it does not merely differ quantitatively from that of an incandescent star, it is different in kind.

Heavenly bodies of any sort are composed of atoms, but if we consider just those stars of the highest temperature, we see that the atoms of radiant stars cannot be different in composition; they are in the power of the stellar mass and its central movement. The atoms of the earthly periphery, however—those of its surrounding atmosphere—are free of this power; they can enter and be part of forces which have developed independence in relation to the force of the mass. The surface of the planet is formed not only of molecules, each composed of a small number of atoms, but of much more complex elements, some crystalline, others colloidal, the latter resulting in the autonomous forces of life in plants, animals, men, in human society. Stars of relatively low temperature, including the sun, tolerate, if necessary, the molecules' fragile autonomy, but intense radiation keeps almost all of the mass in an atomized state. Cold Earth cannot keep the atoms of her surface within the power of an almost zero radiation, and the "movement of the whole" which forms around her moves in a direction contrary to that of the movement formed within a star with high temperature. The sun lavishes its force in space, while the particles which, on Earth's periphery, succeed in escaping the force of the central core and cohere to form ever higher power no longer expend, but rather consume, strength. All that which condenses and quickens on our Earth is thus marked by avidity. Not only is each complex particle avid of infinitely available solar energy or of remaining free earthly energy, but of all the accumulated energy in the other particles. Thus, in the absence of radiation, in the cold, Earth's surface is abandoned to a "movement of the whole" which seems a movement of general consumption, and whose salient form is life.

The crowning achievement of this tendency is anthropocentrism. The weakening of the terrestrial globe's material energy has enabled the constitution of the autonomous human existences which are so many misconceptions of the universe's movement. These existences may be compared to those of the feudal lord, who gains independence insofar as the central power ceases to have energetic action. But man's avidity, taken as a whole, is much greater than that of the local sovereign himself. The latter contents himself with preventing the king's agents from mixing in his affairs, while the human being loses awareness of the reality of his world—as the parasite is unaware of the pain or joy of those from whom it draws subsistence. Furthermore, in closing off ever more tightly the world about him so as to represent the sole principle of existence, he tends

to substitute his constitutive avidity for the sky's obvious prodigality; he thus gradually effaces the image of a heavenly reality free of inherent meaning or demand, replacing it with a personification (of an anthropomorphic kind) of the immutable idea of the Good.

Given these unfavorable conditions, there is but one way out. Those condemned by avidity to subordinate everything to the acquisition of energy define all that makes for further acquisition as being "of use." They have delimited, within the system of free universes, a world of "use" drawn back upon itself, isolated and imprisoned, whose structure is composed by implements, raw materials, and work. Thus, their only goal is that of an unquenchable greed. For the greater their wealth the more they proliferate; their productive force produces only new productive force, their greed in operation can produce only greater greed. The cycle of human energy began, therefore, to seem like a desperate trap, and men began to believe themselves condemned to observe the greed which drove them as a curse: their despair drove them to renunciation.

Since the nature of things is not to be changed by a curse, they have not grown less avid; their sense of malediction was all that changed.

There is but one way out; it is in vain that we deny our nature, and since we do seek power, we can only assent to the force we must be. To flee is ridiculous; one must go rather to the full limit of power. Existence in avidity attains, when fully developed, a point of disequilibrium at which it suddenly and lavishly expends; it sustains an explosive loss of the surplus of force it has so painfully accumulated. The amount of energy which thus escapes, though by no means negligible, is relatively low; however, it is no longer part of the world of use: use is then subordinate, it becomes the slave of loss.

When immediate avidity, whose principle is hunger, submits to the need to give, whether of one's own self or one's possessions, an inversion of wealth takes place. The impulse to avidity tends, it is true, to limit the giving as directed toward loss. The gift is used in the struggle between those engaged in securing the strength of others; for it can become a way of diminishing a rival's prestige. The true gift of the self, ecstasy—which is not only a link between the sexes—marks, nonetheless, the limit of greed, the chance of escape from cold movement, and of rediscovering the joy of sun and spiral.

But although the universe spends while remaining wholly free of the shadow cast by the possibility of exhausting its prodigality, such can no longer be the case for those fragile existences which multiply in cruel combat on Earth's surface. At least those more effective in their avidity, who have thereby acquired a greater potential for loss, have begun to be aware of the unsound, the catastrophic nature of all hoarding of useful power. Through loss man can regain the free movement of the universe, he can dance and swirl in the full rapture of those great swarms of stars. But he must, in the violent expenditure of self, perceive that he breathes in the power of death.

1938

Program (Relative to *Acéphale*)

1. Form a community creative of values, values creative of cohesion.

2. Lift the curse, the feeling of guilt which strikes men, sending them to wars they do not want, forcing them to a labor whose fruits escape them.

3. Assume the function of destruction and decomposition, but as accomplishment and not as negation of being.

4. Realize the personal accomplishment of being and of its tension through concentration, through a positive asceticism, and through positive individual discipline.

5. Realize the universal accomplishment of personal being in the irony of the animal world and through the revelation of an acephalic universe, one of play, not of state or duty.

6. Take upon oneself perversion and crime, not as exclusive values, but as integrated within the human totality.

7. Fight for the decomposition and exclusion of all communities—national, socialist, communist, or churchly—other than universal community.

8. Affirm the reality of values, the resulting inequality of men, and acknowledge the organic character of society.

9. Take part in the destruction of the existing world, with eyes open to the world to come.

10. Consider the world to come in the sense of reality contained as of now, and not in the sense of a permanent happiness which is not only inaccessible, but hateful.

11. Affirm the value of violence and the will to aggression insofar as they are the foundation of all power.

April 4, 1936

Un-knowing and Its Consequences

At the end of yesterday's lecture ("The Idea of Truth and Contemporary Logic" by A. J. Ayer), Jean Wahl spoke of the subtle relationships which might be proposed between what Hegel said and what I have to say to you today. I am not certain that those relationships are very solid. I do think, however, that Jean Wahl has pointed to something with a precision of meaning which does justify emphasis on my part. It so happened that I met A. J. Ayer last night, and our reciprocal interest kept us talking until about three in the morning. Merleau-Ponty and Ambrosino also took part, and at the end of the conversation, I think, a compromise was reached.

It happened, nevertheless, that the conversation took a turn such that, despite our very pleasant surroundings, I began to feel as though I were beginning my lecture. I apologize for this distinction made between bar and lecture hall, but the outset does involve a certain confusion.

We finally fell to discussing the following very strange question. Ayer had uttered the very simple proposition: there was a sun before men existed. And he saw no reason to doubt it. Merleau-Ponty, Ambrosino, and I disagreed with this proposition, and Ambrosino said that the sun had certainly not existed before the world. I, for my part, do not see how one can say so. This proposition is such as to indicate the total meaninglessness that can be taken on by a rational statement. Common meaning should be totally meaningful in the sense in which any proposition one utters theoretically implies both subject and object. In the proposition, there was the sun and there are no men, we have a subject and no object.

I should say that yesterday's conversation* produced an effect of shock. There exists between French and English philosophers a sort of abyss which we do not find between French and German philosophers.

I am not sure that I have sufficiently clarified the humanly unacceptable

* *D'hier, d'Ayer*: Bataille is punning on the resemblance between the word *yesterday* and the name of the philosopher—trans.

character of that proposition according to which there existed something prior to man. I really believe that so long as we remain within the discursive, we can always declare that prior to man there could be no sun. And yet one can also feel troubled, for here is a proposition which is logically unassailable, but mentally disturbing, unbalancing—an object independent of any subject.

After leaving Ayer, Merleau-Ponty, and Ambrosino, I ended by feeling regret.

It is impossible to consider the sun's existence without men. When we state this we think we know, but we know nothing. This proposition was not exceptional in this respect. I can talk of any object, whereas I confront the subject, I am positioned facing the object, as if confronting a foreign body which represents, somehow, something scandalous for me, because objects are useful. A given object enters into me insofar as I become dependent on objects. One thing that I cannot doubt is that I know myself. Finally, I wondered why I blamed that phrase of Ayer's. There are all sorts of facts of existence which would not have seemed quite as debatable to me. Which means that this unknowing, whose consequences I seek out by talking to you, is to be found everywhere.

Let me clarify what I mean by this un-knowing; the effect of any proposition the penetration of whose content we find disturbing.

I shall begin with an antithetical proposition, not from a review of knowledge which may appear systematic, but rather from the concern with the attainment of maximum knowledge. It is, indeed, quite evident that insofar as I have a satisfiable curiosity of an unknown realm reducible to a known one, I am unable to say what it is that Hegel called absolute knowledge. It is only if I knew all, that I might claim to know nothing, only possession of this discursive knowledge would give me an ineradicable claim to have attained un-knowing. As long as I misunderstand things, my claim to un-knowing is an empty one. Were I to know nothing, I should have nothing to say, and would therefore keep silent. The fact remains that while recognizing that I cannot attain absolute knowledge, I can imagine knowing everything, that is, I bracket my remaining curiosity. I may consider that continued investigation would not teach me much more. I might thereby expect a major personal change in knowlege, but it would stop there. Assuming better knowledge of everything than I now have, I should still not be free of that disturbance of which I speak. Whatever proposition I may utter, it will resemble the first one. I find myself confronting that question, that question raised, we may say, by Heidegger.

Speaking for myself, the question has long seemed to me unsatisfactory, and I have tried to frame another: why is there what I know? Ultimately, this can be perfectly expressed in a turn of phrase. It still seems to me that the fundamental question is posed only when no phrase is possible, when in silence we understand the world's absurdity.

I have tried my best to learn what can be known, and that which I have

sought is inexpressibly deep within me. I am myself in a world which I recognize as deeply inaccessible to me, since in all the relations I have sought to establish with it, there remains something I cannot conquer, so that I remain in a kind of despair. I have realized that this feeling is rather rare. I was quite surprised that someone like Sartre shared no such feeling at all. He has said approximately the following: if you know nothing, you've no need to repeat it.

This is the position of one ignorant of the contents of a locked trunk he is unable to open. At a moment like this, one uses a literary language which contains more than need strictly be said. Only silence can express what one has to say, in a language therefore of disquiet, and in a state of perfect despair which, in at least one sense, is not comparable to that of one in search of something he does not have. This is a much deeper despair, one which we have always known, for, essentially bent on objects, we have projects in mind which cannot be realized, and we are on the point of frustration. This despair is equivalent to that of death. As foreign to death as it is ignorant of the contents of this coffer of which I have just spoken.

We can imagine death. We can, at the same time, know that this conception is erroneous. Our proposition concerning death is always tainted with some error. Un-knowing in regard to death is like un-knowing in general. It would seem quite natural to me that, in all that I have just said, each of you has seen a wholly special position (involving an exceptional individual placed outside the norm). As a matter of fact, this judgment of me is entirely consistent with present-day man. I do think, nevertheless, that we may say that this was not ever so—a view which may appear to you somewhat lightly framed.

This is a rather debatable hypothesis, the position of people whose object is precisely that of knowledge. Knowing that you know nothing helps considerably; you have to persevere in thought so as to discover the world of those who know they know nothing. It is a very different world from that of people who possess confidence (children), from that of those who have extended intellectual knowledge. It is a profound difference. These residues may even involve un-knowing in sometimes disconcerting syntheses, since they are, it must be said, no more satisfactory than the first position.

I think it well to refer to an experience as widespread as sacrifice (and in a context different from that offered in my other lectures): the difference and similarities between un-knowing and sacrifice. In sacrifice, one destroys an object, but not completely. A residue remains, and from the scientific point of view, on the whole, nothing of any account has taken place. And yet, if we consider symbolic values, we can conceive this destruction as altering the notion with which we started. The immediate satisfaction provided by a slaughtered cow may be either that of the peasant, or that of the biologist, but it is not what is expressed in sacrifice. The slaughtered cow has nothing to do with these practical notions. In all this, there was a limited, but solid knowledge. By

engaging in the ritual destruction of the cow, one destroyed all the notions to which mere life had accustomed us.

Man has need of inventing a prospect of un-knowing in the form of death. These are not regular intellectual operations. There is always some cheating. We all have the feeling of death, and we can assume that this feeling played a strong part in sacrifice. There is a profound difference between Catholics and Protestants; Catholics still experience sacrifice, reduced to a symbolic thinness. Nevertheless, the difference should not be exaggerated: traditional sacrifice and Catholic sacrifice are sacrifice of the soma and of the mass. The act of saying certain words over a bit of bread is quite as satisfying to the spirit as the slaughter of a cow. There is, ultimately, in sacrifice a rather frequent desire for horror. It seems to me that in this respect the spirit will assume as much horror as it can stand. An atmosphere of death, knowing's disappearance, the birth of that world we call sacred. We can say of the sacred that it is sacred, but at that moment language must at least submit to a pause. It is in fact the leitmotiv of this exposition that such operations are ill-conducted, debatable. It is all beside the point. And for a very simple reason: the only way of expressing myself would be for me to be silent; thence the flaw of which I have spoken. It is diametrically opposed to that which troubles us in the first proposition, in the phrase which set off the discussion with Ayer. A trouble felt, as well, in those who seek knowledge. That which I feel in confronting un-knowing comes from the feeling of playing a comedy, and in a position of weakness. I stand before you, challenging, while at the same time offering all the reasons for silence; I may consider, too, that perhaps I have no right to keep silent—a still more difficult position to maintain.

