

Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939 Study Guide

**Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939 by
Georges Bataille**

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Plot Summary

"Visions of Excess" is written over the years 1927 through 1939 by Georges Bataille. Selected writings are published as a book in 1985. "Visions of Excess" is aptly titled. It is a philosophical study of the surrealist writer's thoughts, ideas and opinions about many different social, economic, and philosophic issues. He records his childhood recollections after undergoing psychoanalysis in "[Dream]" that reveals several underlying themes and psychoses that drive his writing as an adult. His formal training as a medieval librarian provides him with tools of classification and collection to present his eclectic style of communicating with a reading audience. Bataille's written imagery is a verbal equivalent of Salvador Dali's multifaceted "The Lugubrious Game."

Georges Bataille lives from 1897 to 1962, and is a contemporary of philosopher Andre Breton. Born in Reims, France, Georges and his mother abandon his paralytic, blind, and syphilitic father when the Germans arrive there in 1915. Georges rebels against his father by quitting high school and becoming Catholic in 1913. He publishes his first pamphlet in 1918 to honor Cathedral Notre Dame des Reims and his Christian spirit but denies his faith by 1920. Georges writes a book titled "W.C." in 1926 that is "violently opposed to all dignity" and undergoes a psychoanalysis arranged by his friend Dr. Dausse. He writes several other books and founds French reviews titled "Documents", and "Critique." He is a trained medieval librarian and meets Michel Leiris who introduces him to surrealism, but is rejected by Andre Breton, the surrealist leader, who considers Bataille obsessive. Breton calls Bataille an "excremental philosopher" in part because he applies reason to unreasonable things. The style of Bataille's work is often pornographic and repulsive, apparently designed to shock and impact his audience.

"Visions of Excess" is a highly structured and classified book of Bataille's writing over a twelve-year period. Thirty-two articles and essays are categorized in three chronological periods. Many articles have topical subtitles and numerical sections. For example, "The Critique of the Foundations of the Hegelian Dialectic" is in Section II and "Nietzsche and the Fascists" and "The Obelisk" is in Section III. Subtitle subsections vary with Roman and Arabic numerals with no apparent order that range from none to 19, XII, 15 and XIV. There is an apparent benefit provided by structural consistency of tracking the same essay from Introduction to Writing Section and Commentary sections that is diminished when reading the content of an article. Specifically, a reader can follow from the introduction to the essay followed by commentary on it for increased understanding. For example, "[Dream]" is introduced as an obsession that is an animating force in his theory and commented as an episode in his psychoanalysis but written as a three year-old whose "father slaps me and I see the sun." Bataille's "Visions" is a challenging read that leaves one with the question whether his psychoanalysis is yet complete.



Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

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Georges Bataille lives from 1897 to 1962, and is a contemporary of philosopher Andre Breton. Born in Reims, France, Georges and his mother abandon his paralytic, blind, and syphilitic father when the Germans arrive there in 1915. Georges rebels against his father by quitting high school and becoming Catholic in 1913. He publishes his first pamphlet in 1918 to honor Cathedral Notre Dame des Reims and his Christian spirit but denies his faith by 1920. Georges returns to school to train as a medieval librarian at the Ecole des Chartes. After living in Spain Bataille accepts a position at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris where he stays until he gets sick and has to leave in 1942. Working as a medieval librarian, he writes a medieval romance and articles on numismatics. He meets Michel Leiris who introduces him to surrealism. Georges writes a book titled "W.C." in 1926 that is "violently opposed to all dignity." He undergoes a psychoanalytic cure arranged by his friend Dr. Dausse. Bataille's oedipal terrors are an animating force of the heterodox theory he develops after 1927. Leiris tells Andre Breton about Bataille's book "W.C." that makes him seem obsessed. Breton is a leading French surrealist power broker but the unknown Bataille is hostile to him. Ironically, Breton may have promoted Bataille's "intellectual violence" if Bataille had not used it on him.

Bataille begins a review publication named "Documents" with rebel surrealists and art historians in which his essays of Section I appear. They include "Eye," "The Big Toe," and "The Language of Flowers" that ends with Sade tossing rose petals "into a ditch filled with liquid manure." Breton calls Bataille the "excremental philosopher" and condemns his pathological reasoning to the unreasonable. Breton's critical aversion to Bataille's literary filth grows more credible from other Bataille essays depicting a brown smudge in "The Lugubrious Game" and anal fixation in "The Pineal Eye" and "The Jesuve." Bataille's writing illustrates the highest elevation of man in idealist religious and philosophical systems of Breton and Hegel united with the fall of humanity at its extreme animality. Bataille attacks Nietzsche and Breton for their desire to revolt by soaring above but refusing to embrace the stinking decomposition of their destiny.

Bataille's Section II writings of the Marxist dialectic are implicit in his earlier works of "The 'Old Mole'" and "Pineal Eye." His first writing of this section named "The Critique of the Foundations of the Hegelian Dialectic" is presented to free up dialectical negation from Engels' mechanical abstraction. Bataille brings that concept down to earth in his "Notion of Expenditure" where the use of dialectic animates the class struggle leading to



revolution. Bataille identifies "conspicuous consumption" of Thorstein Veblen as a tool that the rich use in destroying more than anyone else to reaffirm their own position above the poor. In "Psychological Structure of Fascism," Bataille presents heterogeneity including the imperative or sovereign that is pure and noble, contrasted with impure, untouchables that are poor and ignoble workers. To counter the fear of an impure heterogeneity taking over the sovereign, Bataille joins with Breton in 1935 to form the Popular Front. The Popular Front is united with Socialists and Communists under Leon Blum's lead. Bataille's "Popular Front in the Street" recaps his thoughts and ideas with its "paradoxical fascist tendency."

"Vision's" Section III introduces "Acephale," a review published four times between 1936 and 1939, primarily of Bataille's writings. Despite the review's public availability, the Acephale group is a secret society with rituals closed to the public. Bataille's political thought is presented in a first essay to Nietzsche titled "Nietzsche and the Fascists." The Acephale group is outside the mainstream of political thought and its primary purpose is societal rebirth of myth that he writes about in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." The death of God is written meditatively with joy, dread, war and death in "The Practice of Joy before Death" as mystical disbelief in God's existence. Bataille presents a model of unified community organization in "The Labyrinth" that is comparable to its presentation as a fall from the elevation in "The Obelisk." Bataille's text leads in two directions but to select one over the other changes the nature of the work itself from "bicephalic text to a monocephalic one." Bataille's works is "two-headed" or of two minds so that he considers it to be as clear a statement of his thought as possible.



Section I (1927-1930)

Section I (1927-1930) Summary and Analysis

Section I contains seventeen writings of one to three pages. Bataille states his surrealist position in each subsection. Surrealism in art and literature puts images, ideas, and objects in contrast with each other to illustrate a point which may or may not be rational or sensible. Bataille presents words with similarly incongruous ideas.

His first essay "[Dream]" comes from psychoanalytic therapy that Bataille has at the urging of Dr. Mause. Figure 1 precedes the article and shows young Georges in 1898, sitting on his father's knee, wearing a suit and sea-captain's hat while his older brother sits beside him on the other knee. Georges dreams of riding streets of Reims on his bicycle. The road annoys him because the pavement is broken up by streetcar tracks. He looks for a smooth road to ride up and down. The bicyclist finds construction workers disrupt the smooth road by digging a trench with barrel supports framed with planks in circles. He bikes until "an atrocious darkness descends" and he changes to the form of an American gentleman in a suit. Rats hang by their tails threatening to bite but must be killed as the frightened and disgusted American visitor confronts slimy and bloody fish and menacing rats at his face. Young Georges has a childhood fear of rats and spiders as he goes down in the cellar with a candle and his father. He links terror of spiders with mixed feelings of "the most horrible and the most magnificent" memories of his father pulling down his pants. He remembers his father spanking him with a bloody toad looking like a vulture sinking his beak. He is three and naked with a bloody penis being punished for playing with a hoop.

