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Selected Writings, 1927-1939*

**Visions
of Excess**

Selected Writings,

1927-1939

Georges Bataille

Edited and with an Introduction by Allan Stoekl

Translated by Allan Stoekl,
with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr.

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for his work in characterology, Baron Ernest Seillière, (*De la déesse nature à la déesse vie* [Paris: Alcan, 1931], p. 133) uses the expression *acephalic* . . . Klages is, moreover, the author of one of the most important books to have been devoted to Nietzsche, *Die psychologischen Errungenschaften Nietzsches*, second edition (Leipzig, 1930) (first edition: 1923).

21. *Nietzsche, der Philosoph und Politiker* (Leipzig, 1931); the two passages cited are on pp. 98 and 80.

22. See Seillière, op. cit., p. 37.

23. [The title of Lévinas's article is "Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlerisme." Tr.]

24. Nietzsche is generally interested in the beauty of the body and in the race, without this interest determining for him the privileging of a limited blood-community (whether fictive or not). The community ties that he foresees are without any doubt mystical ties; it is a matter of a "faith," not of a fatherland.

25. *The Gay Science*, section 377, entitled "We Who Are Homeless." [Kaufmann translation, pp. 338-40. Tr.]

26. *Den Mythus der Zukunft dichten!* writes Nietzsche in notes for *Zarathustra* (*Werke, Grossoktavausgabe* [Leipzig, 1901], vol. 12, p. 400).

27. *Die Zukunft feiern nicht die Vergangenheit!* (from the same passage as the preceding quote); *Ich liebe die Unwissenheit um die Zukunft* (*The Gay Science*, #287).

28. *Posthumous Works* (*Werke* [Leipzig, 1901], vol. 13, p. 362).

29. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, second part, "On the Land of Education": "and I am driven out of fatherlands and motherlands. Thus I now love only my *children's land*. . . . In my children I want to make up for being the child of my fathers. . . ." [Trans. W. Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking, 1954), p. 233. Tr.]

30. The Russian revolution perhaps shows what a revolution is capable of. The questioning of all human reality in a reversal of the material conditions of existence suddenly appears as a response to a pitiless demand, but it is not possible to foresee its consequences: revolutions thwart all intelligent predictions of their results. Life's movement no doubt has little to do with the more or less depressing aftermath of a trauma. It is found in slowly active and creative *obscure determinations*, of which the masses are not at first aware. It is above all wretched to confuse it with the readjustments demanded by the conscious masses, carried out in the political sphere by more or less parliamentary specialists.

31. This interpretation of the "political thought" of Nietzsche, the only one possible, has been remarkably well expressed by Karl Jaspers. The reader is referred to the passage that we cite in our review of Jaspers's book. [Bataille's review of Jaspers's *Nietzsche, Einführung in das Verständnis seines Philosophierens* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1936), consists chiefly of a French translation (by Pierre Klossowski) of a long quote from Jaspers's book, which may be found on pp. 252-53 of the book's English translation: *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*, trans. C. F. Wallrath and F. J. Schmitz (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1965). The review itself may be found on pp. 474-76 of volume I of Bataille's *Oeuvres Complètes*. Tr.]

32. This is the conclusion of section 377 of *The Gay Science*, "We Who Are Homeless." This paragraph sums up more precisely than any other Nietzsche's attitude toward contemporary political reality.

Propositions

When Nietzsche said he wanted to be understood in fifty years, he could not have meant it in only the intellectual sense. That for which he lived and exalted himself demands that life, joy, and death be brought into play, and not the tired attention of the intellect. This must be stated simply and with an awareness of one's own involvement. What takes place profoundly in the revaluation of values, in a decisive way, is tragedy itself; there is little room left for repose. That the essential for human life is exactly the object of sudden horror, that this life is carried in laughter to the heights of joy by the most degrading events possible, such strange facts place human events, happening on the surface of the Earth, in the conditions of mortal combat, making it necessary to break the bonds of recognized truth in order to "exist." But it is vain and unbearable to try to address those who have at their disposal only a feigned attention; combat has always been a more demanding enterprise than any other. In this sense it becomes impossible to shy away from a meaningful comprehension of the teachings of Nietzsche. All this leads to a slow development where nothing can be left in the shadows.

I. Propositions on Fascism

1. "The most perfect organization of the universe can be called God."¹

The fascism that recomposes society on the basis of existing elements is the most closed form of *organization*; in other words, the form of human existence closest to the eternal God.