There remains simply the following: un-knowing does not eliminate sympathy, which can be reconciled with psychological knowledge.

When one knows that the hope of salvation must really disappear, the situation of someone wholly rejected (the difference between a lecturer and a servant dismissed in humiliation)—it is a painful situation because there is no project one can form which is not tainted by a kind of death. When one reaches this sort of despair but continues to exist in the world with the same hopes and the same instincts (human and bestial aspects), one realizes suddenly that one's possession of the world has greater depth than that of others. These possibilities are, in effect, more open to him who has relinquished knowledge (the walk through fields with a botanical textbook). Each time we relinquish the will to knowledge, we have the possibility of a far more intense contact with the world.

With a woman, insofar as one knows her, one knows her badly, that is, one's knowing is a kind of knowledge. Insofar as one tries to know a woman psychologically, untransported by passion, one distances oneself from her. It is only when we try to know her in relation to death that we draw near. By a series of contradictions, it is when someone fails that we draw close, but we are

asked to deny this feeling of the "perishable." In love, the will to project the loved one within the imperishable is a wish that goes contrary to this. It is insofar as an individual is not a thing that he can be loved. It is insofar as he bears some resemblance to the sacred. Just as the loved one cannot be perceived unless projected into death, thereby resulting in the imagination of death.

Still, we can, of course, through a conception of aspects of ordinary life, which provides a basis of un-knowing, endow them with extreme splendor. We have put a great distance between ourselves and un-knowing. Love cannot be successful. That attempt at magnification of the human being reduces such magnification to this world of practical knowledge.

Now that I have set forth the first consequence of un-knowing, I have again lost the right to speak of it. I have, in assuming the posture of un-knowing, returned to the categories of knowledge.

One can move indefinitely between both positions; neither one has greater validity than the other. I should be saved only by attaining the impossible.

There is, however, a perspective within which we can discern a true triumph for un-knowing—that of the end of history. Hegel's position in this respect is strongly subject to criticism. History must come to an end before it can be discussed; Hegel was mistaken in announcing the end of history; from 1830 on it accelerated. We can, however, without assuming responsibility, speak of the end of history. The position I have set forth would tend toward closure. The last man would find himself in a situation that would be wholly meaningless. If we consider our death as that of the last man, we can say that history has come full circle. He who would be last would have to continue the enterprise. Surely within him night would fall, overwhelming, burying him. This, one might almost say, would be his last spasm.

I think that I have also given the impression of having, in all these matters, a bias toward destruction. The world situation does not, in my view, imply that one is bound to the impossible. The relinquishing of investigation in that direction is true freedom.

There is no reason to adapt narrowly moral views but rather those which are moral in their intensity.

This situation does contain a sort of resolution. In relinquishing all, we can be rich. We are, as it happens, in the situation of the gospels, in that state of grace whose criterion is intensity.

The elements of cheating become a matter of indifference. There is no meaning in death, no project-related meaning. In this negation of means, in which salvation lies beyond everything, all is opened up within the limits of the instant, were I the last of men, and dying.

If I succeed in living within the instant, I break free of all difficulty, but I am no longer a man (to be a man means living in view of the future); and there

is no recourse to animality in this situation, which requires a considerable energy available to few.

I pass no value judgment. I cannot manage the slightest condemnation of those who know, who live in the world in which I myself live, in which I can no longer live.

January 12, 1951

Un-Knowing and Rebellion

I have, in several talks given in this hall, tried to communicate my experience of un-knowing. Although it is in certain respects a personal one, I nonetheless consider it to be communicable in that it does not seem a priori to differ from that of others, except in a kind of defect which is my own: the consciousness that this experience is that of un-knowing.

It is, of course, obvious that whenever I speak of un-knowing, I must incur the same difficulty, and must each time, therefore, invoke it. But I do, nevertheless, proceed, promptly acknowledging it, for what I shall now develop before you will be, as on other occasions, that paradox, the knowledge of un-knowing, a knowledge of the absence of knowledge.

I intend, as indicated by the title of my talk, to speak of rebellion. I consider that we are enslaved by knowledge, that there is a servility fundamental to all knowledge, an acceptance of a mode of life such that each moment has meaning only in terms of another, or of others to follow. For clarity's sake, I shall present things thus. Naturally I shall fail, as I have done heretofore. But I should like, first of all, to state the measure of my failure. I can, in fact, say that had I succeeded, the contact between us would have perceptibly been of the sort that exists not in work, but in play. I should have made you understand something that is decisive for me: that my thought has but one object, play, in which my thinking, the working of my thought, dissolves.

Those who have followed my thinking as set forth have realized that it was, in a way that is fundamental, in perpetual rebellion against itself. I shall try today to offer an example of this rebellion on a point which is of prime importance relative to those philosophical considerations which form my point of departure.

I shall, in brief, start with the utterance of a general philosophy which I can offer as my own. I must begin with this statement. It's a very crude philosophy, one which must really seem far too simple, as though a philosopher capable of stating commonplaces of this sort bears no relation to the subtle sort of character now known as a philosopher. For this sort of idea might really be anyone's. I do mean that this thought which appears common to me is my

thought. I recall meeting, a long time ago, a young medical intern who held a philosophy of this sort. He never stopped repeating, with an extraordinarily cool self-assurance, one explanatory idea; everything, in his view, came down to the instinct of self-preservation. That was thirty years ago. One is less likely to hear this refrain today. My conception is surely less out of date, and may, despite all, correspond more closely, or somewhat less badly, to the idea of philosophy. It consists in saying that all is play, that being is play, that the idea of God is unwelcome and, furthermore, intolerable, in that God, being situated outside time, can be only play, but is harnessed by human thought to creation and to all the implications of creation, which go contrary to play (to the game).

We find, moreover, in this respect, a blunting of that most ancient register of human thought which remains largely within the idea of play in its consideration of the totality of things. This blunting is, however, by no means peculiar to Christian thought. Plato still considered the sacred action, that very action which religion offers man as a possibility of sharing in the essence of things, as a game. Nevertheless, Christianity, Christian thinking remains the screen separating us from what I shall call the beatific vision of the game.

It seems to me to be our characteristically Christian conception of the world and of man in the world which resists, from the very outset, this thought that all is play.

The possibility of a philosophy of play—this presupposes Christianity. But Christianity is only the spokesman of pain and death. From this point of departure, and given the conditions of space and duration within which being exists, one could see a series of problems arising. To these I shall give no further consideration. Another question arises; if one sets play against the expediency of action, the game in question can be termed a lesser one. The problem: if this is a lesser game, it cannot be made the end of serious action. We cannot, on the other hand, attribute to useful action any end other than that of the game. There is something amiss here.

Let us say that we can take some edge off the game. It is then no longer a game.

The philosophy of play appears, in a manner that is fundamental, to be truth itself, common and indisputable; it is, nevertheless, out of kilter in that we suffer and we die.

The other solution: we can think and be the game, make of the world and of ourselves a game on condition that we look suffering and death in the face. The greater game—more difficult than we think—the dialectic of the master who confronts death. Now, according to Hegel, the master is in error, it is the slave who vanquishes him, but the slave is nonetheless vanquished, and once he has vanquished the master, he is made to conquer himself. He must act not as master, but as rebel. The rebel first wants to eliminate the master, expel him from the world, while he, at the same time, acts as master, since he braves death. The rebel's situation is thus highly equivocal.

Rebellion's essential problem lies in extricating man from the obligation of the slave.

For the master, the game was neither greater nor lesser. The rebel, however, revolting against the game which is neither lesser nor greater, who must reduce the game to the state of a lesser one, must see the necessity of the greater one, which is essentially rebellion against the lesser, the game's limit. Otherwise, it is the lesser man who prevails over reason.

The rebel is thus constrained, because he has had to accept death. He must go to the limit of his revolt; he has certainly not rebelled in order to complete his submission. From this follows the awareness that the worst is a game, a negation of the power of suffering and death—cowardice in the face of this sort of prospect.

I think, though, that this time I have found my way out of the first proposition of a philosophy of play by passing to the game itself [*crossed out*: and no one will be surprised if] I've set a trap.

It thus appears that we extricate ourselves from the philosophy of play, that we reach the point at which knowledge gives way, and that un-knowing then appears as the greater game—the indefinable, that which thought cannot conceive. This is a thought which exists only timidly within me, one which I do not feel apt to sustain. I do think this way, it is true, but in the manner of a coward, like someone who is inwardly raving mad with terror. Still, what can so cowardly a reaction. . . .*

November 24, 1952

* Text breaks off in this manner. —trans.

Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears

Knowledge requires a certain stability of things known. The realm of the known is, in at least one sense, a stable one, in which we recognize ourselves, whereas although the unknown may not be in motion—it may even be quite immobile—there is no certainty of its stability. Stability may exist, but even the limits of possible movement are uncertain. The unknown is obviously and always unforeseeable.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this realm of the unforeseeable unknown is the risible, in those objects which produce in us that effect of inner upheaval, of overwhelming surprise which we call laughter. There is something extremely curious about the risible. Nothing is more easily studied, and "finally" known, than laughter. We can, with fair precision, observe and define the various themes of the laughable; it in no way eludes the clarity of knowledge or of methodical investigation. Moreover, once we have seen the cause of laughter in its various aspects, we can reproduce its effects at will. We possess veritable recipes, we can in various ways provoke laughter, in exactly the same way as all the other effects known to us. We can, in short, produce objects of laughter. Or one might say, and indeed it has been said, that knowing means knowing how. But can we say that because we know how to provoke laughter we really know what causes laughter? It would seem, from the history of the philosophical study of laughter, that such is not the case, for it is, on the whole, the history of an insoluble problem. That which first seems so accessible has constantly eluded investigation. It may even be that the domain of laughter is finally—or so it seems to me—a closed domain, so unknown and unknowable is the cause of laughter.

It is not my intention to review, on this occasion, all those existing explanations of laughter, which have never managed fully to resolve the mystery. The best-known is surely that of Bergson—the application of the mechanical to the living. This theory of Bergson's, although very well known, is, I believe, somewhat unjustifiably disparaged.

I was, in particular, surprised to see Francis Jeanson in a recent book on laughter (*The Human Meaning of Laughter*, Editions du Seuil, 1950)—one of the

most rational accounts published—give more credit to the theory of Marcel Pagnol. You may be aware that Marcel Pagnol published—some three years ago, I believe—a small pamphlet on laughter. This theory is, however, not really very original, and seems to me extremely sketchy. To the author of *Marius*, laughter expresses the laughing individual's feeling of superiority.

Actually, this little work of Pagnol's might serve to confirm our view that the ability to elicit laughter is one thing, while understanding its nature is quite another. I freely admit, by the way, that the philosophers who have theorized laughter have always excelled in the art of amusing and of provoking waves of laughter.

It is nonetheless true, however, that Bergson's hypothesis is so far from providing a solution to the mystery that the author himself offers it as explanation, not of laughter in general, but of one particular aspect of the risible which he terms the comic.

Thus, apart from the value of Bergson's effort, we observe that the laughter which does, nevertheless, make sense, such as that of the (chance) encounter, that of tickling, that of the child's immediate laughter, is excluded.

Actually, studies have accumulated without enabling us really to account for laughter. Apart from the authors' individual convictions or particular theories, we don't truly know the meaning of laughter. Its cause remains unknown, so that we are suddenly invaded when our habitual foundation is upset, producing in us that "sudden widening of the face," those "explosive sounds in the larynx," and those "rhythmic spasms of thorax and of abdomen" described by medical men.

There remains, perhaps, just one last theory, which has at least, to its credit, its dependence on the most outstanding and essential quality of preceding ones: *their failure.* Let us suppose that that which induces laughter is not only unknown, but unknowable. There is still one possibility to be considered. That which is laughable may simply be *the unknowable.* In other words, the unknown nature of the laughable would be not accidental, but essential. We would laugh, not for some reason which, due to lack of information, or of sufficient penetration, we shall never manage to know, but because *the unknown makes us laugh.*

We laugh, in short, in passing very abruptly, all of a sudden, from a world in which everything is firmly qualified, in which everything is given as stable within a generally stable order, into a world in which our assurance is overwhelmed, in which we perceive that this assurance was deceptive. Where everything had seemed totally provided for, suddenly the unexpected arises, something unforeseeable and overwhelming, revelatory of an ultimate truth: the surface of appearances conceals a perfect absence of response to our expectation.