In "The Solar Anus," Bataille claims the world and everything in it is parody, which is defined as a composition imitating another work from a humorous or satiric point of view. He claims everything either imitates something else or is the same thing in forms that deceive. For example, air parodies or imitates water, lead parodies gold, and Bataille claims coitus parodies crime. A turning earth makes men and animals have coitus which makes the earth turn. Bataille's writing seems as sensible and rational as Dali's surrealist painting. His observations grow increasingly graphic when he notes earth's volcanoes "serve as its anus" that "violently ejects the contents of its entrails." This essay is a pornographic "love" poem Bataille writes to proclaim by title except the sun "nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared" to the "intact anus of her body at eighteen years."

"The Language of Flowers" notes the appearance of things distinct from one another in the well-defined part of a flower. Bataille's pornographic theme notes "dirty traces of pollen or the freshness of the pistil" but color and configuration of the corolla offers symbolic interpretation. Each flower has its own language but all are unmatched by a rose or spurge to show human love, which is the natural function of the flower. Similarly it is not odor or appearance that is the aphrodisiac but the petals of a red rose or beautiful woman that signifies love. Flowers wither and die on stems reaching from



earth to sky. Desire and flowers rise to stain and wither beauty like a filthy and glaring sacrilege. A flower on its plant is the exception that witnesses the architectural order of spectacular fields and forests. Under the surface, invisible roots spread like the visible leaves spread under the sun the shower of light. Bataille calls mandrake roots obscene and notes the form of carrot and turnip. Philosophers use base natural forms as symbols of noble or sacred abstraction despite the confined madman Marquis de Sade plucking petals off the most beautiful roses to toss them "into a ditch filled with liquid manure."

"Materialism" notes the paradoxical action of those who want to rid their thoughts of spirituality begins by setting up a hierarchical structure or ordered list which belies the idealism they claim to eliminate. At the top of the list is dead matter which, by placing it there creates the ideal form in itself. "Matter" is an idea whose existence they deny, despite substituting it for the traditional religious distinction between divinity and creatures. Bataille says "materialism" should be disclaimed by "excluding all idealism."

Bataille claims in "Eye" that civilized man is characterized by unexplainable horror of insects and the extremely seductive eye. He claims filmmakers of the "Andalusian Dog" experience this horror in its first scenes when a "razor would cut open the dazzling eye of a young and charming woman" whom a young man admires insanely and wants to take in his coffee spoon. The author Stevenson calls it a "cannibal delicacy" but Bataille says the eye causes enough anxiety to never bite into it. A poem of Victor Hugo notes an "eye of conscience" that the artist Grandville sees watching him mournfully after striking a tree trunk he sees as a man bleeding in his nightmare. Grandville writes wondering if these are eyes of a crowd watching torture like flies. In his last illustration Figure 2 on page 19, he presents eyes in the sky surrealistically posed against other images of horror.

"The Big Toe" is the most human part of a body because it distinguishes man from the ape that uses his toes to swing from branches of trees rather than stand erect like a tree. Bataille calls this "erection by his foot" that gives man a light head raised to the heavens despite his foot still in the mud. Blood flows equally through a body but men believe that height represents principles of good and light that conflict with the evil and dark to keep their feet mired in mud. A foot's low position is disguised by heels of varying height, sexual discomfort and execution for touching a queen's foot. Fingers are useful and show character but toes seem dull and foolish. A big toe is not ugly like inside a mouth but looks do not matter since toes keep man on earth to seduce him from the heights.

"The 'Lugubrious Game'" extends Bataille's mournfulness to exaggeration. He claims intellectual despair leads to violence and rage like a pig rummaging "in manure and mud uprooting everything with his snout." Artists Picasso and Dali create works with hideous and frightening images that distract from the rage but do not lessen the power of ideas to harness a man like a horse. The ugliness can be hateful but it gives an illusion of beauty, which is the opposite that conceals nothing. Marquis de Sade when imprisoned in the Bastille screams into the dirty water pipe to the terrified people in Paris "they are



killing the prisoners!" Bataille can no longer retreat into poetry without being called a coward.

"Formless" describes an adjective with a meaning that eliminates shape in the universe and is like a spider or spit. Academic men find their happiness in forms of the universe that enables it to take shape like putting on a frock coat.

"The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme [Superman] and Surrealist" claims surrealism is a childhood sickness of materialism. Initially surrealism rebels without lower classes and is assumed a confused mental condition using violent words to demand spiritual dictatorship. Political action eliminates differences between high and low that Bataille uses to contrast the eagle and the "old mole." The eagle is virile soaring over the sky with imperial hooked beak symbolizing power over challengers to overcome authoritarian idealism. "Old-mole" Marxism starts in the earth's bowels like materialist bowels of the proletarians. Man is like a plant, rising up from earth sending roots to earth like man's urge to reach down. Nietzsche's writing sets values for individuals to rise above class and urged by "fire from heaven" like Icarus drawn to the sun with wax wings that melt. Until middle-class values become principles of ridicule and disgust through the delusions of Icarus there is no possibility for working-class principles to prevail.

"Base Materialism and Gnosticism" asserts a particular object distinguishes matter and form in organic beings where form presents a value of the unity of being in an individual existence. Materialism negates idealism, which is basic to all philosophy from classical philosophy of Hegel back to ancient philosophy of Gnosticism. Gnosticism originates in Christianity, Greco-Roman ideology, Egyptian tradition, Persian dualism, Eastern Jewish heterodoxy and Zoroastrian dualism. A gnostic theme posits matter as active, eternal and autonomous in darkness and evil thereby opposing dominant Hellenistic spirit of superior principles. Gnosticism psychologically is like modern materialism in its refusal to submit oneself and one's reason to whatever is more elevated. Gnosticism upsets idealism and a human spirit as base matter that enables intellect to escape the constraints of idealism.

"The Deviations of Nature" discusses Pierre Boaistuau's claim in his 1561 book that nothing horrifies and terrifies more than the "inverted, mutilated, and truncated" works of nature seen as today's carnival "freaks." Many seventeenth and eighteenth century books present Siamese twins and two-headed calves as "monsters." Bataille claims these forms cause a sense of malaise and deep seduction caused by nature. He notes that "monsters" represent the opposite of geometric regularity in concrete visible form.

"Rotten Sun" claims the sun is the most elevated and abstract object since it cannot be directly viewed for long at high noon. One who views the sun directly is said to go mad in an epileptic crisis. Bataille compares a "scrutinized" sun with the Mithraic cult ritual of the sun. A priest slashes the throat of a bull held on a scaffold. The dying bull's hot blood pours down on naked people under the scaffold looking up it. His image with its throat slashed open symbolizes the blinding sun. Hot blood pours from the bellowing, dying bull like Icarus' sudden melting of waxen wings from flying too close to the sun.



"Mouth" as prow or forward most part characteristically terrifies other animals. Man starts at the top of his skull however, which is insignificant compared to the eyes or forehead of a beast baring his jaws. The mouth of civilized man is less prominent than primitive man except in rage with grinding teeth or terror and suffering. As an organ of screaming man throws his head and mouth back in a position like the animal's to issue bestial screams, rather than present his authoritative face with its closed mouth.

"Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh" describes a man of thirty years as a painter. He grows entranced staring at the sun to self-mutilation by biting off his finger. Previously he studies Hindu mysticism, Friedrich Nietzsche, drinks rum or cognac and believes the severed ear of Vincent Van Gogh influences him. His name is Gaston and he believes biting off a finger is not as hard as suicide that he can do later. The two self-mutilators are obsessed by the sun. Van Gogh does not paint the sun until he has finished mutilating himself. He paints no suns for six months preceding suicide in 1890, despite painting wilted sunflowers in late 1888. In addition to Gaston and Van Gogh, the author notes another self-mutilation by a female mental patient who tears out her eyes in response to an imagined voice of God demanding it. Bataille claims these self-mutilated madmen are absurd and terrible examples of the spirit of sacrifice in religious practice.

