

**The Accursed Share**

An Essay on General Economy

Georges Bataille.

Volume I

Consumption

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*Exuberance is beauty.*  
WILLIAM BLAKE

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## Preface

For some years, being obliged on occasion to answer the question "What are you working on?" I was embarrassed to have to say, "A book of political economy." Coming from me, this venture was disconcerting, at least to those who did not know me well. (The interest that is usually conferred on my books is of a literary sort and this was doubtless to be expected: One cannot as a matter of fact class them in a pre-defined genre.) I am still annoyed when I recall the superficial astonishment that greeted my reply; I had to explain myself, and what I was able to say in a few words was neither precise nor intelligible. Indeed, I had to add that the book I was writing (which I am now publishing) did not consider the facts the way qualified economists do, that I had a point of view from which a human sacrifice, the construction of a church or the gift of a jewel were no less interesting than the sale of wheat. In short, I had to try in vain to make clear the notion of a "general economy" in which the "expenditure" (the "consumption") of wealth, rather than production, was the primary object. My difficulty increased if I was asked the book's title. *The Accursed Share*: It might be intriguing, but it wasn't informative. Yet I should have gone further, then, and affirmed the desire to lift the curse that this title calls into question. Clearly, my project was too vast and

the announcement of a vast project is always its betrayal. No one can say without being comical that he is getting ready to overturn things: He must overturn, and that is all.

Today the book is there. But a book is nothing if it is not *situated*, if criticism has not determined the place that belongs to it in the common movement of ideas. Again, I find myself faced with the same difficulty. The book is there, but at the moment of writing its preface I cannot even ask that it be given the attention of specialists in a science. This first essay addresses, from outside the separate disciplines, a problem that still has not been framed as it should be, one that may hold the key to all the problems posed by every discipline concerned with the movement of energy on the earth – from geophysics to political economy, by way of sociology, history and biology. Moreover, neither psychology nor, in general, philosophy can be considered free of this primary question of economy. Even what may be said of art, of literature, of poetry has an essential connection with the movement I study: that of excess energy, translated into the effervescence of life. The result is that such a book, being of interest to everyone, could well be of interest to no one.

Certainly, it is dangerous, in extending the frigid research of the sciences, to come to a point where one's object no longer leaves one unaffected, where, on the contrary, it is what inflames. Indeed, the ebullition I consider, which animates the globe, is also *my* ebullition. Thus, the object of my research cannot be distinguished *from the subject at its boiling point*. In this way, even before finding a difficulty in receiving its place in the common movement of ideas, my enterprise came up against the most personal obstacle, which moreover gives the book its fundamental meaning.

As I considered the object of my study, I could not personally resist the effervescence in which I discovered the unavoidable purpose, the value of the cold and calculated operation. My research

aimed at the acquisition of a knowledge; it demanded coldness and calculation, but the knowledge acquired was that of an error, an error implied in the coldness that is inherent in all calculation. In other words, my work tended first of all to *increase* the sum of human resources, but its findings showed me that this accumulation was only a delay, a shrinking back from the inevitable term, where the accumulated wealth has value only in the instant. Writing this book in which I was saying that energy finally can only be wasted, I myself was using my energy, my time, working; my research answered in a fundamental way the desire to add to the amount of wealth acquired for mankind. Should I say that under these conditions I sometimes could only respond to the truth of my book and could not go on writing it?

A book that no one awaits, that answers no formulated question, that the author would not have written if he had followed its lesson to the letter — such is finally the oddity that today I offer the reader. This invites distrust at the outset, *and yet*, what if it were better not to meet any expectation and to offer precisely that which repels, that which people deliberately avoid, for lack of strength: that violent movement, sudden and shocking, which jostles the mind, taking away its tranquillity; a kind of bold reversal that substitutes a dynamism, in harmony with the world, for the stagnation of isolated ideas, of stubborn problems born of an anxiety that refused to *see*. How, without turning my back on expectations, could I have had the extreme freedom of thought that places concepts on a level with the world's freedom of movement? It would serve no purpose to neglect the rules of rigorous investigation, which proceeds slowly and methodically. But how can we solve the enigma, how can we measure up to the universe if we content ourselves with the slumber of conventional knowledge? If one has the patience, and the courage, to read my book, one will see that it contains studies conducted according

to the rules of a reason that does not relent, and solutions to political problems deriving from a traditional wisdom, but one will also find in it this affirmation: *that the sexual act is in time what the tiger is in space*. The comparison follows from considerations of energy economy that leave no room for poetic fantasy, but it requires thinking on a level with a play of forces that runs counter to ordinary calculations, a play of forces based on the laws that govern us. In short, the perspectives where such truths appear are those in which more general propositions reveal their meaning, propositions according to which *it is not necessity but its contrary, "luxury," that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems*.