We perceive that finally, for all the exercise of knowledge, the world still lies wholly outside its reach, and that not only the world, but the being that one

is lies out of reach. Within us and in the world, something is revealed that was not given in knowledge, and whose site is definable only as unattainable by knowledge. It is, I believe, at this that we laugh. And, it must at once be said, in theorizing laughter, that this is what ultimately illuminates us; this is what fills us with joy.

This theory obviously presents from the outset many difficulties, perhaps more than most.

I do think that it does not, to begin with, give us the specificity of laughter. That is obviously its main defect. I might, if necessary, be able to show that in every case of laughter we pass from the domain of the known, from that of the foreseeable, to that of the unknown and unforeseeable. Such is the case, for example, with the unexpected meeting in the street, which may not provoke a burst of laughter, but which does usually make us laugh. And so it is with the laughter of tickling, which affects us unexpectedly. Such, I believe, is the case of the very young child, overwhelmed, as he emerges from that sort of torpor which we imagine as his embryonic existence, when, upon discovering his mother's affection, he suddenly discovers something disturbing, exciting, and wholly unlike his previous experience.

This, however, does not mean that we laugh whenever a sight which is calm and in keeping with our expectations is succeeded by a disturbance, or even by a reversal, of that sight. And the proof of this lies all too readily at hand.

Let us suppose, in effect, that suddenly—as has happened in certain cities—the earth begins to quake and the floor to buckle beneath our feet. None of us would, I think, dream of laughing.

Of course we can say, in spite of this, that there is in the relationship between laughter and the unknown an element that is, relatively speaking, measurable. The cause of such laughter can be said to be proportionate, in its effect, to the diminution of nature as known, or to the suppression of the known character of nature which makes us laugh. Certainly, the less we know of that which arises, the less we expect it, the harder we laugh.

And the suddenness with which the unknown element appears also plays a role. Now, this suddenness has the precise sense of intensity. The swifter the change, the more intense our feeling and perceptive experience of it. But finally, that does not make sudden catastrophe laughable. We must, I think, in those conditions, consider the matter differently.

I believe, really, that the principal error of most attempts to discuss laughter philosophically lies in isolating the object of laughter. Laughter is, I think, part of a range of possible reactions to one situation. This situation, of which I have spoken, this suppression of the character of the known, can result in different reactions.

Laughter, in this respect, can seem to guide us to the path; the consideration of the cause of laughter can set us on the path leading to the understanding

of this fundamental situation. But once we have settled upon this situation, we must quickly add that the sudden invasion of the unknown can, depending upon the case, produce the effect of laughter or of tears, as well as other reactions.

Laughter and tears—and this must be mentioned because it goes somewhat contrary to my claim—have not, incidentally, always been studied in isolation. The recent, interesting study of Alfred Stern, a philosopher who has lived in America, considers laughter in connection with tears. This work is entitled *The Philosophy of Laughter and Tears.*

However, as I have observed, other reactions may also be linked to the same state. For example, the sudden invasion of the unknown can result in poetic feeling, or in that of the sacred. It can also produce the effect of anguish or of ecstasy, and not only anguish but also, of course, the effect of terror. I do not, by the way, consider this to be the complete picture. Other aspects do indeed exist. It may, however, be complete insofar as certain other forms are not precisely reducible to one of those just enumerated. Such, for example, is the case of the tragic.

In any case, I think we might recognize the impossibility of discussing laughter outside the framework of a philosophy which goes beyond laughter itself, as, for example, that which I might term a philosophy of un-knowing, which I am attempting to outline before you over a series of lectures which are ordered, up to a certain point.

A certain reciprocity, in this respect, should be noted. I believe it is impossible to speak of un-knowing in any way other than in our experience of it. This experience always has an effect, as laughter or tears, the poetic feeling, anguish or ecstasy. And I do not think it possible to talk seriously of un-knowing apart from these effects.

I now wish to stress, incidentally, another aspect of the difficulty involved in the interpretation of laughter. I think it pointless to try to approach laughter as a mystery to be solved by a personal philosophy formulated quite independently of any thought of laughing.

There is always something extremely interesting in the attempt, in afterthought, to test a philosophy on the problem of laughter. Its extreme interest lies in its recognition that philosophy should be able to supply the key to the problem of laughter. But this key will, I believe, provide no opening at all, if it is not made expressly for the lock in question.

I think that in straining to solve the problem of laughter, we have to begin by thinking about laughing, insofar as one does philosophical work. Philosophical reflection must, I think, bear first on laughter.

Given my immediately preceding statement, that may come as a surprise. But the contradiction is obviously a superficial one. I have said that the problem of laughter should not be isolated, that it must, on the contrary, be linked to the problem of tears, to the problem of sacrifice, and so forth. I mean by that,

essentially, that we must begin with an experience of laughter as related to the experience of sacrifice, the experience of the poetic, and so forth. Let us be clear. I do not mean that these are necessarily simultaneous, but I do believe in the possibility of beginning with the experience of laughter and not relinquishing it when one passes from this particular experience to its neighbor, the sacred or the poetic. This means, if you like, finding in the given which is laughter the central given of philosophy, its very first and perhaps its ultimate given.

I now wish to explain myself on this point. I should like to make as clear and precise as possible this determinate orientation of philosophy, or at least of the reflective experience as based on the experience of laughter. And I shall therefore take my own personal experience as point of departure.

I may say indeed that insofar as I am a philosopher, mine is a philosophy of laughter. It is a philosophy founded on the experience of laughter, and which does not even make any further claim. It is a philosophy which casts off problems other than those provided by that precise experience.

I stress the fact that I prefer to speak of reflective experience. For me this has a great advantage, insofar as the word *experience* carries, despite its association with the word *reflective*, the meaning of a constantly sustained and precise effect, such as laughter, or ecstasy, or anguish.

My philosophical reflection is never pursued independently of this experience. And I must say that this is true in a double sense; for my philosophical reflection has value insofar as it modifies the effects in question, insofar as it makes of these effects conscious effects. And I think it useful to describe the way in which I have undertaken my reflection on this point.

I should begin by stating that I am not in any way a professional philosopher. I can't say that I have not studied philosophy, but I did not study in the usual way; I was not a student of philosophy. I wanted, rather systematically, by the way, to study things other than philosophy. And these studies, as things turned out—I apologize for the anecdotal character of this explanation— took me to London, and in London I was received in a house also frequented by Bergson.

Despite all this I had, as I have said, like everyone else, studied some philosophy, in that completely elementary way one does in order to pass an exam. I had indeed read a few pages of Bergson, but with the very simple reaction of one who is about to meet an important philosopher. I was embarrassed by the idea of knowing nothing, or almost nothing, of his work. So, as I have already recounted in one of my books—but I want now to relate it with more precision—I went to the British Museum and read Bergson's *On Laughter*.

It was not very satisfying reading, but I found it very interesting, nevertheless. And I have continued, in my various considerations of laughter, to refer to this theory which still seems to me one of the deepest to have been developed.

I therefore read this little book, which I found enormously gripping for reasons other than the content developed within it. What gripped me at that time was the possibility of thinking about laughter, the possibility of making laughter the object of reflection. I increasingly wanted to deepen this reflection, to distance myself from all I had remembered of Bergson's book, but from the start my thinking was directed, as I have tried to present it to you, toward both experience and reflection.

I should say, incidentally, that according to my fairly precise remembrance of the first stages of my thought as it there developed, my sole, my true interest lay in its character of experience. I went astray in difficulties of a quite secondary sort; I lacked—I was about to say—experience, but I can't use that word, since in speaking now I use it in another sense. I lacked the knowledge needed to accomplish this reflection. Still, I managed, in that reflection, a kind of plunge, from my overhanging position, toward dizziness, into the possibility of laughter.

Still, there is something in my thinking at that time that I can retain: its principle. This consisted in considering that the major problem was that of laughter. And putting this quite crudely, quite differently from the way in which I would now do so, I thought that if I could manage to learn what laughter was, I would know everything. I would have solved the problem of all philosophy. It seemed evident to me that solving the problem of laughter and solving the philosophical problem were the same thing. The object that I grasped in laughter seemed, if you like, of interest comparable to that of the object as usually posed in philosophy.

I do not seek to defend this point of view, at least in the form in which I now present it. I do need to express myself thus in order to be able to describe this experience.

I should explain that when this experience began, I was, in short, quickened by a very definite religious faith, in conformity with a dogma, and that this was very important to me, to the point where, as far as possible, I suited my action to my thoughts. Certainly, when I began to envisage the possibility of furthest descent within the sphere of laughter, the first effect was the feeling that everything offered by dogma was decomposed and swept away in a sort of deliquescent tide. I felt then that it was, after all, wholly possible to maintain faith and its related behavior, but that the tide of laughter which swept over me, made of my faith a game—a game in which I might continue to believe, but which was transcended, nonetheless, by the dynamics of the game which was given me in laughter. From that moment on, I could adhere to it only as something transcended by laughter.

It almost goes without saying that in conditions such as those, faith in dogma cannot persist, and that gradually, and as a matter of not the slightest consequence, I grew detached from all faith.

I thus emphasize that the fundamental idea I want to stress is the com-

plete absence of presuppositions. The philosophy that I propose is, at the very least, absolutely presuppositionless.

When I now speak of un-knowing, I mean essentially this: I know nothing, and if I continue to speak, it is only insofar as I have knowledge which leads me to *nothing*. This is particularly true of that sort of knowledge which I am now considering before you, since it is in order to set myself before this *nothing* that I do talk of it, to set both myself and my listeners in confrontation with this *nothing*.

I must also say that there was, from the beginning, another aspect of this mixture of belief and laughter. It very quickly became clear to me that there was nothing in my experience of laughter which was not to be found in my former religious experience. I mean that in claiming to maintain faith within the sphere of laughter I was not expressing myself precisely enough. I did maintain them, but in such deep diffusion that I felt they could be indefinitely transposed in an impulse of laughter. I could recapture all the impulses of religious experience, mingling them with the experience of laughter without feeling that religious experience to be in any way impoverished.

I may say, too, that the impulse of what I prefer to call my life rather than my work has essentially worked toward the maintenance (in ways both unexpected and, probably, most unsatisfactory from the point of view of adherence to the limits of dogma) of the whole religious experience acquired within the limits of dogma.

Similarly, I believe that when I pass, as I am now doing, from the pure and simple consideration of laughter to the more general one of un-knowing—since by un-knowing I mean mainly an experience—I remain, despite the break with all possible knowledge, within the richness of the experience I had formerly known. Un-knowing, as I understand it, does not eliminate the possibility of an experience which I consider to be equally as rich as the religious experience present in that maximum knowledge which is revelation.

It is, in short, in considering being as problematic, as wholly unknown, and in plunging into this nonknowledge, that I find an experience not only as rich, but, to me, richer still, deeper if possible, because in this experience I further part with common experience. I part with that experience of the profane in which, after all, we adhere to objects whose hold upon us is extremely doubtful, due merely to hunger, suffering, and made possible only because our actions are often commanded by fear. Within the experience of un-knowing of which I speak, there remains a religious experience; it is wholly detached from concern with the future, it is wholly detached from the hold exerted by the possible threat of suffering, it is now only play.

I am naturally led to lay stress upon the fact that this experience of laughter is rather remote from the common experience of it. I should say first, because this may seem rather strange, that this experience may be quite as detached from those movements described by medical men as cited heretofore.

It is always possible not to widen one's face without fundamentally changing anything. In that respect I can only say that, of course, the widening, the brightening of the face and even the burst of laughter are part of that experience, that we cannot suppose this experience to exclude moments of real, pealing laughter, as physiologically defined. What seems to me much more important, however, is to explain that I part with the experience and with laughter on one very important point, insofar as I understand not only theoretically what we mean in using this word, but something more.

Of course, laughter remains joyous. Notwithstanding that joy which is present in laughter and which is so paradoxically associated with objects of laughter which are not generally joyous, that joy cannot, in my view, be separated from the feeling of the tragic.

I believe, moreover, that this is not wholly exterior to the joy commonly present in laughter, insofar as for each of us, for all of us, it is always possible from the impulse of common joy to pass into the feeling of the tragic, and without any diminution of that joy. It remains true, however, that in most cases, we take care not to do so.