In "The Jesuve," Bataille claims power like the priest who slashes the throat of a cow for sacrifice. He believes sacrifice is practiced in to satisfy a basic need like hunger. He writes to provoke comrades to excess with tireless and decadent details. Bataille writes of a pineal eye in 1927 tied to bullfighting images. He compares a pineal eye to his anal or nocturnal idea writing "the intact anus . . . to which nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared except the sun (even though the anus is the night.)" He sees this "eye" atop his skull as "erupting volcano" symbolizing the dazzling sun with a comical view of "the rear end and its excretions." Bataille images man comparing "erection-movement" of plants to a male mammal in coitus rising like a plant on hind legs to mount a female. Bataille proposes plants, animals, and man in a planetary system as basis of human nature. He characterizes primate evolution from a four-legged and horizontal lemur to the gorilla as "progressive erection" through primitive man to Homo sapiens. Bataille notes the irony of man's presumed nobility from repugnant apes whose brilliant colors never migrate to the head but remain "obscene blossoming of their bald, haloed anuses, bursting like boils . . . for the liberation of the indecencies of nature, with the most shameful obscenity."

"The Pineal Eye" describes a small conical appendage of vertebrates' brain with cranium postulated to be a vestigial third eye, endocrine organ, or seat of the soul. A pineal eye atop one's skull is not reasoned but self-evident and subject to analysis. Plants grow vertically and animals situate horizontally. Humans alter polarization by "appropriating the vegetal erection" when they are drawn to the sky. Plants cover earth but man's laughing and suffering eyes stay on a horizontal plane that keeps him at vulgar things unless he reject's animal nature. Degradation comes not from a brain but from intestines pressing on nude flesh in an obscene and satanic fashion. For example, he describes a young sorceress's nude bottom raised and open to the black sky that admits a flaming torch with feverish sob and blast of thunder. Bataille records a forest



ritual where naked men and women gather round a female gibbon impaled on a stake so "her huge screaming pink anal protrusion stares at the sky like a flower." They surround her burial in a pit to the "filthy, beautifully blood-colored solar prominence, sticking out of the earth and ridiculously shuddering with convulsions of agony." Then "the Englishwoman with her charming rear end stretches her long nude body on the filled pit" concludes ritual "copulation of the stinking hole with the sun" Apes lose their tail hiding "a bald protuberance and the most beautiful colors of nature" so that "The bald summit of the anus has become the center, blackened with bushes, of the narrow ravine cleaving the buttocks."

"The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade" is condensed from nineteen titled and numbered subsections written as an open letter to his "Comrades" who are apologists and admirers of D.A.F. de Sade. Bataille notes sadism is not unlike sadism existing before de Sade's outrageous writing. He divides social facts into religious or profane to describe human impulses to acquire or expel. Basic appropriation is consumption of food. Man also appropriates other products like clothes, furniture, housing, land, and tools of production. Production and selling are excretory phases. Philosophy, science or common sense can establish world homogeneity despite revolt and scandal. Finally ". . . a worker works in order to obtain the violent pleasures of coitus. . . ." Mind and virtue linked to organs of excretion make man seem antisocial. First stage of revolution makes groups exclude one another by violent expulsion of a group in power by one opposing power. Participation is required in destructive actions of revolution that without it is "utopian sentimentality."



Section II (1932-1935)

Section II (1932-1935) Summary and Analysis

In this group of five writings created between 1932 and 1935, Bataille addresses current social and political ideas forecast in earlier works. "The Critique of the Foundations of the Hegelian Dialectic" describes how the dialectic method of Marx and Hegel is treated with repugnance and critiqued. German professor Nicolai Hartmann examines dialectical themes in Hegel's philosophy to compare verbal and reality-based approaches. Hartmann claims their fundamental difference lies in the treatment of the Marx/Hegel dialectic as a general law of reality to substitute for logic while Hartmann disputes its universality and tests dialectic reasoning in each particular case. For example, Engels tests the dialectic by claiming its validity and looking for examples in nature to substantiate it. He compares this to Hartmann who examines lived experience first. Specifically, Engels theorizes "a priori" whereas Hartmann concludes "a posteriori." Engels believes the tenets of Hegel's "Philosophy of Nature" but Hartmann is indifferent to them. Other natural scientists also claim the dialectic is incompatible with science but Hegel claims nature is unreasonable and causes the fall or negation of the idea. Engels works for eight years to develop a dialectic theory of nature that he admits is failed and unfinished. Engels "negation of the negation" is impractical in a class struggle that sets capitalism as a positive term against the proletariat as a negative term that thereby implies negative and positive in the same application. Engels uses mathematics with the dialectic but mathematicians deem it degenerate. Bataille intends to define dialectic limits. For example, dialectic opposition of terms cannot account for growth of a man from infancy to old age, but psychological growth as a man may have dialectical value in a father-son relationship as well as lived experience, natural sciences and historical origin.

"The Notion of Expenditure" describes the concept of expenditure with dialectic to animate class struggle leading to revolution. "Conspicuous consumption" of Thorstein Veblen is a tool that the rich use to strengthen their position over the poor. Classical utility theory is inadequate to define what is useful to man since it relies on principles beyond material utility and pleasure, like honor and duty. Consumption divides into a minimum for conservation or continuation of life and productive activity. Unproductive expenditure without value beyond itself emphasizes loss, like luxury, war, arts and spectacles. Some examples are beautiful and dazzling jewels that cost a fortune, competitive games that cost a lot of money and artistic production. Artistic production requires either real expenditure like buildings, music, and dance or symbolic expenditure in drama or poetry. Poor people do not stop rich people from wasting resources that could alleviate poverty. For example, "potlatch," is a gift of riches to humiliate, defy, and obligate another as showy destruction of wealth that destroys stability of hereditary fortune. Bourgeois society exercises meanness distributing potlatch with goods made by poor men that degrades and enslaves them. The worker produces to live while the boss condemns workers to degradation by rivalry and



struggle. Bataille claims Christians glorify God when they struggle in the "bloody game of social war" to hurl the powerful down and exalt the poor.

"Sacrifices" is written by Bataille to preface a collection of Andre Masson's drawings. Masson is an illustrator whose sketches portray an acephalic man in flight and on the ground to set a "proper cosmological-orgiastic tone." Bataille recognizes himself as the "me" that exists suspended in a void different from all others from one man and woman coming together. Any difference in events that result in his "me" could be an "other" instead. His "me" in the void where he has dominion is the realization of everything that precedes and surrounds him. The question of what exists compared to what appears is resolved by answering what is required to exist for moral value. The "me" is rejected as "that which exists" because it exists as illusion beyond objective reality. The limit of death in violence is a "me" free in dying to accept individuality and transcendence. A "man-god appears and dies" as rottenness and redemption to eliminate preconditions from purified love of the cross that demands embrace in struggle.

"The Psychological Structure of Fascism" introduces two forms of heterogeneity including the imperative or sovereign contrasted with impure, untouchables that are poor and ignoble workers dominated by a king and homogeneous society. Homogeneity is common method of measuring functionality within society. Money enables the measure of work and values each man for what he produces that makes him a function of something other than himself. For example, the machine shop owner owns the machine output produced by a machine operator. The homogeneous part of society owns or purchases production, not wage-earning laborers. The Marxist idea is justified when a State serves threatened homogeneity by protecting the non-homogeneous elements that do not benefit from production. A State can be democratic, with spontaneous homogeneity or despotic to control heterogeneous forces. Homogeneity depends on a productive system to work as long as homogeneous elements have interest in conserving the system and social elements do not develop a heterogeneous point of view. Fascism appears and develops from the bottom up with nothing to establish power. Bataille claims fascism is a total heterogeneous power characterized by the foundation of inseparable elements of religion and military. Fascism unites impoverished classes under the leader who identifies with the state. A State becomes the principle of all value like Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Nationalist Socialist Germany. Prime ministers get power from a state but the fascist leader derives power from his personal position as the chief of a fascist party.

"Popular Front in the Street" describes countering fear of impure heterogeneity taking over the imperative. Bataille joins ironically with his foe Breton in 1935, to form the Popular Front united with Socialists and Communists under Leon Blum's lead. Bataille claims revolutions dominate history like contagious emotion that spreads mass uprising. Distrust grows ironically against revolutionaries as it did against committees and political parties or intellectuals. Debate is necessary with political questions that when held in the street stir up emotions. Bataille identifies birth of the Popular Front February 12, 1934 on Cours de Vincennes when workers march against fascism. Communist marchers follow workers that merge with Socialist masses in the street and are shot by Daladier's government. This event initiates the Popular Front to maintain non-fascist

strong France. The Popular Front subsequently mixes with other ideas and goals to become a movement in itself but is not an organized force until transformation into a renewed political form.