This being said, I will urge critics to be somewhat cautious. It is an easy game to raise irrefutable objections to new views. Generally, that which is new is disconcerting and not correctly understood: The objections are directed at simplified aspects that the author does not grant any more than a would-be contradictor, or grants only within the limits of a provisional simplification. There is little chance in the present case that these peremptory difficulties, which stand out at the first reading, have escaped my attention in the 18 years this work has demanded of me. But, to begin with, I confine myself to a quick overview, in which I cannot even consider broaching the multitude of questions that are implied.

In particular, I have foregone the idea of giving, in a first volume, a detailed analysis of all of life's actions from the point of view that I introduce. This is regrettable in that the notions of "productive expenditure" and "nonproductive expenditure" have a basic value in all the developments of my book. But real life, composed of all sorts of expenditures, knows nothing of purely productive expenditure; in actuality, it knows nothing of purely nonproductive expenditure either. Hence a first rudimentary classification will have to be replaced by a methodical description of every aspect of life. I wanted first to offer a group of privileged

facts that would allow my thinking to be grasped. But this thinking could not have shaped itself if it had not also considered the totality of small occurrences, wrongly supposed to be insignificant.

I imagine that it would be equally futile to draw destructive conclusions from the fact that economic crises, which necessarily have in my work a sense in which they are decisive events, are only represented therein in a summary, superficial fashion. If the truth must be told, I had to choose: I could not at the same time give my thinking a general outline, and lose myself in a maze of interferences, where the trees constantly prevent one from seeing the forest. I wanted to avoid redoing the work of the economists, and I confined myself to relating the problem that is posed in economic crises to the general problem of nature. I wanted to cast a new light on it, but to start with, I decided against analyzing the complexities of a crisis of overproduction, just as I deferred calculating in detail the share of growth and the share of waste entering into the manufacture of a hat or a chair. I preferred to give, in general, the reasons that account for the mystery of Keynes's bottles, tracing the exhausting detours of exuberance through eating, death and sexual reproduction.

I confine myself at present to this summary view. This does not mean that I am leaving it at that: I am only postponing more extensive work until later.<sup>1</sup> I am also postponing, for a short time, the exposition of my analysis of anxiety.

And yet that is the crucial analysis that alone can adequately circumscribe the opposition of two political methods: that of fear and the anxious search for a solution, combining the pursuit of freedom with the imperatives that are the most opposed to freedom; and that of freedom of mind, which issues from the global resources of life, a freedom for which, instantly, everything is resolved, *everything is rich* – in other words, everything that is commensurate with the universe. I insist on the fact that, to freedom

of mind, the search for a solution is an exuberance, a superfluity; this gives it an incomparable force. To solve political problems becomes difficult for those who allow anxiety alone to pose them. It is necessary for anxiety to pose them. But their solution demands at a certain point the removal of this anxiety. The meaning of the political proposals to which this book leads, and that I formulate at the end of the volume, is linked to this lucid attitude.<sup>2</sup>

PART ONE

**Theoretical Introduction**

## The Meaning of General Economy

### *The Dependence of the Economy on the Circulation of Energy on the Earth*

When it is necessary to change an automobile tire, open an abcess or plow a vineyard, it is easy to manage a quite limited operation. The elements on which the action is brought to bear are not completely isolated from the rest of the world, but it is possible to act on them as if they were: One can complete the operation without once needing to consider the whole, of which the tire, the abcess or the vineyard is nevertheless an integral part. The changes brought about do not perceptibly alter the other things, nor does the ceaseless action from without have an appreciable effect on the conduct of the operation. But things are different when we consider a substantial economic activity such as the production of automobiles in the United States, or, *a fortiori*, when it is a question of economic activity in general.