I would, at this point, stress something frequently stressed in my writing: the fact that this is an experience I believe to be deeply consonant with that of Nietzsche. I have frequently, I think, put things somewhat strangely, in saying that I felt at one with Nietzsche's thought, with Nietzsche himself, as well, and in some fundamental relation with Nietzsche's experience. And one may wonder if that means very much; we are all isolated; communication between one being and another is minimal; my interpretation of Nietzsche may, on the other hand, be debatable. I do nevertheless, and for a reason which is not merely an intellectual one, stress this relation between what Nietzsche was and what I am. The reason lies in a very particular kind of experience apparently proper to both Nietzsche and myself—similar, for example, to the way in which the experience of Saint Theresa was as much that of Saint John of the Cross as it was hers. They were, if you like, related on the level of communication present in dogma and in their subscribing to the same religion. This community may be present between two individuals, outside of a religious community. That is why I speak of community in speaking of Nietzsche. I mean by that precisely the following: I believe there to be a relation between the thought and experience of Nietzsche and my own, analogous to that which exists within a community.

I do want, moreover, to be clear about this. I think that Nietzsche's thought makes this experience quite clear. It is present, naturally and in particular, in the importance which Nietzsche ascribed to laughter, and this in a great number of passages, but mainly in a rather late, posthumously published work: "To see the failure of tragic natures and to laugh, that is divine." I do not think that what I represent in general when I talk of un-knowing and of the experience of its effects can be dissociated from an expression such as that.

What matters to me insofar as I speak of laughter is situating it at that point of slippage which leads to that particular experience, the laughter which becomes divine insofar as it can be one's laughter at witnessing the failure of a tragic nature. I am not sure but what there is something troubling to me in Nietzsche's expression. It is perhaps, a shade too—I would not say grandiloquent—but a shade too tragic. Indeed, once one clarifies the experience of the really tragic to the point of the ability to laugh at it, all is lightened, all is simple, and everything can be said with no pain, with no appeal to emotion other than those surmounted.

Indeed, I believe that the nature of laughter as one of that group of effects which I relate to un-knowing lies in its link to a position of dominance. In tears, for example, our experience of un-knowing, of what is present in our crying, is not one in which we have a position of dominance. One is clearly overwhelmed.

Now, it must be stated that the transcendence present in laughter is not of great interest if it is not the transcendence indicated in Nietzsche's phrase. In general we laugh on condition that our position of dominance not be at the mercy of laughter, the object of laughter. To laugh, it is necessary that one not risk losing one's position of dominance.

To return to the terms I have already employed—laughter is, let us say, the effect of un-knowing, though laughter has not, theoretically, as its object the state of un-knowing; one does not, by laughing, accept the idea that one knows nothing. Something unexpected occurs, which is in contradiction to the knowledge we do have.

Here I would cite a phrase from an article by Charles Eubé ("The Tragic Foundation of Laughter," *Critique*, no. 68, January 1953), which I find of particular interest. I say this with slight embarrassment, since I published it in the last issue of *Critique*, but one phrase in particular I found very meaningful. Here is the way in which at one point he defines laughter. It is not, properly speaking, a definition of laughter, but of the position of him who laughs. This position implies, according to Charles Eubé, "the refusal to *accept* that which, deep within ourselves, we *know*. . . ."

Indeed, he who laughs does not, theoretically, abandon his knowledge, but he refuses, for a time—a limited time—to accept it, he allows himself to be overcome by the impulse to laughter, so that what he knows is destroyed, but he retains, deep within, the conviction that it is not, after all, destroyed. When we laugh we retain deep within us that which is suppressed by laughter, but it has been only artificially suppressed, just as laughter, let us say, has the power to suspend strict logic. Indeed, when we operate within this sphere we can also retain faith, and, conversely, we can know that which we simultaneously destroy as known.

I have returned to the theme which I had developed last time in talking of lesser play as opposed to greater play. There is lesser laughter as well as greater

laughter. I don't wish to limit myself today to discussion of the greater laughter, but it is nevertheless to it that I essentially refer.

The most curious mystery within laughter comes from one's rejoicing in something which places a vital equilibrium in danger. We even rejoice most strongly thus. This, as I see it, is the case in which we must, once and for all, declare that a question such as this cannot be isolated within the sphere of laughter. The same indeed applies to tears.

Tears are deeply ambiguous. We all know that there is pleasure in crying, that we find in tears a kind of solace we may often not care to accept, but which overcomes us. There is something intoxicating in tears, as in laughter. One would, I think, have no difficulty in showing that tears can be considered as related to laughter, to the invasion of the unknown, to the elimination of a part of this world which we consider as the world known in all the parts generally seen as a whole. If someone dies, for example, it is true that a familiar order is deeply altered, and that we must face the substitution, before us and in spite of us, of something that we know by something unknown to us, for example, the presence of the dead, or more precisely, the absence of the living. Tears, more than anything else, mark the disappearance, the sudden destruction of the known universe in which we belong.

But tears, like laughter, are strange in nature. And this stranger nature I shall have some difficulty in describing, for it is not a classic object of study. There exist, first of all, beyond the tears of pain, the tears of sadness, the tears of death, the tears of joy. Now of tears of joy we do frequently need to speak. But beyond tears of joy, there may be tears more curious still, which are not usually the object of understanding. I tend to think that eyes fill with tears for all sorts of complex reasons. I can, I believe, do no more now than provide some indications of my meaning.

There are, I think, tears of success, which are very frequent. They are obviously not so frequent that I am, for example, curious to know whether or not some of you have concrete experience, knowledge of the tears of success. Actually, I know nothing of what I call tears of success; they have not been subject to study, like laughter, not so far as I know.

For example, an unhoped-for success can bring tears to one's eyes, and so can a wholly extraordinary stroke of chance. I will cite one instance, surprising even to me, which I have never been able to mention or hear mentioned without tears filling my eyes. I know someone who, during the war, was an officer on board the *Hood*, until almost the day of the catastrophe. On that day, or perhaps the day before—it was a matter of a few hours—he left on a mission in a motor launch, so his mother naturally believed him dead. His death was moreover announced, and it was not until days and days later that his mother learned that he was alive. Now, I do not think that this unhoped-for element is something which must necessarily bring tears to one's eyes, but it can do so. And

this, in my view, places it at something of a distance from what is the general, classical view of tears.

I should say that I was, in this respect, struck by something; this is not the only example familiar to me, but I generally cannot manage to recall the examples that should be present in my memory; I almost always forget. I have frequently had this experience, but have not, so to speak, ever noticed it; I am not very methodical and I generally forget it. You see, moreover, that I speak now of a domain which is still wholly open to investigation, which is wholly unknown.

I do not want to cause confusion. Certainly, when I talk of the unknown, it is not of that sort that I speak. There is, however, something wholly particular which seems, nevertheless, quite clear to me: essential to this cause of tears is the element of the unhoped-for, the unanticipated, which returns us to the theme which I have generally introduced.

I shan't continue this exposition by talking more generally of the different effects heretofore enumerated. I have already, in this series of lectures, discussed the relations between eroticism and un-knowing, and between the sacred and un-knowing. I might, perhaps, in another lecture, speak of the relations between ecstasy and anguish and un-knowing, but I shall, this evening, limit myself to that which I have already presented.

In pronouncing the word *ecstasy*, I shall limit myself to saying merely the following: laughter, when considered as I have done, initiates a sort of general experience which is, in my view, comparable to what the theologians call "mystical theology" or "negative theology." But I must add that there is, in this respect, an essential difference to be noted: this experience, so far as I am concerned, is not negative merely within certain limits; it is totally negative. To this experience and to its accompanying reflection, I would want to give the name of "atheology," composed of the privative prefix *a* and of the word *theology*. It is an atheology whose fundamental consideration, let us say, is present in the following proposition: God is an effect of un-knowing. He can nevertheless be known as an effect of un-knowing—like laughter, like the sacred.

I can then say the following: that this experience is, on the whole, part of the general line of religions. In speaking as I do, I am aware not only of adopting a basically religious attitude, but further, of representing a kind of constituted religion. There is no question of foundation of a religion. No, there is no foundation, since there is no possible presupposition; there is only a possibility of experience. But not all religions have been founded, after all; religions were able to be simply experiences constituting a more or less coherent dogma, and often less rather than more.

I will, moreover, say in conclusion that I would not in any case want to underestimate the philosophical character of this entire way of seeing. First of all, I declare with insistence that this way of seeing, despite its negative char-

acter, is necessarily linked to a positive philosophy. All that it can add to this principle—that of negation—is the recognition that positive philosophy itself is not, for him who is positioned in experience as I have described it, a sort of ineluctable necessity; it is, rather, suspended, as I have suggested that dogma might be, within laughter.

I would also note something which I believe to be of a certain importance: that the philosophies to which I thus refer have something quite curious in common, that Hegel, like Heidegger, had an experience of theology. The word *experience* may be out of place, of that I am not sure, but they did have knowledge of theology. And there is, I believe, reason to think that negative theology was not unknown either to Heidegger or to Hegel, and that the Hegelian dialectic, in particular, cannot be considered entirely unrelated, historically at least, to negative theology.

More importantly, I would add, moreover, that one must, in thus expressing oneself, be able to state what seems possible concerning morality and human behavior. I have, in my last lecture, already indicated certain principles in this regard. But I am not sure that they suffice, and I am indeed certain that what I shall have to say this evening will be no more so. But I was nevertheless quite struck to hear one listener ask me last time if I could not say something like: given these conditions, what is to be done? I think the question was not so badly framed as I have just presented it, but it came more or less to the same thing.

What I said was quite simple. I had stated that the game would require a certain boldness and that it was in the boldness of play, in the boldness of play in which nothing is ever given, in which we have no guarantee of any kind, that our only possibility might be found. All that should be shown in a relatively coherent relation to what I have just stated. But I should like to convey a clearer idea of what I now have to add.

I read, a few days ago, a book which some of you have certainly read, a book by Hemingway entitled *The Old Man and the Sea*, and I was struck, upon reading it, by the sense that Hemingway's morality is, on the whole, a very familiar one. I say Hemingway's morality, because he obviously has moral preoccupations, and it would be mistaken not to perceive the morality of his work. And it is basically very simple; it is the master's moralilty, that of the master according to Hegel, not, I think, according to Nietzsche—but that can be made clearer.

Hemingway, in short, cares only for that which can be cared for by men who have adopted the attitude of the master. The master is a man who may hunt, who may fish, who does not work. The master faces death as a game, and that is what interests Hemingway, always. We never see him represent, for example, the hero in work. He always represents men who assume risk, and not a risk into which anguish enters as destruction. There is in Hemingway's characters always something that has been surmounted. Now this manner of surmounting is clearer in his last book, *The Old Man and the Sea.*

For those who have not read it, I shall say that this book presents an old man stricken by misfortune, who tries to catch swordfish, which are very large. Each time he goes out in his boat, he does so in vain, continually returning empty-handed. Finally he goes out one more time, but alone, with no one to assist him, because given his run of ill luck, no one can or wants to follow him any more, and he meets with good fortune, but under conditions which very quickly turn to misfortune in the extreme. That is to say, he has, at first, the hardest time in mastering the big fish he has caught; it leads him far off his course and in large measure subjects him to a veritable torture, because he lacks the strength to control this big fish. And all ends in the fact that on his return, when he has nevertheless mastered it, the sharks begin, despite the old fisherman's desperate efforts, to eat the fish on which he might have lived for some time; and despite his efforts to kill as many sharks as possible, he returns with nothing.

From the point of view which I have adopted, there is something remarkable in this old man, who remains, from beginning to end, essentially *sovereign*. It is not without significance that this man is not a worker in the proper sense of the word, but a fisherman. Fishing is not quite work. It is, if we like, the work of primitive man, but it is work which does not create that alienation which characterizes the slave's work. In our time still, anyone who considers himself a master can fish. Fishing is still the property of the master.

Now, the possibility here introduced by Hemingway seems to me quite remarkable. It consists in knowing how to keep silent, knowing how to endure anything, and, in short, in living within the sole possibility offered in chance, in the ability to find oneself in a position of dominance, despite every imaginable mischance.

I must say that I am not without reservations. I found it quite felicitous that things be thus represented; but there is, nevertheless, something troubling in Hemingway's characters. I am, perhaps, troubled in particular since that time when I learned that Hemingway, at a date unknown to me, was converted to Catholicism. Obviously that may, on the contrary, be agreeable to many. For my part, I was deeply disappointed. And I relate that to what else may be disappointing in the man. His deep anti-intellectualism is known to all, and I think that this anti-intellectualism accounts for that which is basically very limited and entirely anachronistic in the affirmation of the master's morality pursued throughout his work. This claim of the affirmation of the master's morality is my own, but there are grounds for it.

I do nevertheless want to stress the rather painful feeling conveyed by Hemingway's hatred of man's intellectual effort—not that I do not perceive and even share the possible feeling of intense repugnance for the intellectual, but I believe this repugnance must also be surmounted. We have to surmount it. Indeed, I believe we cannot avoid going to the extreme limit of things. The world today poses many problems for us which are related, for example, to work and

to all the questions raised thereby. I believe in any case that as persons subject to its law we cannot escape it, we cannot play at being fishermen, hunters, and bullfight lovers with nothing else to do, and we cannot, conversely, ignore what is represented in man's desperate effort to go to the limit of his intellectual capacities.