Section III (1936-1939)

Section III (1936-1939) Summary and Analysis

In this group of ten writings created from 1936 to 1939, Bataille addresses several ideas that are significant to his time. "The Labyrinth" presents a model of unified community organization. Men express their "being" through constant struggle for unreachable satisfaction. Other beings express "beingness" unequally. For example a dog's being is different from a sponge and an important man expresses being more significantly than a wanderer. By acting in specialized or narrowed areas, a man's being is impoverished from the "multicolored immensity of human lives." Being is undefined if projected beyond itself. For example, a knife with blade and handle replaced indefinitely is not the same and a sponge pounded into dust of cells is no longer a single being. Similarly a man who knows his neighbors as part of society is a particle connected by instability to an entangled whole. Bataille claims being is found only as a whole made of particles that remain autonomous despite being plunged into a "foggy labyrinth" of society's acquaintance.

"The Sacred Conspiracy" claims producing and eating among other things are necessary but nothing. If political action leads to nothing, then human enthusiasm will meet a void. The author claims man belongs to a world today that offers nothing to love beyond individual insufficiency that represents self-interest and the need to work. He believes past worlds enable one to become lost in ecstasy but profiting today leads to degradation. Earth was a free universe and in play subject only to storms, trees, and birds until Man demanded necessity above the universe. Bataille writes in a small and cold village house where he and his friend Andre Masson listen to the overture from Don Giovanni while reflecting on a conversation about being swept away by an overwhelming dream they cannot own.

"Nietzsche and the Fascists" describes how Bataille's political thought transitions from Marx and Fascism in his first article to Nietzsche. Elisabeth Judas-Forster is the sister of the Nietzsche who Bataille considers worse than Judas who betrayed Jesus from her anti-Semitic falsehoods. A cousin of Nietzsche and her collaborator reproduces Hitler's photograph with Nietzsche's bust to show kinship of his teachings and Hitler's Mein Kampf. Nietzsche's teachings are seductive and inspire the will and aggressive instincts on both sides like Hegel's ideas that are "generally unintelligible." Nietzsche is repulsed by political parties, but his writing is ambiguous enough to support fascism and establish him as a primary ancestor. Ironically, Fascism and Nietzscheanism are mutually exclusive and cause confusion. Italian dictator Mussolini invents a fascist movement with the vocabulary and spirit of Hegel and does not contain the philosophy of Nietzsche as it is credited. Only "will to power" connects doctrines that Mussolini applies to all Italians he wants to be supermen. Fascism uses sayings from old interpretations of Nietzsche to oppose current political systems. Alfred Rosenberg writes the first ideology of National Socialism that explains Nietzsche from Mussolini. "Movement of the German Faith" was not unified until after Hitler took power. Specifically, the only religion is race



and German is the only virtue. Political Nietzscheanism constructed by Alfred Baumler distills from Nietzschean contradiction a doctrine of the people's will to power. Baumler clarifies Nietzsche's thoughts on Christianity in saying "God is dead" as "the meaning of a historical fact." Baumler calls Revolution awareness of the future and myth as intense feeling about the past. Nietzsche questions how an ideal can be discovered in the past.

"Propositions" describes items of Nietzsche's desire to be understood in fifty years through all dimensions of his life. Bataille writes propositions that are short sayings to sum up his thoughts on fascism and death of God. Fascism claims a perfect organization can be called God and based on existing elements in a closed organization that is closest to God. Nietzschean pride comes from life's disintegration with an overflowing will to power. Revolutionary destruction that forms a new structure is the only true liberating act. Democracy is based on neutralized free and weak opposition that excludes explosive condensation and facilitates reduction of the world to God. Death with return to dust is celebrated because inorganic matter is the maternal breast. The organic world is an environment for uncertainty and illusion. The mythological death of God claims that a headless man represents power that will cause the destruction and death of God. This creature is identified with the superhuman that causes the death of God. A headless man and superman are united where time is an object of ecstasy and explosion. Extreme time appears in the surprising chance vision of dead or naked bodies, explosions, blood, sunbursts, and thunder. War is refusal of man opposing power to find security in a non-moving and sleeping erection. Revolution must be considered in its brutality which denies authority in the explosive riot of people. God, kings, and other rulers stand between man and the earth to stop the fierce economic man from plundering the earth. The burning reality of earth cannot be touched by those who misunderstand it. Man is incapable of enjoying products of the earth. True universality is the death of God or the absence of movement and tranquility.

"Nietzschean Chronicle" discusses how after a civilization develops, the values that initially bring men together gradually lose effectiveness and awe-inspiring character. The movement decomposes and sickens to crisis as individuals ask critical questions. The community loses power to stimulate religious emotion while its main beneficiaries try to conserve it through constraint, alliances, and politics. Eventually individuals see themselves facing a false and empty world of administrative impudence. This societal decomposition affects economic activity, authority, and moral and religious attitudes to disintegration. Men fight for recovery of a lost world before exhausting resources. Nostalgia to recover the lost world can result in military discipline caused by a raging brutality to destroy whatever it cannot take. Nietzsche's life was dominated by obsession with a lost world followed by confusion in opposite directions of a religious solution. Religious movements that develop now do not need to look like any other traditional religion according to Nietzsche. Recomposition follows two directions when a civilization decomposes into either sovereign religious civil/military elements of the past or the birth of free and liberating sacred figures and myths that renew life for the future.

"The Obelisk" claims there is no mystery in the world of spirit since only words foreign to life exists there. A mystery is obscure from images that a dream may borrow from the crowd that a guilty conscience may bury or ignore. Nietzsche's madman runs into the



marketplace claiming to seek God amidst a crowd that laughs at him until he exclaims we have killed him and asks how we might comfort ourselves. Each individual is important to himself but to the others around him, they are less than a shadow or speck of dust. The Obelisk is a simple geometric structure standing out over measured and tranquil spaces that it commands like a pure image of the head and heavens. Egyptians consider the obelisk a sign of military power and glory standing out against the sky in sovereign permanence from which avenues radiate out. Giant pyramids bear witness and assure presence of unlimited sky on earth as its sides "seem to fall from the sky like the rays of the sun." Bataille claims these structures maintain what escapes from dying men. From the pyramids in Egypt to the obelisk on the Place de la Concorde history demonstrates the sensation of time across continents and the ages. The obelisk remains only as long as the authority it symbolizes does not become conscious, in which case it is projected to the ends of time. Bataille claims the foundation of things falls into the void and vertiginous fall of time where man throws himself into "that which has no foundation and no head."

"The Sorcerer's Apprentice" presents rebirth of myth to inspire primitive communal explosion of drives leading to sacrifice that he writes about after the failure of art, science and politics to affect "essential" human drives. Man has many needs that he must satisfy including some that if left unsatisfied neither cause him pain or distress, but are feared nonetheless. Great men in each field constitute the outer limits of production to which he dedicates his life. A man of science places great hopes in science to live his destiny. He excludes other human interests for knowledge that makes other parts no longer matter. Ironically, the science function can be served only when practiced as the goal itself, which demands the practitioner live a crippled existence. A man of fiction is more ambiguous because the truth science pursues can be true only when it has no meaning. Paradoxically nothing has meaning unless it is fiction. Artists accept perceived shadows despite living amidst truth, money, glory, fame, and social rank. Fiction encourages the artist to make fiction serve the real world. He escapes fiction through the real world that he supports to make haunting phantoms enter. A man of action explains science stripped of the human spirit that remains virile by making reality conform to what he thinks.