Between the production of automobiles and the *general* movement of the economy, the interdependence is rather clear, but the economy taken as a whole is usually studied as if it were a matter of an isolatable system of operation. Production and consumption are linked together, but, considered jointly, it does not seem difficult to study them as one might study an elementary operation relatively independent of that which it is not.

This method is legitimate, and science never proceeds differently. However, economic science does not give results of the same order as physics studying, first, a precise phenomenon, then all studiable phenomena as a coordinated whole. Economic phenomena are not easy to isolate, and their general coordination is not easy to establish. So it is possible to raise this question concerning them: Shouldn't productive activity as a whole be considered in terms of the modifications it receives from its surroundings or brings about in its surroundings? In other words, isn't there a need to study the system of human production and consumption within a much larger framework?

In the sciences such problems ordinarily have an academic character, but economic activity is so far-reaching that no one will be surprised if a first question is followed by other, less abstract ones: In overall industrial development, are there not social conflicts and planetary wars? In the global activity of men, in short, are there not causes and effects that will appear only provided that *the general data of the economy* are studied? Will we be able to make ourselves the masters of such a dangerous activity (and one that we could not abandon in any case) without having grasped its *general* consequences? Should we not, given the constant development of economic forces, pose the *general* problems that are linked to the movement of energy on the globe?

These questions allow one to glimpse both the theoretical meaning and the practical importance of the principles they introduce.

### ***The Necessity of Losing the Excess Energy that Cannot be Used for a System's Growth***

At first sight, it is easy to recognize in the economy – *in the production and use of wealth* – a particular aspect of terrestrial activity regarded as a cosmic phenomenon. A movement is produced on the surface of the globe that results from the circulation of energy

at this point in the universe. The economic activity of men appropriates this movement, making use of the resulting possibilities for certain ends. But this movement has a pattern and laws with which, as a rule, those who use them and depend on them are unacquainted. Thus the question arises: Is the general determination of energy circulating in the biosphere altered by man's activity? Or rather, isn't the latter's intention vitiated by a determination of which it is ignorant, which it overlooks and cannot change?

Without waiting, I will give an inescapable answer.

Man's disregard for the material basis of his life still causes him to err in a serious way. Humanity exploits given material resources, but by restricting them as it does to a resolution of the immediate difficulties it encounters (a resolution which it has hastily had to define as an ideal), it assigns to the forces it employs an end which they cannot have. Beyond our immediate ends, man's activity in fact pursues the useless and infinite fulfillment of the universe.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the error that results from so complete a disregard does not just concern man's claim to lucidity. It is not easy to realize one's own ends if one must, in trying to do so, carry out a movement that surpasses them. No doubt these ends and this movement may not be entirely irreconcilable; but if these two terms are to be reconciled we must cease to ignore one of them; otherwise, our works quickly turn to catastrophe.

I will begin with a basic fact: The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.

***The Poverty of Organisms or Limited Systems and the Excess Wealth of Living Nature***

Minds accustomed to seeing the development of productive forces as the ideal end of activity refuse to recognize that energy, which constitutes wealth, must ultimately be spent lavishly (without return), and that a series of profitable operations has absolutely no other effect than the squandering of profits. To affirm that it is necessary to dissipate a substantial portion of energy produced, sending it up in smoke, is to go against judgments that form the basis of a rational economy. We know cases where wealth has had to be destroyed (coffee thrown into the sea), but these scandals cannot reasonably be offered as examples to follow. They are the acknowledgment of an impotence, and no one could find in them the image and essence of wealth. Indeed, involuntary destruction (such as the disposal of coffee overboard) has in every case the meaning of failure; it is experienced as a misfortune; in no way can it be presented as desirable. And yet it is the type of operation without which there is no solution. When one considers the *totality* of productive wealth on the surface of the globe, it is evident that the products of this wealth can be employed for productive ends only insofar as the living organism that is economic mankind can increase its equipment. This is not entirely – neither always nor indefinitely – possible. A surplus must be dissipated through deficit operations: The final dissipation cannot fail to carry out the movement that animates terrestrial energy.