I believe, in any case, that if the seduction of Hemingway, which is linked to ignorance, can be attained, it will be on one condition only: that we go to the extreme limit of knowledge. It is only beyond knowledge, and perhaps in that un-knowing which I have here presented, that we can win the right to ignorance. But I do not think that can be done straight off. I do not think that we can elude any problem whatsoever, and I believe that the matchless courage which may in any case be demanded of us is needed, as well, so that we may endure the exhaustion, and even the tedium of the ant's labor carried out within our heads.

February 9, 1953

The Ascent of Mount Aetna

Yesterday I went to Laure's grave and as I stepped out of the door, I found the night so dark that I wondered if I should find the way; it was so black that I felt throttled, unable to think of anything else, and thus unable to enter the half-ecstatic state which starts each time I take that same path. After a long while, halfway up the hill, feeling increasingly lost, I recalled the ascent of Aetna, and felt suddenly overwhelmed. Everything was just as black and as subtly infused with terror as on that night when Laure and I climbed Aetna's slopes. (For us the ascension meant a great deal; in order to go there, we had given up a trip to Greece, and had had to be reimbursed for the cost of the crossing, already partly paid for.) Arriving at dawn on the crest of the vast, bottomless crater we were exhausted, with our eyes almost starting out of their sockets in a solitude too strange, too catastrophic. There was that shattering moment when we leaned over the gaping wound, the crack in that star on which we draw breath.

The picture of ash and flames which André * painted after we had told him about it was near Laure when she died; it is still in my room. Halfway along our path, having entered an infernal region, we could also discern, in the distance, the volcano's crater at the far end of a long valley of lava. One could not possibly imagine a place which demonstrated more clearly the fearful instability of things, and Laure was suddenly gripped by an anguish such that she fled, madly, running straight ahead; she was driven to distraction by the terror and desolation in which we now found ourselves. Yesterday, I continued the ascent of the hill to her grave, overwhelmed by a memory thus charged with nocturnal terror (but with a subterreanean glory, too, with that nocturnal glory known not to real men, but only to shadows trembling with cold). Upon entering the cemetery, I was myself so moved that I lost my wits; I felt fear of Laure, and it seemed that were she to appear to me, I should only cry out in terror. Despite the extreme darkness, it was possible to make out the graves (they ap-

* André Masson. — trans.

peared as vague, relatively white forms), the crosses, and the slabs of stone; I also glimpsed two glowworms. But Laure's grave, overgrown, formed—I do not know why—the only absolutely black area. Upon reaching it I suddenly felt pain in both my arms, for some unknown reason, and it was, at that moment, as though I'd split in two, as if I were embracing her. My hands groped around my own body, and it felt as if I were touching her, inhaling her presence. A terrible tenderness took hold of me, and it was again just as it had been when we were suddenly reunited, as when the obstacles between two people have fallen away. And then, realizing that I should once more become myself, constrained by my own dull needs, I began to groan and to implore her pardon. I wept bitterly, no longer knowing what to do, for I well knew I should lose her again. I was stricken with intolerable shame at the idea that I should become, for example, myself, as I am at this moment of writing, or worse still. I had only a certainty (but this certainty was thrilling) that the experience of a lost soul, detached from the usual objects of action, is utterly without limits.

My feeling of yesterday was no less ardent, no less true, no less charged with meaning for the destiny of living individuals than the encounter with the unintelligible in other, vaguer, or less personal forms. Being blazes in the dark through us all, from each to each, and the flames are all the brighter if love has collapsed the prison walls enclosing each of us. But what is greater than the breach through which two beings acknowledge one another, free of the vulgarity, the flatness introduced by the infinite? He who has, at least, loved beyond the grave is thereby free, as well, of the vulgarity of the daily relation, but never were those constricting bonds more surely broken than by Laure. Pain, horror, tears, madness, orgy, fever, and then death were the daily bread Laure shared with me. And this bread leaves the memory of a tenderness, deathly but immense; it was the form assumed by a love bent on overstepping the limits of things. And still, how many times together did we attain moments of unattainable joy, starry nights, flowing streams? In the forest of Lyons at nightfall, she walked with me in silence, I looking at her, unawares. Have I ever known greater certainty of what in life is possible in response to the heart's most unfathomable impulses? I watched my destiny moving forward beside me in the dark; no words can express my recognition of her. I can never express how beautiful Laure was; her imperfect beauty was the moving image of an ardent and uncertain destiny. The brilliant transparency of those nights is equally inexpressible. He who loves beyond the grave has at least the right to release love within himself from its human limits and, holding nothing back, to give it the meaning apparently inconceivable for anything else.

I wish to transcribe this passage from a letter of Laure's to Jean Grémillon in September (or October) 1937, upon our return from Italy: "We have done, Georges and I, the ascent of Aetna. It is quite terrifying. I should like to tell you about it, I can't think of it without feeling disturbed, and I relate everything I do right now to this vision. I therefore find it easier to grit my teeth . . .

so strongly—as if to break my jaw." I transcribe these sentences, but I no longer really understand their inner truth. I no longer even seek to understand, for I can do so only in reaching for something almost inaccessible and only rarely possible.

September 15, 1939

Autobiographical Note

Born, Billom (Puy-le-Dôme), September 10, 1897. Family of peasant stock for two or three generations, originally from the Ariège, Puy-le-Dôme, and the Cantal. Father blind (prior to birth) and paralytic (1900).

Schooling at Reims lycée, very bad student, almost expelled in January 1913, refuses to continue schooling and stays idle at home until October, but agrees to enter Epernay secondary school as a boarder. Now becomes a good student. Brought up with no religious instruction, now leans toward Catholicism, and is formally converted in August 1914.

Having fled to safety with his mother's family in the Cantal, is called up for service in January 1916. Falls gravely ill, is discharged in 1917. Briefly considers becoming a priest, or rather a monk. Enters the School of Paleography and Library Science in November 1918, is regularly at the head of his class, but graduates second.

Two months in England in 1920. Following a stay with the Benedictines of Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight, suddenly loses his faith because his Catholicism has caused a woman he has loved to shed tears.

Upon graduation from the School of Paleography is named fellow of the School of Advanced Hispanic Studies in Madrid (later the Casa Velásquez). Enthusiasm for bullfights; witnesses death of Granero, one of Spain's most popular matadors (certainly the most popular after Belmonte) in the Madrid arena.

Enters the Bibliothèque nationale as a librarian in July 1922.

Is convinced, from 1914 on, that his concern in this world is with writing and, in particular, with the formulation of a paradoxical philosophy. Reading of Nietzsche in 1923 is decisive. Resolving to travel, begins study of Russian,

Georges Bataille

Chinese, and even of Tibetan, which he quickly abandons. Translates, with collaborator, book by Leon Chestov from the Russian (1924).

Forms friendship with Michel Leiris, then with André Masson, Théodore Fraenkel. Enters into contact with the surrealists, but the result is mutual hostility between himself and André Breton. In 1926, writes a short book entitled *W.-C.* (this book, of violent opposition to any form of dignity, will not be published and is finally destroyed by its author), then, in 1927, *The Solar Anus* (published, with Masson's etchings, by the Galerie Simon in 1931). The virulently obsessive character of his writing troubles one of his friends, Dr. Dausse, who has him undergo psychoanalysis with Dr. Borel. The psychoanalysis has a decisive result; by August 1927 it put an end to the series of dreary mishaps and failures in which he had been floundering, but not to the state of intellectual intensity, which still persists.

Marriage in 1928. Meeting at that time with Georges Henri Rivière through the publication, in 1929, of *Documents*, an art magazine containing a miscellaneous section edited by Bataille under the somewhat remote supervision of Carl Einstein. Bataille publishes a certain number of articles in this journal, his earliest published writings, of which the first is a text on Gallic coins admired by him. (Breton will, following a misunderstanding, come to see this article as an attack on Gallic art.) The mutual hostility of Bataille and Breton at that time brings Bataille into closer relation with ex-members of the surrealist group; in addition to friends such as Leiris and Masson, Jacques Baron, Jacques-André Boiffard, Robert Desnos, Georges Limbour, Max Morise, Jacques Prévert, Raymond Queneau, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Roger Vitrac. These are largely the names listed at the end of the Second Surrealist Manifesto (published in *La révolution surréaliste*, 1929), in which they are subjected to a violent attack, ending with the denunciation of Georges Bataille, considered to be planning the formation of an antisurrealist group. This group never existed; nevertheless those singled out by the Second Manifesto were agreed upon the publication of *Un cadavre* (a title already used by the future surrealists on the death of Anatole France), a blistering indictment of Breton (which in no way prevented most of them, including Bataille himself, from later reconciliation).

Documents, the journal which had been at the origin of these polemics owing to its publication of numerous articles by the authors of *Un cadavre*, ceased to exist in 1931. Shortly afterward, Bataille entered the Democratic Communist Circle, which published *La critique sociale* (from 1931 to 1934) under the editorship of Boris Souvarine. Bataille published several long studies, including "The Notion of Expenditure," "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," and, in collaboration with Raymond Queneau, "Critique of the Foundations of the

Hegelian Dialectic." Bataille was then a close friend of Queneau, who worked daily at the Bibliothèque nationale, gathering documentation for a book on "literary madmen" (which, some years later, ended in the publication of *Enfants du Limon*).

The Democratic Communist Circle went out of existence in 1934. At that time Bataille, after several months of illness, underwent a serious psychological crisis. He separated from his wife. He then wrote *Blue of Noon*, which is in no way the narrative of this crisis, but which can be considered as reflecting it.

Bataille personally took the initiative in 1935 to found a small political group which, under the name of Counterattack, united some former members of the Communist Circle and, following a definite reconciliation with André Breton, the whole of the surrealist group. Some meetings of Counterattack took place in the "Grenier des Augustine" (now Picasso's studio), with the last, on January 21, 1936, dedicated to the death of Louis XVI. Breton, Maurice Heine, and Bataille took the floor.

Counterattack was dissolved at the end of the winter. (The supposed pro-fascist tendency on the part of certain of Bataille's friends, and, to a lesser degree, of Bataille himself. For an understanding of the element of truth in this paradoxical fascist tendency, despite its radically contrary intention, one should read Elio Vittorini's *The Red Carnation*, together with its strange postface. There is no doubt that the bourgeois world as it exists constitutes a provocation to violence and that, in that world, the exterior forms of violence hold a fascination. Be that as it may, Bataille considers, at least since Counterattack, that this fascination can lead to the worst.)

With Counterattack dissolved, Bataille immediately resolved to form, together with those of his friends who were former members (these included Georges Ambrosino, Pierre Klossowski, Patrick Waldberg), a "secret society" which, turning its back on politics, would pursue goals that would be solely religious (but anti-Christian, essentially Nietzschean). This society was formed. Its intentions are in part expressed in the journal *Acéphale*, published in four issues between 1936 and 1939. The *Collège de sociologie*, founded in March 1936, represented, as it were, the outside activity of this "secret society"; this "college," whose domain was not all of sociology, but rather the "sacred," expressed itself publicly through a series of lectures. The founding members were, in addition to Bataille, Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris. Lewitsky, Jean Paulhan, and Georges Duthuit lectured there.

Of the "secret society" properly so-called it is difficult to talk, but certain of its members have apparently retained the impression of a "voyage out of the

world." Temporary, surely, obviously unendurable; in September 1939, all of its members withdrew. Disagreement arose between Bataille and the membership, more deeply absorbed than Bataille by immediate concern with the war. Bataille, in fact, had begun in 1938 to practice yoga, but really without close adherence to the precepts of the traditional discipline, in considerable chaos and in a state of mental turmoil pushed to the extreme. A death occurring in 1938 had torn him apart. It was in complete solitude that he began, in the opening days of the war, to write *Le coupable*, in which he describes a mystical experience of a heterodoxical nature in the course of development and, at the same time, some of his reactions to the events then taking place. At the end of 1940 he meets Maurice Blanchot, with whom links of admiration and agreement are immediately formed. Toward the end of 1941, before *Le coupable* has been completed, Bataille begins to write *L'expérience intérieure*, completed before the end of the following year.

Owing to an infected lung, he is forced to leave the Bibliothèque nationale in April 1942. In 1943 he settles in Vézelay; there he remains until 1949. (*On Nietzsche*, *Memorandum.*) While living in Vézelay he founds a monthly review, *Critique*, in 1946. By dint of frequent trips to Paris he succeeds, in collaboration with Eric Weil and then with Jean Piel, in endowing this publication, in which he publishes many studies, with a definite authority.