"The Practice of Joy before Death" describes how Death of God is written meditatively with joy, dread, war and death in a mystical experience supported by the disbelief in God's existence. Joy before death focuses on those who believe in no beyond. Joy before death makes god perishable. Six poetic commentaries presenting the author's thoughts on joy before death note abandoning self to peaceful annihilation as a "dark unknown." Another phrase claims "I AM" joy before death and annihilated in joy at death, while a third imagines "the frozen instant of my own death." A fourth text focuses on a point that is "locus of all existence and all unity" before claiming impossibility of satisfying love as a guide to leap into the "nullification of all possible illusion." The fifth text is a vision of death the same as illuminating light and self as mirror of death "just as the universe is only the mirror of light." The sixth titled commentary, "Heraclitean Meditation" begins with "I MYSELF AM WAR" and claims human possibilities can be sated by horrifying, bloody images of warfare like explosives that "will soon blind me."



"The Sacred" describes the modern spirit in a search without benefit of a Holy Grail, or goal to find the true and good. There is no model which this passionate movement can use to pattern itself in art or formal invention, intellectual development or philosophy. Upheaval and search is supported by surrealism as heir to earlier trends in poetry after Rimbaud and painting since Van Gogh. The grail is sought in pathways with vain efforts to restore true and good that stipulated that the grail not be confused with God or Christianity. Distinctions between sacred and transcendent enter new fields of human spirit with less decisive consequences after "God is recognized to be dead" and limitations eliminated.

"The College of Sociology" describes Bataille's scheduled meeting with two colleagues, Caillois and Leiris where the three men planned to speak at the College of Sociology. Caillois however is needed in Argentina and will not return until two months later in September. Leiris chooses not to appear because he thinks the role they assign to the sacred does not conform to his opinion of Mauss' doctrine of total phenomenon. Bataille confirms that any disagreement Leiris has will not exclude future collaboration. In the future, he intends to have defined terms better where the individual is an unfinished aggregate.



Characters

Georges Bataille

Georges Bataille is the author of "Visions of Excess." He lives from 1897 to 1962 and is a professional librarian. Born in Reims, France, Georges and his mother abandon his paralytic, blind, and syphilitic father when the Germans arrive there in 1915. He quits high school in 1913 and embraces Catholicism in 1918. By 1920 however, he falls out of faith after writing a story about the Cathedral Notre Dame de Reims nearly destroyed by the Germans. He is trained as a medieval librarian. Bataille accepts a position in Paris at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris where he remains until he gets sick and has to leave in 1942.

Michel Leiris introduces Bataille to surrealism. He is rejected by Andre Breton, the surrealist leader, who considers Bataille obsessive. Breton criticizes Bataille as an "excremental philosopher" when he tries to apply reason to unreasonable things and his writing topics. Bataille forms French reviews titled "Documents," and "Critique" and writes several books including "Story of the Eye," "The Accused Share," "Erotism," and "The Absence of the Intellectual" in addition to "Visions." Bataille is important to French surrealism for his groundbreaking writing in essays, articles and meditations emphasizing the visceral, erotic and society's relation to myths and the primeval. "Visions of Excess" expresses his ideas, thoughts, and expressions that provide an understanding of the past and future of critical theory including literature, economics, sociology, and philosophy.

Allan Stoekl

Allan Stoekl is the translator, editor, and writer of the introduction to "Visions of Excess." Stoekl is a French and comparative literature professor at Pennsylvania State University. He is also the author of "Agonies of the Intellectual." Allan Stoekl is of main significance to "Visions of Excess" because his understanding, comprehension, and interpretation of Bataille's written expression provides the vehicle by which English readers learn about the life and writing of this French philosopher and writer. Bataille presents his thoughts and ideas about life and the socio-economic, philosophical, and cultural thoughts and events of his time in French. Stoekl interprets and translates Bataille's French presentation of those thoughts and ideas through the filter of his English introduction and translation.

Andre Breton

Andre Breton is a contemporary of Bataille. He is an avant garde philosopher and surrealist leader. Michael Leiris introduces him to Bataille's work named "W.C." that makes Breton think Georges Bataille is obsessed. Breton is a leading French intellectual power broker but the unknown Bataille is hostile to him. Bataille uses



methods of "intellectual violence" on Breton in his writing. For example, Bataille attacks Breton in his desire to revolt by soaring above but refusing to embrace the stinking decomposition of his destiny. Breton calls Bataille the "excremental philosopher" and condemns his pathological use of reasoning to the unreasonable. Breton and Bataille subsequently join forces to support the Popular Front. Breton is a main character in "Visions" to the extent he is a critical peer of Bataille and leader of the surrealists. Breton is judgmental of Bataille, thereby making himself a foil to his work and a potential replacement of his disapproving father image.

Bataille's father

Bataille's father is paralyzed, blind, and syphilitic according to Georges' writing. Georges and his mother abandon him to the Germans in November 1915 when they approach Reims. The father is not religious, but later goes insane and refuses to see a priest when he dies. The father is significant to Bataille's writing as a cause of his pathology. Bataille undergoes psychoanalysis and remembers a dream with mixed feelings of "the most horrible and the most magnificent" memories of his father pulling down his pants and spanking him with a bloody toad looking like a vulture sinking his beak at the age of three and punished for playing with a hoop. His father is a main character in "Visions" to the extent Georges Bataille acts out rebellion to his father as a youth by converting to and then rejecting Catholicism. He expresses pathological themes in writing that seem to originate in the events of his early youth most directly expressed in "[Dream]."

Friedrich Engels

Friedrich Engels is the name of a philosopher who uses mathematical ideas to support the dialectic method he calls progress to perfection, which mathematicians however consider degenerate. Engels believes the tenets of Hegel's "Philosophy of Nature" but other natural scientists claim dialectic is incompatible with science. Engels works for eight years to develop a dialectic theory of nature that he admits fails and is unfinished. Despite his efforts, dialectical materialism is not developed as a constituted doctrine. Engels "negation of the negation" is impractical in a class struggle that sets capitalism as a positive term against the proletariat as a negative term, which thereby implies negative and positive in the same definition.

Thorstein Veblen

Thorstein Veblen is the name of a sociologist that coins the phrase "conspicuous consumption." Bataille claims that this is a tool the rich use in destroying more goods than anyone else to reaffirm their class position over the poor. Bataille claims Revolution enables lower classes to control means of expenditure by expending the ruling class.



Leon Blum

Leon Blum is the name of the leader of the Popular Front united with Socialists and Communists. Bataille joins ironically with Breton in 1935 to form the Popular Front with Socialists and Communists under Leon Blum's lead.

Nietzsche

Nietzsche is the name of the first philosopher whose writings establish values that let individuals rise above class conditions. His disgust for establishment idealism and conformist ideology urges him forward in his Icarian adventure. Since Nietzsche urges stem from "fire from heaven" akin to Icarus drawn to the sun with waxen wings that melt as he nears the goal, his fall is that much more severe. Once Nietzsche declares God dead, only catastrophic confusion, emptiness, and poverty remain. This chaos and emptiness persist until the creation of ant-ireligious and ethereal values arrive to replace them.

Marquis de Sade

Marquis de Sade is the name of an author and literary character whose example Bataille uses in "Visions" to express base natural forms as symbols of noble or sacred abstraction. For example, Bataille tells a story about the confined madman Marquis de Sade plucking petals off the most beautiful roses to toss them "into a ditch filled with liquid manure." Bataille tells another tale of the Marquis de Sade who is imprisoned in the Bastille and screams into the dirty water pipe to terrified people in Paris that "they are killing the prisoners!"

Picasso and Dali

Picasso and Dali are the names of two artists that create works with hideous and frightening images that distract from the rage but do not lessen the power of ideas to harness a man like a horse. Bataille uses them in "Visions" as examples of surrealist artists who create painting in which the ugliness can be hateful but gives an illusion of beauty, which is the opposite of one that conceals nothing.

Elisabeth Judas-Forster

Elisabeth Judas-Forster is a sister of the philosopher Nietzsche. Bataille considers her worse than the Judas who betrayed Jesus because of her anti-Semitic falsehoods. She marries anti-Semitic Bernhard Forster in 1885 and remembers Adolf Hitler visiting her in Weimar on November 2, 1933, where she gives him a tour of Nietzsche's archives. A cousin of Nietzsche collaborates with Elisabeth Forster to reproduce Hitler's



photograph in front of Nietzsche's bust in his book showing the kinship of Nietzsche's teachings and Hitler's "Mein Kampf."