In social revolution (but not in Stalinism as it exists today) decomposition conversely reaches its extreme point.

Existence is constantly situated in opposition to two equally illusory possibilities: an "ewige Vergottung und Entgottung," in other words an "eternal integration that deifies (that produces God), and an eternal disintegration that annihilates God in itself."

The destroyed social system recomposes itself by slowly developing an aversion to the initial decomposition.

The recomposed social structure—whether the result of fascism or of a negating revolution—paralyzes the movement of existence, which demands a constant disintegration. The great unitary constructions are only the warning signs of a religious upheaval that will push life's movement beyond servile necessity.

The charm, in the toxic sense of the word, of Nietzschean exaltation comes from its disintegration of life, while carrying it to the overflow of the will to power and irony.

2. With regard to the community, the character of the individual as substitute is one of the rare certainties that emerges from historical research. It is from the unitary community that the person takes his form and his being. The most opposed crises have led, before our eyes, to the formation of similar unitary communities: thus in these there was neither social sickness nor regression; instead, societies rediscovered their fundamental mode of existence, their timeless structure as it was formed or reformed in the most diverse economic or historical circumstances.

The protest of human beings against a fundamental law of their existence can evidently have only a limited significance. Democracy, which rests on a precarious equilibrium between classes, is perhaps only a transitory form; it brings with it not only the grandeur but the pettiness of decomposition.

The protest against unitarism does not necessarily take place in a democratic sense. It is not necessarily done in the name of a *within*; the possibilities of human existence can from now on be situated *beyond* the formation of *monocephalic* societies.

3. Recognizing the limited scope of democratic rage (in large part deprived of meaning because the Stalinists share it) does not mean in any way the acceptance of a unitary community. Relative stability and conformity to natural law in no way confer on a political form the possibility of stopping the movement of ruin and creation of history, still less of satisfying in a single moment the demands of life. On the contrary, closed and stifling social existence is condemned to the condensation of forces of decisive explosion, which cannot be carried out within a democratic society. But it would be a crude error to imagine that the exclusive, and even simply the necessary, goal of an explosive thrust is to destroy the head and the unitary structure of a society. The formation of a new structure, of an "order" developing and raging across the entire earth, is the

only truly liberating act, and the only one possible, since revolutionary destruction is regularly followed by the reconstitution of the social structure and its head.

4. Democracy rests on a neutralization of relatively free and weak antagonisms; it excludes all explosive condensation. Monocephalic society is the result of the free play of the natural laws of man, but each time it is a secondary formation, it represents a crushing atrophy and sterility of existence.

The only society full of life and force, the only free society, is the *bi- or polycephalic* society that gives the fundamental antagonisms of life a constant explosive outlet, but one limited to the richest forms.

The duality or multiplicity of heads tends to achieve in the same movement the *acephalic* character of existence, because the very principle of the head is the reduction to unity, the *reduction* of the world to God.

5. "Inorganic matter is the maternal breast. To be released from life is once again to become *true*; it is to perfect oneself. Whoever understands this would consider the return to insensate dust as a celebration."²

"To grant perception also to the inorganic world; an absolutely precise perception—the reign of 'truth'!—Uncertainty and illusion start with the organic world."³

"Loss of all specialization: synthetic nature is superior nature. But all organic life is already a specialization. The inorganic world found behind it represents the greatest synthesis of forces; for this reason, it seems worthy of the greatest respect. In the inorganic, error and the limitations of perspective do not exist."⁴

These three texts, the first summarizing Nietzsche, the other two taken from his posthumous writings, reveal at the same time the conditions of the splendor and poverty of existence. To be free means not to be a function. To allow oneself to be locked in a function is to allow life to emasculate itself. The head, conscious authority or God, represents one of the servile functions that gives itself as, and takes itself to be, an end; consequently, it must be the object of the most inveterate aversion. One limits the extent of this aversion, however, by giving it as the principle of the struggle against unitary political systems: but it is a question of a principle outside of which such a struggle is only a contradiction in terms.

II. Propositions on the Death of God

6. The *acephalic man* mythologically expresses sovereignty committed to destruction and the death of God, and in this the identification with the headless man merges and melds with the identification with the superhuman, which IS entirely "the death of God."