If thought and its expression have become his main area of activity, this has not been without repeated attempts, within the limits of his means, at experiences lacking apparent coherence, but whose very incoherence signifies an effort to comprehend the totality of possibility, or to put it more precisely, to reject, untiringly, any possibility exclusive of others. Bataille's aspiration is that of a sovereign existence, free of all limitations of interest. He is, indeed, concerned with *being*, and being as *sovereignty*, with transcending the development of means. At issue is the attainment of an end over and above means—at the price, if necessary, of an impious disturbance. Philosophy, for example, for Bataille comes down to acrobatics—in the worst sense of the word. The issue is not that of attainment of a goal, but rather of escape from those traps which goals represent.

We must not elude the task incumbent upon all men, but reserve a share of sovereignty, a share that is irreducible. On this level it is an attitude which follows in the wake of religious experience, but the religious experience freed from the quest for means, that religious experience which must be an end if it is anything at all. There is work on Bataille's part, but it is an effort to escape, an effort of release toward a freedom that is direct.

1958 (?)

Heterology and the Critique of Instrumental Reason

ANNETTE MICHELSON

The analogy between sacrificial death by fire and solar radiance is man's response to the manifest splendor of the universe.

—*Georges Bataille,* The Limit of Utility

The history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice: in other words, the history of renunciation.

—*Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno,* The Dialectic of Enlightenment

Consider Bataille's *Cogito*: "When I think, I am like a whore undressing." Traversing the full range of the writing, one ends by assenting to this movement of stripping and delivery of the disincarnate self to a reader/auditor/interlocutor/spectator, frequently implied, invoked, evoked, addressed. One has also, however, a sense of ritual, somber and deliberate, of a ceremony of effort and abandon, incessantly renewed in solicitation and encounter. In the constancy of renewal we take the measure of Bataille's assiduous interrogation, issuing, paradoxically enough, in a systemic of sorts, a cosmology which founds his general economy. It is this which affords us, in turn, a certain license of approach. Whatever our point of departure, it will signal direction to a center, to the abyss which opens on to the sacred, disclosing, on the way, the stations of Bataille's trajectory, the terms which resonate throughout our course.

I depart, then, from the text offered in this issue of *October* as "The Ascent of Mount Aetna." Its place in the *Oeuvres complètes*[1] is entirely marginal; it is, in fact, a note written in 1954, during the composition of the postscript to *Le*

1. The ten volumes of the *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, Gallimard, 1970; hereafter *OC*) compose a superb variorum edition. The extensive notes and appendices offer important supplementary texts of many kinds, both fragmentary and complete: essays, sketches, outlines, diary entries,

coupable, dated, more exactly in the manner of a diary entry, September 14, and found after Bataille's death among his papers.[2] In it Bataille superimposes two experiences of that terror which is for him indissociable from the sacred, two occasions upon which he had confronted death, two nights of a darkness incomparable with any other: the first spent on the slopes of Aetna, climbing to the very rim of its crater, and a second, some years later, which marked his encounter with the unintelligible within the ecstasy of grief following upon the death of Laure, the woman with whom he had shared that experience of ascent and abyss.[3]

The terror felt that second night recalls and equals the experience of "the immense instability of things" sensed as he had leaned over "the gaping wound, the crack in that star upon which we draw breath." For Bataille, indeed, human experience at its fullest — that which he names "communication" or "intimacy" — is sustained by the opening of the self to terror shared. It is in the scissiparity inherent in the process of cell division that Bataille locates the origin of those gaps, breaches, openings, wounds by which communication, sexual and social, is attained. Aetna's crater, then, will hypostatize in its disquieting hyperbole that implacable contingency which opens a breach within the spatiotemporal order of earthly existence, of productivity. And it does so, moreover, in a movement of expenditure which is lavish and mortal.

Aetna is not only the crack in that star within the solar system upon which we draw breath; it is, as well, the earth's prodigal eruption in a sumptuary effervescence of excretion.[4] It is, therefore, a model of that destructive gesture

---

and correspondence. The meticulous generosity of this edition sets a scholarly standard. Michel Foucault's foreword informs us that the collating and preparation of manuscripts as well as the critical apparatus, begun in 1967, are the work of M. Denis Hollier for volumes I and II, M. Thadée Klossowski for volumes III and IV, Mme. Leduc for volume V, and MM. Henri Ronse and J.-M. Rey for the five last volumes. The selection made for this issue of *October*, from volumes I, II, V, VI, VII, and VIII, retraces Bataille's trajectory as articulated in the notion of the sacred through the meditation on laughter, sacrifice, and unknowing. In our choice of texts, we have attempted to set that trajectory within the political history of his times and in reference to his sustained meditation on the thought of Nietzsche. Readers are also referred to a recently published selection of translations from volumes I and II of the Gallimard edition, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927–1939*, edited and with an introduction by Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985. An English language edition of *Le collège de sociologie (1937–1939)*, edited by Denis Hollier, will also be published by the University of Minnesota Press. Finally, it is hoped that Hollier's study of Bataille, *La prise de la concorde* (Gallimard, 1974), will be made available in English translation; it is by far the finest effort in a growing exegetical literature, and one to which those who work toward an understanding of Bataille are indebted.

2. Bataille, *OC*, vol. V, pp. 499–501.

3. A collection of the writings of Laure, edited and published by Bataille and Michel Leiris after her death, has been reprinted in Laure, *Ecrits: fragments, lettres*, ed. J. Peignot and le Collectif Change, Paris, Societé Nouvelle des Editions Pauvert, 1977. This edition also includes Bataille's biographical sketch, additional correspondence, and memoirs of other people acquainted with her.

4. Luis Buñuel relates in his memoirs (*Mon dernier soupir*, Paris, Laffont, 1982, p. 148) that a

which cancels relations of production and use among men and between them and environing nature. Before Aetna's crater men stand, as always, in discontinuity; but they can together feel the vertigo of that abyss.

Climbing, some years later, the hill which leads to Laure's grave, the memory of that first ascent returns. And there returns, as well, the special darkness of that night, for Bataille steps across the threshold of his house in the direction of the burial site into a night whose darkness is, as it were, inexplicable. His pilgrimage is marked by a sudden intensity of terror and by an experience of splitting, of possession by the body and spirit of the dead woman, and it culminates in an ecstatic recapturing of love lost. But it is now that he is overcome by a sense of shame, weeping within his rapture at the inevitable reversion to a state of ordinary being, his shame rendered intolerable at the prospect of "becoming once again this person that I am, writing"—thinking, stripping.[5]

And one now recalls Bataille's celebration of Emily Brontë in the first essay of the collection entitled *Literature and Evil*,[6] and especially of that novel whose subject is, for Bataille, the rebellion of one cursed and expelled from his realm, one wholly unrestrained in his burning desire to regain that realm, external and opposed to the rule of reason, order, and mundane purpose. Quoting Jacques Blondel,[7] who has indicated the links between the discourse of Sade and that of Heathcliff, he refers to that passage in which Justine's torturer speaks of the voluptuousness of destruction, its delicious tickling of the senses and the ecstasy of "divine infamy," passing then to Heathcliff's declaration that only his birth in a country of strict legality and delicacy of taste stands in the way of his desired diversion through the slow vivisection of the two prime objects of his hatred.

Emily Brontë represents, then, in her solitude, the dream of a sacred violence wholly unattenuated by any compact or accord with organized society, the rejection of that questionable identification of God with reason, installed by Christianity in a movement of unwarranted elision. "Not that she professed it,"

---

meeting between Bataille and himself was arranged by Jacques Prévert in response to Bataille's expressed wish to meet the author of *Un chien andalou* (1928), whose celebrated first sequence is constructed around the slitting of a woman's eye by a man armed with a razor blade. Buñuel has nothing to say of the meeting, but remarks upon Breton's dislike of Bataille as "too coarse, too material." For Bataille, at the same time, surrealism represented an "Icarian subterfuge," but one imagines that he might have found *L'age d'or* (1930) equally intriguing in its deployment of scatological imagery, particularly in the sequence following that of the lovers' ecstatic embrace in the mud, when their reunion is fantasized as the screen's surface is flooded with excrement—an effect achieved with stock footage of the lava of an active volcano.

5. Although this entire episode lends itself most evidently to a reading in terms of Freud's theory of the uncanny, I consider this to lie outside the scope of this essay.

6. Bataille, *OC*, vol. VIII, pp. 172–187.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 176. Bataille cites Jacques Blondel, *Emily Brontë: Expérience spirituelle et création poètique*, Paris, P.U.F., 1955, p. 406.

says Bataille, "in the explicit form which I, in my clumsiness, have given it. But . . . she felt and expressed it mortally, divinely as it were."[8]

Bataille has sensed in his own agony of shame and despair that the return to the realm of purposeful action means submission to the preeminence of duration over the instant, to that of discourse over the sovereignty of passion, retreat from the gratuitous transport of joy before death into the limits of the quotidian, the projection of the future, the real. Bataille must, in short, reemerge from the realm of terror and joy, which is that of the sacred, into the world of the profane, retread the path that leads across the transgressive limit around which he has, by a founding gesture of demarcation, constituted his cosmos and his economy.

Let us review the sources of that founding gesture and its impulse.

We locate them largely in that tradition of French sociology and anthropology to which, over the years, Bataille paid repeated tribute, epitomized (though by no means wholly so) in the work of Durkheim and Mauss and in that of his contemporary, Alfred Métraux. It is *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*[9] that presents Durkheim's masterly analysis of religious thought and institutions through those of primitive and/or archaic societies. Common to all is the classification of things and ideas into two groups, the profane and the sacred. Thus is the world divided in two, and the oppositional character of this division is absolute. The variety of sacred things is infinite, extending beyond the sphere of objects and aspects of nature to persons, actions, utterance, and gesture. The realm of sacred things cannot, therefore, be generally circumscribed, nor are those things to be defined with respect to their status within established hierarchies of values, there being sacred things of every degree. They are characterized, rather, by their heterogeneity with respect to the profane. And that heterogeneity is held to be absolute.

> In all the history of human thought there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another. *The traditional opposition of good and bad is nothing beside this; for the good and the bad are only two opposed species of the same class, namely morals*, just as sickness and health are two different aspects of the same order of facts, life, while the sacred and the profane have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as two distinct classes, as two worlds between which there is nothing in common. The forces which play in one are not simply those which are met with in the other, but a little stronger; they are of a different sort. In different religions, this opposition has been conceived in different ways. Here, to separate these two sorts of things, it has seemed

8. Bataille, *OC*, vol. IX, p. 175.
9. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain, New York, The Free Press, 1965.

> sufficient to localize them in different parts of the physical universe; there, the first have been put into an ideal and transcendental world, while the material world is left in full possession of the others. But howsoever much the forms of the contrast may vary, the fact of the contrast is universal.[10]

Durkheim goes on to speak of a passage between these worlds as requiring a metamorphosis, thereby revealing "the essential duality of the two kingdoms." Thus initiation rites as commonly practiced are the ceremonial introduction of youth into the religious life. They constitute the rite of passage from the world of the profane into the world of the sacred and are consequently conceived not as development of a preexistent self, but as transformation, rebirth. Pointing out that the ceremonies attendant upon this rebirth are intended literally and not only symbolically, he then asks, "Does this not prove that between the profane being that he was and the religious being which he becomes, there is a break of continuity?"

It is around this threshold of the sacred, the fault line marked by interdictions that solicit transgressive action, that Bataille will construct his heterology and elaborate the theater of sovereignty. The heterology, which cannot be wholly contained in the discursive modality, originates as a meditation upon the sacred in its verbal, philological ambiguity. For the notion of the sacred, offered, as it happens, by Freud as an example of the antithetical meaning of primal words, refers to that which is both holy and accursed. Heterology, then, will center on the sacred as posited of those things which are, in common practice, hidden, obscured, subject to prohibition or censorship—objects of revulsion, excluded from quotidian contact or touch, abstracted from use. Thus death and decay in their diverse aspects and figures, the body's excreta (tears, sweat, shit, blood, and menstrual blood), those substances cast off, excluded, hedged around with silence and interdiction, partake of the sacred. And manifestly, as well, those states of loss of self we know in rage, laughter, orgy, and sacrifice. We may say of such states, as Bataille does indeed say, that these are states of sovereignty.

For Durkheim, the institution of sacrifice had been illuminated and renewed by the work of Robertson Smith insofar as the sacrificial banquet is seen as the means of communication within the same flesh of worshipper and his god, thus forming a bond of kinship between them. In this view, sacrifice is seen not as renunciation, but rather as communion. Its attendant ceremonies, in generating assemblies of men, thereby multiplying the relations among individual members of the community, effects a change in "the contents of consciousness." On feast days, upon entry into the sacred, the furthering of private interest through economic incentives and the satisfaction of personal, material needs are "eclipsed," and the concentration on common beliefs and traditions,

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54, italics added.

on the memory of their ancestors, and on the collectivity of which they are the incarnation predominates. The result is not merely social unity, but the sense of a quickening of the community, a greater sense of its reality, and a revivification, a strengthening of every consciousness.