Mussolini

Mussolini is the name of the Italian dictator. Mussolini invents the fascist movement according to the vocabulary and spirit of Hegel rather than Nietzsche to whom it is often credited. Mussolini applies the term "will to power" to all Italians that he wants to be supermen.

Alfred Rosenberg

Alfred Rosenberg is the name of a writer. He writes the first fully developed ideology of National Socialism that explains Nietzsche and tears him from Mussolini's grasp. Rosenberg claims to eliminate everything non-Nordic in his philosophy of the Third Reich.

Alfred Baumler

Alfred Baumler is the name of a writer who distills from the maze of Nietzschean contradictions the doctrine of the people's common will to power. Baumler clarifies Nietzsche's thoughts on Christianity explaining that the expression "God is dead" is "the meaning of a historical fact." Baumler identifies Revolution as an awareness of the future with myth as an intense feeling about the past.

Roger Caillois

Roger Caillois is the name of one of the speakers who is scheduled with Michael Leiris to appear at the College de Sociologie with Bataille. Caillois was needed in Argentina and will not return until two months after their speaking engagement. Leiris chooses not to appear because he thinks the role they assign to the sacred does not conform to his interpretation of Mauss' doctrine of total phenomenon. He is also concerned that their efforts may lead to a literary clique despite Bataille's intention to make sure Caillois' and his own work command respect. Bataille confirms any disagreement Leiris has will not exclude future collaboration when terms are better defined.



Objects/Places

Reims, France

Reims, France is the name of the birthplace of Georges Bataille.

Ecole des Chartes

Ecole des Chartes is the name of the school where Georges Bataille studies and receives training to become a medieval librarian.

Bibliotheque Nationale

Bibliotheque Nationale is the name of the national library in Paris where Bataille is employed until he is asked to leave in 1942 when he gets sick. He is employed as a medieval librarian and conducts an active life writing.

Surrealists

Surrealists is the name given to practitioners of surrealism, which is a genre in art and literature where images, ideas, and objects are put in contrast or juxtaposition to each other to illustrate a point which may or may not be rational or sensible.

Oedipal terrors

"Oedipal terrors" is the name given to Bataille's fears that form an animating force of the heterodox theory he develops after 1927.

Documents

"Documents" is the name of literary review that Bataille founds with rebel surrealists and art historians.

Conspicuous consumption

"Conspicuous consumption" is a phrase coined by sociologist Thorstein Veblen. Bataille uses the term to explain how this concept is used as a tool by the rich in destroying more than anyone else to reaffirm their own position above the poor.



Revolution

Revolution enables the lower class to take control of the means of expenditure so as to expend the ruling class.

Acephale

"Acephale" is the name of a review published four times between 1936 and 1939 that consist primarily of Bataille's writings. In addition, Acephale group is the name of a secret society with rituals closed to the public. The Acephale group is outside the mainstream of political thought and although subversive, is not ready to lead an organized mass movement. The Acephale group does not offer standard economic or material promises nor does it oppose any progressive reforms in either social or economic realms. Its primary purpose is societal rebirth of myth to inspire the primitive communal explosion of drives leading to sacrifice that Bataille writes about. The Acephale Group practices secret rites and considers human sacrifice to contact low forces. The Acephale Group operates without a head.

College de Sociologie

College de Sociologie is the name of a school that focuses on biweekly lectures given by founding fathers including Bataille, Leiris, and others or invited speakers to redefine "science of the sacred" that can replace functional sociology with one more acceptable to the Acephale group.

Eagle and the old mole

Eagle and the "old mole" is a metaphoric phrase used by Bataille. The eagle is virile, soaring in the solar sky with an imperial hooked beak symbolizing authority to assure sovereignty over challengers. "Old-mole" Marxism starts in the earth's bowels like materialist bowels of the proletariat. Revolt supersedes authoritarian idealism in revolution.

Icarus

Icarus is the name of a mythical creature that is drawn to the sun. The myth has Icarus flying to the sun with wax wings that melt thrusting him back to earth. The author uses this mythical creature as metaphor for the fall of man from the heights of his striving.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism is the name of materialist thinking that originates in Christianity, Greco-Roman ideology, Egyptian tradition, Persian dualism, Eastern Jewish heterodoxy, and



Zoroastrian dualism. A gnostic theme posits matter as active, eternal, and autonomous in darkness and evil and thereby opposing dominant Hellenistic spirit of superior principles. Gnosticism is like modern materialism in refusing to submit oneself and one's reason to whatever is more elevated.

Mithraic Cult

The Mithraic cult ritual of the sun is the name of a ritual that Bataille describes. A priest slashes the throat of a bull held on a scaffold. The dying bull's hot blood pours down on naked people under the scaffold looking up at it. His image with its throat slashed open symbolizes the blinding sun. Hot blood pours from the bellowing and dying bull like Icarus' sudden melting of waxen wings from flying to the sun.

Pineal Eye

Pineal eye is the name of a vestigial organ that Bataille comments on. He compares a pineal eye to anal or nocturnal ideas writing "the intact anus . . . to which nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared except the sun (even though the anus is the night.)" He sees the "eye" atop his skull as "erupting volcano" and symbol of dazzling sun with comical view of "the rear end and its excretions." He compares the vertical movement of plants like tides elevating water, to horizontal motion.

Dialectic

Dialectic is the name of a method of logic developed by Marx and Hegel that is treated with repugnance and critiqued. The German professor Nicolai Hartmann examines the dialectic in Hegel's philosophy to compare verbal and reality-based approaches. Hartmann claims a basic difference where the Marx/Hegel dialectic is treated as a general law of reality that can be substituted for logic. Hartmann disputes its universality and tests dialectic reasoning in each particular case.

Potlatch

Potlatch is the name of a form of barter that primitive societies use. It is a gift of substantial riches to humiliate, defy, and obligate a recipient to satisfy another obligation later with a more valuable gift. Potlatch is used as a showy destruction of wealth in religious sacrifice. Loss of value is required in potlatch to destroy stability of hereditary fortune.

Heterogeneity

Heterogeneity is the term given by definition to dissimilar items that do not fit scientific identity. Principles of heterogeneous elements restrict forms used to particular



application of a general form including sacred like taboo, unproductive expenditure results like waste and madmen, and reactions like attraction or repulsion, as well as violence and excess from breaking laws.

Tendential Concentration

Tendential Concentration is a term given by definition to confirm the tendency to concentrate power that contradicts other power domains like military or religious authority. Royal authority does not have its own authority as religious or military powers but has "tendential" concentration. For example, the cross and saber are both placed at the steps leading to the king's throne, symbolizing that he has the authority to contradict both the church and the army.

Fascism

Fascism is the name given to a socio-economic system of state rule as a total heterogeneous power that is characterized by the foundation of inseparable elements of religious and military predominance. Fascism appears to concentrate power through uniting classes as its fundamental process around a chief who rises from within. A Fascist State unites impoverished classes under the chief or leader who identifies with the state so that "everything is in the State." A State becomes the principle of all value. This is exemplified in Mussolini's Fascist Italy.



Themes

Acephale

The term "cephalic" is defined as "of or relating to the head" and "directed toward or situated in, on or near the head." By inference then "Acephale" or "acephalic" means "headless" and is delineated on page 199 of the text stating in part, ". . . the identification with the headless man merges and melds. . . ." Unlike Fascists of the time, the Acephale group operates with no head and is leaderless. Other options expressed in Bataille's writing include monocephalic, bicephalic, and polycephalic that are all related to the number of heads whether one, two, or several. For example, governments of Hitler or Mussolini had one leader or monocephalic whereas a royal government with king, queen, and parliament may be considered bicephalic. Rome's ancient government experienced polycephalic rule when the empire was divided into geographic regions.

The Acephale group is outside the mainstream of political thought and although subversive, it is not ready to lead an organized mass movement. The Acephale group does not offer any standard economic or material promises but it does not oppose any progressive reforms in either social or economic realms either. Its primary purpose is societal rebirth of myth to inspire the primitive communal explosion of drives leading to sacrifice that Bataille writes about in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." The Acephale group practices secret rites and considers human sacrifice as a means to bring about contact with lower forces in sacred meeting places. Bataille is willing to consider other systems as shown in his interest in marginal groups like the Gnostics, madmen, knights and sects of heterodox Christian mystics.