7. Superman and *acephalic man* are bound with a brilliance equal to the position of time as imperative object and explosive liberty of life. In both cases, time becomes the object of ecstasy, and, secondly, it appears as the "eternal return" in the vision of Surlei or as "catastrophe" ("Sacrifices"), or again as "time-explosion": it is, then, as different from the time of philosophers (or even from Heideggerian time) as the christ of erotic saints is from the God of the Greek philosophers. The movement directed toward time suddenly enters into concrete existence, whereas the movement toward God turned away from it during the earliest period.

8. Ecstatic time can only find itself in the vision of things that puerile chance causes brusquely to appear: cadavers, nudity, explosions, spilled blood, abysses, sunbursts, and thunder.

9. War, to the extent that it is the desire to insure the permanence of a nation, the nation that is sovereignty and the demand for inalterability, the authority of divine right and of God himself, represents the desperate obstinacy of man opposing the exuberant power of time and finding security in an immobile and almost somnolent erection. National and military life are present in the world to try to deny death by reducing it to a component of a glory without dread. Nation and army profoundly separate man from a universe given over to lost expenditure and to the unconditional explosion of its parts: "profoundly," at least to the extent that the precarious victories of human avarice are possible.

10. Revolution must not only be considered in its overtly known and conscious ins and outs, but in its brute appearance, whether it is the work of Puritans, Encyclopedists, Marxists, or Anarchists. Revolution, in its significant historical existence, which still dominates the present civilization, manifests itself to the eyes of a world mute with fear as the sudden explosion of limitless riots. Because of the Revolution, divine authority ceases to found power; authority no longer belongs to God, but to time, whose free exuberance puts kings to death, to time incarnated today in the explosive tumult of peoples. Even in fascism itself authority has been reduced to founding itself on a so-called revolution—a hypocritical and forced homage to the only imposing authority, that of catastrophic change.

11. God, kings, and their sequels have interposed themselves between men and the Earth—in the same way that the father stands before the son as an obstacle to the violation and possession of the Mother. The economic history of modern times is dominated by the epic but disappointing effort of fierce men to plunder the riches of the Earth. The Earth has been disemboweled, but men have reaped from her womb above all metal and fire, with which they ceaselessly disembowel each other. The inner incandescence of the Earth not only explodes in the craters of volcanoes; it also glows red and spits out death with its fumes in the metallurgy of all nations.

12. The incandescent reality of the Earth's womb cannot be touched and possessed by those who misunderstand it. It is the misunderstanding of the Earth, the forgetting of the star on which he lives, the ignorance of the nature of riches, in other words of the incandescence that is enclosed within this star, that has made for man an existence at the mercy of the merchandise he produces, the largest part of which is devoted to death. As long as men forget the true nature of terrestrial life, which demands ecstatic drunkenness and splendor, nature can only come to the attention of the accountants and economists of all parties by abandoning them to the most complete results of their accounting and economics.

13. Men do not know how to enjoy the Earth and her products freely and with prodigality; the Earth and her products only lavish and liberate themselves in order to destroy. Dull war, such as that organized by modern economies, also teaches the meaning of the Earth, but it teaches it to renegades whose heads are full of calculations and plans for the short run; that is why it teaches it with a heartless and depressing rage. In the measureless and rending character of the aimless catastrophe known as modern warfare, it is nevertheless possible for us to recognize the explosive immensity of time. The Earth as mother has remained the old chthonian deity, but with the human multitudes she also tears down the God of the sky in an endless uproar.

15.⁵ The search for God, for the absence of movement, for *tranquillity*, is the fear that has scuttled all attempts at a universal community. Man's heart is uneasy not only up to the moment when he finds repose in God: God's universality still remains for him a source of uneasiness, and peace is produced only if God allows himself to be locked up in the isolation and profoundly immobile permanence of a group's military existence. For universal existence is unlimited and thus restless: it does not close life in on itself, but instead opens it and throws it back into the uneasiness of the infinite. Universal existence, eternally unfinished and acephalic, a world like a bleeding wound, endlessly creating and destroying particular finite beings: it is in this sense that true universality is the death of God.

Notes

1. Section 712, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 379–80.
2. See Charles Andler's *Nietzsche, sa vie et sa pensée*, vol. 6 (Paris: Gallimard, 1931), p. 307, and the *Posthumous Works*, period of *The Gay Science* (1881–82), sections 497 and 498 (*Werke, Grossoktavausgabe* [Leipzig, 1901], vol. 12, p. 228).
3. *Posthumous Works*, 1883–88 (*Grossoktavausgabe*, vol. 13, p. 228).
4. *Ibid.*, same page.
5. [No number 14 was included in the original text. Tr.]