> So men do not deceive themselves when they feel at this time that there is something outside of them which is born again, that there are forces which are reanimated and a life which reawakens. . . . For the spark of a social being which each bears within him necessarily participates in this collective renovation. The individual soul is regenerated too, by being dipped again in the source from which its life comes; consequently, it feels itself strong, calmer, more fully master of itself, less dependent upon physical necessities.[11]

Bataille will claim that it is in the festivity of sacrifice and in its sacred violence that man attains that community in sovereignty which is lost in the social order founded on the primacy of production and acquisition.

It is, for the moment, however, Durkheim's choice of historical exemplification of the ritual of sacrifice which interests us. From among those occasions "in which history abounds," of strengthening and vivifying social action, from among all those assemblies animated by a common passion such that men are rendered "capable of acts and sentiments of which we are incapable when reduced to our own forces," he singles out "the night of the fourth of August, 1789, when an assembly was suddenly led to an act of sacrifice which each of its members had refused the day before, and at which they were all surprised the day after."[12] It is, then, the Constituent Assembly's adoption of the decrees abolishing feudal rights and privileges which Durkheim cites, that moment which Michelet, still infused with the euphoria of bourgeois liberalism, had celebrated as "the solemn hour in which feudalism, at the end of a thousand year reign, abdicates, abjures in self-damnation," concluding his account with the rapturous cry, "From that wonderful night on, no classes, only Frenchman; no provinces, but one France!"[13]

I have cited these texts of Durkheim because they are, currently at least, less generally referred to as formative within the theoretical context of Bataille's own work. (Bataille himself, in a lecture, speaks of a general lessening of interest in Durkheim's work; from that work, however, he wishes in no way to dissociate his own.) Most generally known and always cited, however, is the determinant effect of Mauss's "Essay on the Gift," published in 1925 and most evidently fundamental to the elaboration of a general economy centered about

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 390–391.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
13. Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la révolution française*, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1952, vol. I, p. 217.

the notion of expenditure. I want, therefore, only to specify briefly some particulars of its importance for Bataille, particulars of method.

Lévi-Strauss, in his introduction to Mauss's *Sociologie et anthropologie*, speaks of the excitement produced by this essay, that excitement we in turn discern in its unending resonance within Bataille's enterprise. Few persons, it is said, have been able to read this text without experiencing, like Malebranche upon his first reading of Descartes, the excitement felt "at the still indefinable certainty of witnessing a decisive event in the evolution of science."[14] For it was in "The Gift" that an attempt was made, for the very first time in the history of ethnology, to transcend empirical observation toward a grasp of social phenomena at a level of deeper reality. Mauss, reaching beyond description and comparison, discloses connections and links between social entities and institutions, demonstrating, as he does so, the manner in which they are reducible to basic, general forms. The techniques of operation are, moreover, viewed as closely related to those of Trubetskoy and Jakobson, engaged, at that same time, in laying the foundations of structural linguistics. Both methods involved distinguishing between purely phenomenological data insusceptible of scientific analysis and a simpler, determinant substructure. Although Mauss remained, as it were, on the threshold of his findings, we may confidently assume that degree of boldness and refinement of method with which he would, in any further elaboration, have retained the notion of "function" as structural, in the sense that "social values can be known in terms [*en fonction*] of one another." This notion stands in contradistinction to that of Malinowski, for whom the notion of function was rather that of the practical service or use rendered by custom or institution to the social formation. "Where Mauss envisaged a constant relation among phenomena as providing their explanation, Malinowski wonders only what their purpose is, so as to find their justification."[15]

Can we not say that it is this very totalizing and systemic aspect of Mauss's method, this very conception of function which replaces use with relation, that grounds Bataille's sustained engagement with Mauss's thought throughout his critique of the profane order of reason and use?

Within social existence the general principle of exchange that underlies its separate operations produces a unity of the whole more real than its parts. The institution of the gift (*potlatch*, *kula*, *sagali*) by which the circulation of wealth is assured—unremitting, regulatory in its excess—is proposed by Mauss as the model of a modern economy and an ethics of disinterestedness. It will be Bataille's task to radicalize these *conclusions de morale.*

Durkheim's appeal to the precedent of 1789 was made from a position of

14. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1930, p. xxxiii.
15. *Ibid.*, p. xxxvi.

resistance to socialist theory and practice. That appeal, as such, is nevertheless wholly consistent with Mauss's personal adherence to a socialist tradition which has, over the last dozen years, been examined within a more general analysis of the political impulses, engagements, and implications of French sociology.[16]

From his student days Mauss had been involved with socialist groups and in friendships with leading figures of the movement, among them Marcel Cachin and Jaurès himself. Mauss's abiding and predominant concern with issues of social justice, his record of militant interest and activity within French syndicalism, was marked by resistance to Marxist doctrine as articulated in the theoretical rigor of the left wing of the Socialist party. He was a founding member of the editorial staff of *L'Humanité*. His socialism postulated, however, an organic complementarity of labor and management within the framework of a rationalized industrial production.

Such a position presupposed socialism conceived as an ethical ideal, continuous with that of the French Revolution, to be realized, ultimately, through trade unionism, political reform, and the restructuring of educational institutions. Mauss's resistance to the primacy of the economic as the basis of Marxist analysis, his aversion to the conception of class struggle as the ground of justice, and his confidence in social reform situate him well to the right of those Social Democrats for whom the major Marxist theoreticians of the immediate postwar period—Gramsci and Lukács, among others—reserved their deadliest attacks. Mauss's sustained and attentive study of both pre- and postrevolutionary Russia, elaborated in his "Appréciation sociologique du bolshévisme" (1924), discloses an ambivalence of sympathy and disquiet at the drastic implications for its political life of the economic upheaval of the early period of the Soviet state.[17] Writing in 1923–24, shortly after Lenin's death, Mauss endorses the NEP and its reinsertion of a market economy as effecting a complex integration of diversity within the structures of legality and of property relations and as conducive, thereby, to the reestablishment of a political pluralism as the basis for a consensus which alone could, in his view, justify the Bolshevik project.[18] These positions and Mauss's own defense, in the 1920s, of an internationalism predicated upon the coherence and strength of national polities (as embodied, for example, in the League of Nations), and his advocacy of class collaboration, are to be read as symptomatic of the state of French socialism's right wing in the

16. For historical documentation of the respective positions of Durkheim and Mauss with regard to socialist theory and practice, see *Critique*, nos. 445–446 (June–July 1984), especially Jean-Claude Chamboredon, "Émile Durkheim: Le social, object de science. Du moral au politique?" pp. 460–532; and Florence Weber, "Un texte politique de Marcel Mauss," pp. 542–547. See also *L'arc*, no. 48 (1972), especially Pierre Birnbaum, "Du socialisme au don," pp. 41–47; and Denis Hollier, "Malaise dans la sociologie," pp. 55–62.

17. Cited in Weber, pp. 544–545.

18. These views are expressed by Mauss in letters to Elie Halévy and S. Ranulf in November 1936, as cited in Weber, pp. 545–546.

period following the Congress of Tours (1920) and the traumatic split, generated by the categorical terms of adherence to the Bolshevik program and apparatus which marked the birth of the French Communist party. Mauss maintained both his rejection of Marxist theory and his socialist affiliation with the now dissociated right wing of the Socialist party.

It is essential to recall that the "Essay on the Gift" is published in the year following the "Appréciation" and two years after the installation of the fascist regime in Italy. By 1936, which is to say in the year of the Moscow trials, Mauss can look back upon two decades successive to the Bolshevik Revolution as confirming his rejection of violence in class struggle, seeing in the rise of Italian and German fascism the completion of a cycle initiated in the Soviet project. It is in the "Conclusions de morale" section of Chapter IV that Mauss points out that "economic man is not behind us, but rather ahead of us," like the man of duty and morality, the man of science and of reason. Man has been other than he now is, and it is only a very short while since "he became a machine, further complicated by an adding machine."[19] The essay then concludes with the injunction to return to the culture of "noble expenditure" such as that practised in those "Anglo-Saxon countries" in which the expenditure of the rich is considered consistent with their role as stewards and treasurers for their fellow citizens or sometime subjects. The "excesses" of communism, contrasted with other, more benign and productive forms of communal expenditure—those of hospitality and festivity, of workers' insurance, mutual aid, and professional association—will provide models of social organization which will guarantee more than the mere personal security of the wage earner under entrepreneurial control and subject to the fluctuating value of accumulation through savings within the capitalist economy.[20]

Bataille will, then, develop his critique of capitalism and its social order through a reading of both Durkheim and Mauss in the aftermath of World War I, whose devastation had deeply, irrevocably marked his adolescence. Together with his contemporaries, he witnessed in his youth the victory of fascism in Italy. This was a time haunted by the failure of international socialism to install proletarian regimes in Germany and Hungary; it was, as well, the period of oligarchic consolidation, through fascist movements, of international capital and of its massive adoption of the production techniques and the discipline of the assembly line. Although Bataille was, as is well known, marked, together with others of his generation in Paris, by Kojève's instruction in Hegel and by his reading of Nietzsche, he remained, it would appear, relatively untouched by the developments of Hegelian Marxism and its major theoretical formulations elsewhere in Europe.

19. Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur le don," in *Sociologie et anthropologie*, p. 272.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 262–263.

This may, to some degree, account for the absence, in the considerable and growing exegetical literature on Bataille, of efforts to situate him within this period and in relation to those developments. It now appears appropriate, however, in view of a fuller understanding, to consider his work within a context larger than that of the Parisian milieu in which it developed, and to explore its relation to his contemporaries, including those of the Frankfurt school and its associates. I want, then, in the remainder of this introductory text, to point the way—if only briefly and provisionally—to a consideration of heterology as comprehended within the historical context of political aporia which generates other responses, including those of Critical Theory.

It should be understood at the outset that the theories of cultural hegemony and of reification offered in this period of political aporia can be seen as extensions of pre- or non-Marxist discourse on alienation. Both Simmel and Nietzsche had spoken to the issues later addressed by Gramsci and Lukács. Simmel's understanding of the rationalization process inscribed within western civilization[21] is reformulated by Lukács in terms of the theory of commodity fetishism, so that the capitalist system of production is seen as reproducing, in its division of labor, the dynamics of a pervasive dissociative process issuing in the fragmenting of culture, of social existence. Lukács's rereading of the Hegelian dialectic projects the reintegration of the whole. If the proletariat shares with the bourgeoisie, as Marx claimed it did, the reification of all of life's manifestations, it appears, nonetheless, as merely the "object" of the social process. Although the proletarian may appear to himself as subject of his own existence, he discovers in the immediacy of this existence the illusory nature of that appearance; he is forced to recognize that the satisfaction of his most basic needs is, as Marx puts it, "an aspect of the production and reproduction of capital," that the forces of quantification and abstraction to which he is subject are to be perceived in the immediacy of a life in which he is disjunct from his working capacity, forced to sell it as commodity, and in which he is incorporated as an abstract quantity within a wholly mechanized and rationalized industrial process.[22] This extremity of reification attained by the proletariat is the condition of self-realization in

21. Simmels's discussion of expenditure and waste is interesting to consider in this context; see "The Miser and the Spendthrift" (1907), in Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1971, pp. 179–186. Simmel recounts the following case as typical of the sumptuary expenditure that he terms "the enormous waste of the ancien régime." "When a lady returned the 4,000–5,000 franc diamond that Prince Conti had sent her, he had it shattered and used the fragments as blotting sand for the note in which he informed her of the incident. Taine adds the following remark about the attitudes of that age: one is the more a man of the world the less one is concerned about money. But precisely herein lies the self-delusion. For as in a dialectic, the conscious and strongly negative stance toward money has the opposite sentiment as its basis, which alone provides it with meaning and attraction."

22. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1968, pp. 165–166.

class consciousness and of revolutionary action. In the proletariat as the agent of revolutionary action inheres the union of subject and object.

It is in the brief texts which appear elsewhere in this issue, those selected from the *Critical Dictionary* published periodically in *Documents* (1929–30), that we find Bataille's earliest concrete and forceful expression of rage against a bourgeois order contingent upon the advent of industrial production, that of the bourgeois order of capital, and of industrial production. *Smokestack*, *Slaughterhouse*, *Human Face*, *Museum* are items of indictment of that order in its acquisitive and repressive nature. Bataille thus offers, in *Smokestack*, his memory of the terror inspired in him when still a child by the industrial landscape, sensed in an all-too-lucid presentiment as "the nightmare which develops obscurely like a cancer within mankind." Like Blake, he is possessed by knowledge, through surrounding concrete evidence, of the totalizing effect of that order's repression. ("I wander thro' each dirty street / Near where the dirty Thames does flow / And mark in evry face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe.") *Human face*—one of Bataille's more dazzling and aphoristically vituperative texts—moves from the contemptuous contemplation of a family photograph to a critique of the Hegelian dialectic, establishing, through a deft and powerfully asyndetonic effect, the monstrousness of bourgeois marriage and of identity theory. It is this corruscating essay, with its final acknowledgment of the perdurability of socially grounded perversion, which was the central focus of Breton's attack on Bataille in the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* (1930).