Activities at the College de Sociologie focus on biweekly lectures given by founding fathers including Bataille, Leiris and others or invited speakers to redefine a "science of the sacred" to replace functional sociology with one more acceptable to Acephale group. Writings of the Acephale group are at a polar extreme to the College, although either extreme leads to impasse. "Acephale" is also the name of a review published four times between 1936 and 1939, primarily of Bataille's writings. The content of Bataille's text leads in both directions but to select one over the other changes the nature of his work from "bicephalic text to a monocephalic one." Specifically, it is apparent etymologically that the works of Bataille are "two-headed" or of two minds so that he considers it to be as clear a statement of his philosophy and thought as possible. For example, the "Death of God" is written meditatively with joy, dread, war and death in "The Practice of Joy before Death" as a mystical disbelief in God's existence. It seems ironic that a writer dedicated to the death of god looks forward joyfully to celebrate his own annihilation as well.



Surrealism in the life of Bataille

The childhood, early life, and training of Georges Bataille offer insight to the evolution of his adult career as a surrealist writer. Casual reading of his essay "[Dream]" reveals the boy Georges was apparently molested and clearly abused by a sick father. At the age of three, he is terrified by rats and spiders down in the cellar where his father pulls down his pants to punish him. He recalls being spanked naked and a bloody penis for playing hoops that become "barrel supports framed with planks in circles" in his dream. Recollected images are unsettling, confusing, and may have been forgotten, if it were not for the psychoanalysis Dr. Dausse administers to dredge them up from Georges' subconscious. The teenage son rebels against his father by quitting school in 1913 and becomes Catholic. Two years later the young man of eighteen and his mother abandon his paralyzed, blind, syphilitic, and now insane father to the German occupiers. His father dies without a priest in 1915 and by 1920 Georges abandons the Catholic Church to become a medieval librarian.

For the purposes of this book, a definition of Surrealism in art and literature puts images, ideas, and objects in contrast or juxtaposition to each other to illustrate a point which may or may not be rational or sensible. Georges Bataille lives a surrealist life. However it is not until Georges undergoes a psychoanalytic cure arranged by his friend Dr. Dausse and writes a book titled "W.C." in 1926, claiming to be "violently opposed to all dignity," that Bataille embraces surrealism. Perhaps recognizing its pathology, Bataille claims surrealism is a childhood sickness born out of materialism or the crude release of human life from ethical constraints. The childhood malady and perhaps rebellion grows after "God is recognized to be dead" and all limitations are eliminated. Distinctions between sacred and transcendent enter new fields of human spirit with less decisive consequences for not upholding values that are upended when those from below are seen to be above as "surrealist." Contemporary surrealism claims superiority of low values by adding the term "sur" to imbue them with elevated significance or from above, as for example "surtax" or "surcharge."

Michel Leiris introduces Bataille to surrealism in the person of Andre Breton who is the acknowledged leading figure of the genre. Breton is said to have proposed the simplest surrealist act consists of running in the streets and shooting blindly with a pistol into a crowd. Breton's expressions of surrealism relative to the poets Baudelaire, Rimbaud and others confirm their obsession with unhealthiness that disallows anything human to arise except in the cesspool of the heart. There is no model that this passionate movement can pattern itself after whether in art or formal invention or intellectual growth or philosophy or written formulas to act as key. The modern spirit is in a search without benefit of a holy grail, or goal to find the true and good that vacillates from deep modesty to insulting rage or from confirming agreement to absolute negation. Consequently a grail is sought in pathways with vain efforts to restore true and good stipulating that the distinctive grail not be confused with God or Christianity. Painters like Picasso and Dali create paintings with hideous and frightening images to distract by displaying ugliness with an illusion of beauty, which is the opposite that conceals nothing. Parts of a composition like faces, appear in realistic detail with unrealistic



placement such as a detached face floating in space. Bataille writes surrealistically as well to show incongruous concepts and ideas.

Homogeneity and Heterogeneity

Homogeneity is common method of measuring societal awareness and functioning. Heterogeneity is dissimilar and does not fit scientific identity. The basis of comparison in a social structure that requires interaction among participants is the ready exchange of common value. For example, money enables the measure of work and values each man for what he produces, which thereby makes him a function of something other than himself. Homogeneity depends on a productive system to work as long as its homogeneous elements are interested in conserving the system and that social elements do not develop a heterogeneous point of view. Compared to the universal and common applicability of homogeneous elements, the existing heterogeneous elements limit forms to particular application of general forms.

A State is formed by homogeneous society to be the intermediary between a sovereign, i.e. king or ruler, where homogeneous class to act with authority against forces that cannot be assimilated. A State can be democratic with spontaneous homogeneity or despotic to control heterogeneous forces. In a homogeneous industrial society, the owner of the means of production appropriates the output of what he owns. For example, the machine shop owner owns the machine output produced by a machine operator. The homogeneous part of society owns or purchases production and not wage-earning laborers. As long as elements of the homogeneous society do not become materially dissociated, social homogeneity and a State can retain control. Homogeneity requires the study of heterogeneity because if the State no longer serves homogeneity by protecting the non-homogeneous elements that do not benefit from production, rampant uncontrolled heterogeneity can develop.

Heterogeneity restricts forms to the particular application of general forms, including elements of the sacred like the taboo, unproductive expenditure like waste and madmen, reactions like attraction or repulsion, violence and excess in breaking the laws of social homogeneity, elements of a different order than the homogeneous like mysticism or the unconscious, and anything other that is not commensurate like fascists Hitler and Mussolini.

Sacred forms are further described by social anthropology as dualistic to the extent they are found with opposing classes, i.e. pure and impure. Traditionally defined notions of exalted or noble in a heterogeneous or multifaceted world are considered historically authoritative. The highest form of domination appears in royal authority that describes a foundation of fascism. Homogeneous society can exclude incompatible elements like foreign societies or poor classes. For example, the Marquis de Sade when locked in a cell in the Bastille screams into the dirty water pipe to the terrified people in Paris that "they are killing the prisoners!" The terror of a riot is not lessened when they move him to another prison and display his head on a pike. Bataille claims intellectual despair leads to violence and makes one seek rage like a pig rummaging "in manure and mud

uprooting everything with his snout" not to abandon impotent investigation. However they do not diminish the ideas' power over a man that harnesses him like a horse.

Style

Perspective

Georges Bataille writes "Visions of Excess" which is published in 1985. Bataille is a professional librarian, who lives from 1897 to 1962. He writes several other books and founds the French review titled "Documents," and "Critique." He quits high school in 1913 and then embraces Catholicism in 1918. By 1920 he falls out of faith after writing about the Cathedral Notre Dame de Reims nearly destroyed by the Germans. He is a trained medieval librarian and meets Michel Leiris who introduces him to surrealism, but he is rejected by Andre Breton, the surrealist leader, who considers Bataille obsessive. Breton criticizes Bataille as an "excremental philosopher" in part because he applies reason to unreasonable things. Bataille writes this collection of articles, essays, and meditations to express his views on philosophy, politics, and peers. He uses these means to critique and reply to criticisms of his own and others work. The style of his work is often pornographic and repulsive, apparently designed to shock and impact his audience.

Tone

The author Bataille expresses his own ideas by writing subjective, complex, and wandering sentences that seem to have as their main purpose confounding readers with his lack of clarity. For example, one sentence on page 131 is actually a paragraph of 91 words that is replete with disconnected and run-on notions and phrases quoted as follows:

"A fortiori a historical representation of the formation of me (considered as a part of everything that is an object of knowledge) and of its imperative or impersonal modes dissipates, and this allows only the subsistence of the violence and the avidity for the dominion of the me over the void in which it is suspended, at will, even in its prison, the me that I am realizes everything that preceded it or surrounds it, whether it exists as life or as simple being, as a void submitted to its anxious dominion."

Apparently Bataille can write in a coherent and cogent style as his socio-political and economic analysis of homogeneity demonstrates on page 138. He writes in a puzzling style that vacillates between clarity and virtual incoherence. Perhaps his composition is designed to be the verbal equivalent of a Salvador Dali work of art that becomes lost in the verbal imagery. Bataille's writing has a challenging and frustrating affect on the reader.

Structure

"Visions of Excess" is a 271 page non-fictional compilation of essays, articles, fragments, and meditations written from 1927 to 1939, by Georges Bataille. The book is



comprised of the following sections: Contents, Acknowledgements, Introduction, Writing Sections I, II, and III sorted by writing period years, Commentary, Index and miscellaneous photographs. Introduction and Commentary sections are organized chronologically as are the Contents and Writing Sections by years during which Bataille writes content. For example, "I" on the Contents page, referred to here as Section I, contains works written from 1927 through 1930, and "II" or Section II, is written between 1932 and 1935, whereas "III" or Section III content is written between 1936 and 1939.

The same identifying periods are used in Introduction and Commentary sections to classify the content described. The contents within writing sections are titled without apparent relation to each other or the work. For example, some essays in Section I include, "[Dream]," "The Solar Anus," "Eye," "The Deviations of Nature," and "Rotten Sun." Later writing has titles that seem to express greater degrees of relevance like, "The Critique of the Foundations of the Hegelian Dialectic" in Section II and "Nietzsche and the Fascists" and "The Obelisk" in Section III. Section subsections vary with Roman numerals and none in short commentaries to IV, 19 in "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade," XII in "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," 15 Propositions, and XIV in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice."

The apparent benefit provided by structural consistency of tracking the same essay from Introduction to Writing Section and Commentary is diminished by reading the content of an actual work. Specifically, a reader presumably can read from Introduction to essay itself to Commentary on it for increased understanding. For example, "[Dream]" is introduced as an obsession that is an animating force in his theory and commented as an episode in his psychoanalysis. However it is written as a three year-old whose "father slaps me and I see the sun" for playing with a hoop. In later writing, French surrealist Bataille identifies "surrealism as a childhood disease of this base materialism" he calls "crude liberation of human life from the imprisonment and masked pathology of ethics, an appeal to all that is offensive, indestructible, and even despicable." "Visions" is a challenging read that after all is done leaves one with a question whether Bataille's psychoanalysis is yet complete.



Quotes

"Production in Bastaille's view is clearly subordinate and posterior to a destruction: people create in order to expend, and if they retain things they have produced, it is only to allow themselves to continue living, and thus destroying." Introduction, pg. xvii

"Despite the fact that Bastaille at this time was calling himself 'ferociously religious,' it must be understood that this was a religion celebrating a total lack of religion. The acephalic man through Nietzsche represented the death of God as well as the death of the classical conception of man: 'Man will escape from his head as the condemned man escapes from his prison.'" Introduction, pg. xx

"Love and life appear to be separate only because everything on earth is broken apart by vibrations of various amplitudes and durations." Section I, pg. 7

"Most materialists, even though they may have wanted to do away with all spiritual entities, ended up positing an order of things whose hierarchical relations mark it as specifically idealist. They situated dead matter at the summit of a conventional hierarchy of diverse facts, without perceiving that in this way they gave in to an obsession with the ideal form of matter, with a form that was closer than any other to what matter should be." Section I, pg. 15

"At first the 'surrealist revolution' was independent of the revolt of the lower classes, indeed was defined as nothing but a confused mental state to which was added violent verbiage asserting the necessity of a dictatorship of spirit. Subsequently surrealism has recognized the legitimacy of the organizational endeavors and even the principles of Marxist communism, seeing therein the only means to bring about an indispensable revolution in the real world." Section I, pg. 33

"Whatever the role played by acquired skills, for example in enucleation, the necessity of throwing oneself or something of oneself out of oneself remains the psychological or physiological mechanism that in certain cases can have no other end than death." Section I, pg. 67

"Class struggle, which we cite as our most important example, is characterized first of all by the fact that the positive term, capitalism, necessarily implies the negative term, the proletariat; secondly, the realization of the negation implied in the second term implies, in turn, and with the same necessity, the negation of the negation (in this way the revolution has, at the same time, a negative and a positive sense)." Section II, pg. 108

"In so-called civilized societies, the fundamental obligation of wealth disappeared only in a fairly recent period. The decline of paganism led to a decline of the games and cults for which wealthy Romans were obliged to pay; thus it has been said that Christianity individualized property, giving its possessor total control over his products and abrogating his social function." Section II, pg. 123



"This tendency toward concentration appears to be in contradiction, it is true, with the coexistence of distinct domains of power: the domain of royal sovereignty is different from military power and from the domain of religious authority. But taking note of this coexistence is precisely what draws attention to the composite character of royal power, in which it is easy to find the constitutive elements of the other two powers, the religious and the military." Section II, pg. 149

"We are led to make an essential distinction between the reactions that agitate men in the street and the phrasemongering of politicians, and all the teachings of the present period at the very least show that this distinction credits the men who have nothing going for them but their passions, to the detriment of those corrupted and often emptied of human content by the strategic task." Section II, pg. 166

"The world to which we have belonged offers nothing to love outside of each individual insufficiency; its existence is limited to utility. A world that cannot be loved to the point of death - in the same way that a man loves a woman - represents only self-interest and the obligation to work. If it is compared to worlds gone by, it is hideous, and appears as the most failed of all." Section III, pg. 179

"Enslavement tends to spread throughout human existence, and it is the destiny of this free existence that is at stake." Section III, pg. 194

"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." Section III, pg. 199

"Most often, human destiny can be lived only in fiction. But the man of fiction suffers from not accomplishing on his own the destiny he describes; he suffers from escaping fiction only through his career. He then tries to make the phantoms that haunt him enter into the real world." Section III, pg. 226

"While it is appropriate to use the word mysticism when speaking of 'joy before death' and its practice, this implies no more than an affective resemblance between this practice and those of the religions of Asia or Europe. There is no reason to link any presuppositions concerning an alleged deeper reality with a joy that has no object other than immediate life." Section III, pg. 236



Topics for Discussion

Identify, define and describe general themes that Bataille emphasizes in the three sections of this book corresponding to his three writing periods presented in Section I: 1927-1930, Section II: 1932-1935, and Section III: 1936-1939.

Explain and discuss the significance of events in the childhood, youth, early training, and education of Georges Bataille that may influence and impact the point of view he expresses as a writer. For example, explain young Georges acting out against his father. How does his medieval library science training affect his thought and writing style?

Characterize, define, and describe at least two examples of surrealism in art or literature. Identify two or three well-known artists of the Surrealist genre. What in your opinion might be a reason or purpose for this style of expression?

Define, compare, and contrast the basic elements of idealism and materialism. Explain what Bataille identifies as the fundamental conflict between the two philosophical "isms."

Define the term "cannibal delicacy" used by Stevenson described and referred to by Bataille. Discuss your ideas as to why Bataille includes this in his writing.

Describe and discuss the logical argument Bataille uses to support his claim that the big toe is the most human part of a body. Do you agree with his position or not? Support your opinion with a similarly logical argument.

Describe and discuss the fundamental difference German professor Nicolai Hartmann points out with regard to using the Marx/Hegel dialectic. Explain the differences in approach between Hartmann and Engels. Specifically, define, compare, and contrast "a priori" and "a posteriori."

Identify, list, and describe at least three significant elements in Bataille's "Notion of Expenditure" and explain how those elements affect the social order in his theory. For example, explain "potlatch" and describe how it is used to make an impact on social classes and functions.

Characterize, define, and describe Fascism and its development in Mussolini's Italy. Compare and contrast that development to Hitler's Nationalist Socialist Germany. Identify elements of how the systems differ or are the same.

Identify, list, and describe at least three significant elements of Bataille's "Labyrinth."

Compare and contrast the significance and meaning of pyramids and obelisks according to Bataille. Identify and discuss at least three similar symbolic examples in modern political society.

Characterize, define, and describe the meaning you infer from Bataille's notion of "joy before death." Evaluate and discuss how you feel about his idea relative to your own background, training, and spirituality.