Bataille's sociology, founded upon the notion of expenditure as fundamental to primitive economy, will be grounded in turn, however, in a cosmology. It is, indeed, the sun's incessant, untrammeled expenditure of energy which is its glory and which offers man the paradigm of social formation—for both the general economy and its consummation in the ritual of sacrifice. More than that, however, expenditure, destruction, and loss have ontological status; their limits are those of being.

One reads Bataille today knowing that scholarship has, in the two decades since his death, radically altered the manner in which we may think and understand primitive art, communal activity, or sacrificial rites in archaic and primitive societies. Two examples should suffice. The work of the late André Leroi-Gourhan in both the anthropology and archaeology of prehistory has irrevocably altered both its periodization and the theoretical and methodological foundations upon which our understanding of paleolithic culture, its art and artifacts, now rests.[23] His structural analyses have, in their rigor and refinement, truly renewed and purged our reading of this material of extraneous and unwarranted extrapolations. This work has, therefore, both modified and dis-

23. See André Leroi-Gourhan, *Treasures of Prehistoric Art*, New York, Harry Abrams, 1968, and *Le geste et la parole*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1964.

placed that of predecessors in the field, epitomized in the massive enterprise of the Abbé Breuil, upon whose findings[24] Bataille constructed his reading of the art of Lascaux. It would seem, as well, from the investigations of Christian Duverger[25] into the religious and economic structures of pre-Columbian Mexico, that the massive consumption of human victims in ritual sacrifice assumes a significance within the general economy of imperial conquest that is sharply at variance with Bataille's reading of this culture. (Bataille seems not to have reconsidered his reading within the framework of Wittfogel's view of the Aztec culture as implicated in the economy of the hydraulic society.)[26]

If Bataille's readings nevertheless retain their interest, force, and urgency for us, it is by virtue of his interrogation, through their construction, of the limits of human existence. Bataille's Aztec Empire is perhaps closer than one might have supposed to Barthes's Empire of Signs; both are visionary constructions, elaborated with a certain ludic sovereignty with respect to empirical and documentary evidence.

I have suggested that our understanding of Bataille's thought may gain in clarity when viewed—like that of his contemporaries, those of Frankfurt, for example—as the response to the common historical aporias of their time, generated in the decade and a half following World War I by the failure of international socialism and the rise of fascism. I shall, however, in what follows, pay slight attention to matters of chronology, drawing upon a limited number of texts published at various and by no means simultaneous conjunctures within that period and the ensuing one. I shall be less concerned with providing a historical account than with establishing a few coordinates for a mapping of intersections and divergences. To this end, I shall confine myself to the consideration of a single cluster of issues evoked earlier. It is clear that many such intersections exist, and that respective readings of Nietzsche, Hegel, and Sade, among others, present occasions for comparative study; I return, however, to Bataille's reading of the archaic economy and the issues raised by it.

Bataille's sense of a collective energy on tap for the growing fascist movement is evidenced in his calls to action in his manifestos, his manifest contempt for existing channels of revolutionary organization, his trenchant analyses of the dynamics and pathology of fascism.[27] This awareness, however, is in turn

24. This work is summarized in Abbé Breuil, *Quatre cents siècles d'art pariétal, les cavernes ornées de l'age du renne*, Montignac, Dordogne, Centre d'études et de documentation préhistoriques, 1952.
25. Christian Duverger's interesting alternate reading of the Aztec's sacrificial rites as predicated upon a mythos of entropy rather than of expenditure is developed in *La fleur létale*, Paris, Seuil, 1979.
26. See Karl A. Wittfogel's classic study *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1957. Wittfogel's work is dismissed without discussion by Alfred Métraux in *The History of the Incas*, New York, Schocken Books, 1970, p. 29.
27. See, for example, "Toward Real Revolution" and "Program (Relative to *Acéphale*)" in this issue.

Toltec stela of a priest holding the head of a sacrificial victim.

already haunted by the sense that the social order of the West, its culture, the discourse of reason, are grounded in and indissociable from the control and calculation whose dynamics are those of utility and production. In such an order, the rule of "homogeneity" is totalizing, exclusive of "heterogeneity and excess." This transposition of Bataille's duality of sacred and profane now emerges to structure a critical sociology which is, in effect, an assault upon discursive reason as the foundation of the social order of capitalism.

In archaic and primitive economies, the surplus of material wealth is, in part at least, expended by members of a ruling caste or class. Their generally sumptuary expenditure may take the form of festivities, ceremonies, games, the construction of monuments, display—all symbolic gestures of excess. It is roughly toward the end of the feudal order, with the advent of the capitalist mode of production, then, that a rising bourgeoisie installs the regime of "homogeneity" in all its relentless consistency—and this in the name of a common good. Under this regime, the claims of the instant are sacrificed for the future; the traditions of excessive expenditure, the existent symbolic bonds between classes and individuals thereby created, are abrogated. (One recalls Durkheim's approbation of the sacrificial banquet understood as communion.)

In primitive societies, where man's exploitation of his fellows is still relatively weak, the products of human labor flow toward the rich not only because of their authority or status as protectors, but in view of a spectacular expenditure by or in the name of the social group. With the decline of paganism went the games and cults obligatorily supported by the wealthy. Christianity, in its individualization of property, substituted charity, distributed by the rich to the poor. Bataille's Nietzschean description of the censorship of expenditure and display, commanded by the social order of homogeneity, is one of repression, shame, meanness, shabby hypocrisy.[28] The bourgeois posture with respect to expenditure quite naturally resembles its traditional censorship of the body and of sexuality. The display of wealth retreats into the privacy of the home, hidden behind walls and subjected to repression; the passion for accumulation, the conventions which now rule a shameful, guilt-ridden expenditure are sordid, expressive of the *ressentiment* of those subject to and supportive of the repressive order.

Moreover, the concern with accumulation, the insistence upon utility characteristic of the bourgeoisie do not merely generate *ressentiment* and destroy the channels of expenditure; they erode the very social fabric created by communion in shared symbolic gestures. It is in this light that we must understand Bataille's view of class struggle in modern, industrial society. If, for Lukács, the proletariat as agent of history was to realize the unity of subject and object, for Bataille, class struggle now replaces the forms of social expenditure, and its

28. Bataille, *La part maudite*, *OC*, vol. VII, pp. 43–44.

intensification through "organic movements" . . . "threatens the very existence of the masters. . . . The class struggle has but a single possible outcome: the ruin of those who have sought to ruin human nature."

Horkheimer and Adorno present, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*,[29] an alternate and extremely powerful analysis of the origins of this social order seen in its passage from myth to rationality to mythology. It can, in great part, be read as a kind of critical gloss of Bataille's sociology. This text, first published in 1947 and therefore roughly contemporary in composition with *La part maudite*, develops a view of the Enlightenment understood not as a relatively defined and discrete historical period, but rather as the general historical progress of rationality by which we may define the history of the West. The goal of liberation and the promise of "sovereignty" contained in that liberation are proclaimed in the opening phrases of the first chapter as defeated, for "the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant."

The reign of knowledge, identified as man's power over nature and his domination of his fellows, has been won and established as the order of Enlightenment, which, as figured here, appears as the speaking likeness of "homogeneity." For it recognizes only that which can be apprehended in unity, aspiring to an order within which everything is both accountable and necessary. It represents, in fact as in theory, the triumph of calculability; to the thinkers of Enlightenment that calculability has provided a schema of the world. The dream of a *mathesis universalis* has generated the reduction of difference to the abstraction of quantity; by this reduction unity is imposed. When things are known in and through their utility—as in the Enlightenment—the effect of unity in nature is such as to produce a "disqualification by which nature becomes matter for classification."

The book's first lengthy excursus ("Odysseus, or Myth and Enlightenment") presents a critique articulated through a detailed reading of *The Odyssey* as an allegory of individuation and of the birth of the self which generates the bourgeois order and its domination of nature and of men. In this reading, the double nature of Enlightenment as both progressive rationality and as instrument for exploitation and domination is brought forward. Whereas Bataille, like others before him, had placed the triumph of "homogeneity" roughly at the end of the feudal period, for Adorno and Horkheimer,

> The lines from reason, liberalism, and the bourgeois spirit go incomparably farther back than historians who date the notion of the burgher only from the end of medieval feudalism would allow. By continuing to discern the burgher where the older bourgeois humanism fancied it might postulate the sacred dawn that would be its own

29. Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, London, Allen Lane, 1973.

> legitimation [and here, like Bataille they pay tribute to the romantic critique of the bourgeoisie] the neo-Romantic reaction identifies world history with enlightenment.[30]

No other work of Western culture is seen as offering evidence of the mutual implication of Enlightenment and myth in a manner or degree comparable with that of *The Odyssey.* It is the narrative of the sense of self won in confrontation with animate nature, in risk; it maps the ground of identity in victory over danger and domination over others. And in this interpretation of the Homeric myth, the central role of gift and sacrifice is defined as that of exchange, or means of exchange "halfway between barter and offering." The gift, like sacrifice, is "payment for forfeited blood; it seals a covenant of peace." Sacrifice contains the germ of rationalization, insofar as it "already appears as the magical pattern of rational exchange, a device of men by which the gods may be mastered." And in a footnote the authors offer a critical characterization of the "magical" explanation of sacrifice, that of Klages, contrasted with the "materialist" interpretation of Nietzsche. For Klages, then, "the necessity of sacrifice pure and simple concerns everyone, because everyone, as we have seen, receives his share . . . of life, only by continually giving and giving in return."[31] The view of sacrifice further elaborated by Adorno and Horkheimer sees the elimination of what Gilbert Murray had termed "the abomination of human sacrifice" as a first step in the direction of discursive reason. It represents, moreover, a liberation from a rationalization of death by a priestly caste whose tactic of deceit involves the deification of the victim. It is this representation which is exalted by "a fashionable irrationalism," complicit in the domination of an ego "which owes its existence to the sacrifice of the present moment to the future."[32]

It is an interesting response to Bataille's assertion that the victim, destined by selection to be consumed in violence, is torn, by his sentence, from the order of things and introduced within the realm of "intimacy" and depth which is that of life in its fullest splendor.

"If," says Bataille, "I am to find an answer to the enigma of sacrifice, I must be deliberate and shrewd. Sacrifice lies outside the scope of academic method; the sacred mysteries must be approached with craft, with a show of boldness and transgressive power."[33] Frankfurt will claim, however, that this "magic" interpretation of sacrifice which insists upon the categorical denial of its rationality is, in turn, its rationalization. And, as if in direct reply to Bataille's submission to the mysteries, it will hold that current ideologies are but versions

30. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
33. Bataille, *OC*, vol. VII, p. 272. See "Sacrifice," in this issue, which constitutes chapter VII of *La limite de l'utile*, an earlier version of *La part maudite.*

of ancient ones, and that "the irrationality of sacrifice as so often adduced, only reflects the fact that its practice outlasted its rational necessity. *It is this gap between rationality and irrationality that needs cunning to cover it over.*"[34] The abrogation of the ritual, proceeding from the discovery of its futility, produces, as it were, a substitution for that ritual, a sacrifice performed by man upon himself through the sustained opposition of his consciousness to that of environing nature. Man, in his accession to reason, turns the ritual of sacrifice upon himself, acquiring, by denial of nature in himself, dominion over men and things. It is this denial which also contains the seed of mythic irrationality. Its force of annihilation was that of fascism as confronted by the Europeans of Bataille's generation.

Despite their disagreement as to the origins and meaning of the sacrificial rite, Bataille and Frankfurt are in accord as to the history of civilization as one of renunciation which has installed commodity fetishism and the division of labor as an ultimately pervasive principle of rationality within the capitalist order. Horkheimer was heard to observe toward the end of his life that even Marx appeared to envisage life as a vast workhouse. Bataille's strategy of redemption was concentrated in a leap past history into the prerational. For he remarked, "When man's meditation upon himself and the universe attains its extreme limit, it recovers the blind unerring gait of those undistracted by the complexities of reason. It is in the satiety of knowledge that a man comes to recognize himself in his distant ancestors."[35] Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*, or Angel of History, though concentrated upon the past, is implicated in the storm of progress within knowledge for which satiety can mean only the abolition of reason through the destruction of the world.

34. Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 53, italics added.
35. Bataille, *OC*, vol. VII, p. 266.