The contrary usually appears for the reason that the economy is never considered *in general*. The human mind reduces operations, in science as in life, to an entity based on typical *particular* systems (organisms or enterprises). Economic activity, considered as a whole, is conceived in terms of particular operations with limited ends. The mind generalizes by composing the aggregate

of these operations. Economic science merely generalizes the isolated situation; it restricts its object to operations carried out with a view to a limited end, that of economic man. It does not take into consideration a play of energy that no particular end limits: the play of *living matter in general*, involved in the movement of light of which it is the result. On the surface of the globe, for *living matter in general*, energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance. The choice is limited to how the wealth is to be squandered. It is to the *particular* living being, or to limited populations of living beings, that the problem of necessity presents itself. But man is not just the separate being that contends with the living world and with other men for his share of resources. The general movement of exudation (of waste) of living matter impels him, and he cannot stop it; moreover, being at the summit, his sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement; it destines him, in a privileged way, to that glorious operation, to useless consumption. If he denies this, as he is constantly urged to do by the consciousness of a *necessity*; of an indigence inherent in separate beings (which are constantly short of resources, which are nothing but eternally *needy* individuals), his denial does not alter the global movement of energy in the least: The latter cannot accumulate limitlessly in the productive forces; eventually, like a river into the sea, it is bound to escape us and be lost to us.

### ***War Considered as a Catastrophic Expenditure of Excess Energy***

Incomprehension does not change the final outcome in the slightest. We can ignore or forget the fact that the ground we live on is little other than a field of multiple destructions. Our ignorance only has this incontestable effect: It causes us to *undergo* what we could *bring about* in our own way, if we understood. It deprives

us of the choice of an exudation that might suit us. Above all, it consigns men and their works to catastrophic destructions. For if we do not have the force to destroy the surplus energy ourselves, it cannot be used, and, like an unbroken animal that cannot be trained, it is this energy that destroys us; it is we who pay the price of the inevitable explosion.

These excesses of life force, which locally block the poorest economies, are in fact the most dangerous factors of ruination. Hence relieving the blockage was always, if only in the darkest region of consciousness, the object of a feverish pursuit. Ancient societies found relief in festivals; some erected admirable monuments that had no useful purpose; we use the excess to multiply "services" that make life smoother,<sup>2</sup> and we are led to reabsorb part of it by increasing leisure time. But these diversions have always been inadequate: Their existence *in excess* nevertheless (in certain respects) has perpetually doomed multitudes of human beings and great quantities of useful goods to the destruction of wars. In our time, the relative importance of armed conflicts has even increased; it has taken on the disastrous proportions of which we are aware.

Recent history is the result of the soaring growth of industrial activity. At first this prolific movement restrained martial activity by absorbing the main part of the excess: The development of modern industry yielded the period of relative peace from 1815 to 1914.<sup>3</sup> Developing in this way, increasing the resources, the productive forces made possible in the same period the rapid demographic expansion of the advanced countries (this is the fleshly aspect of the bony proliferation of the factories). But in the long run the growth that the technical changes made possible became difficult to sustain. It became productive of an increased surplus itself. The First World War broke out before its limits were really reached, even locally. The Second did not itself signify that the

system could not develop further (either extensively or in any case intensively). But it weighed the possibilities of a halt in development and ceased to enjoy the opportunities of a growth that nothing opposed. It is sometimes denied that the industrial plethora was at the origin of these recent wars, particularly the first. Yet it was this plethora that both wars exuded; its size was what gave them their extraordinary intensity. Consequently, the general principle of an excess of energy to be expended, considered (beyond the too narrow scope of the economy) as the effect of a movement that surpasses it, tragically illuminates a set of facts; moreover, it takes on a significance that no one can deny. We can express the hope of avoiding a war that already threatens. But in order to do so we must divert the surplus production, either into the rational extension of a difficult industrial growth, or into unproductive works that will dissipate an energy that cannot be accumulated in any case. This raises numerous problems, which are exhaustingly complex.<sup>4</sup> One can be skeptical of arriving easily at the practical solutions they demand, but the interest they hold is unquestionable.

I will simply state, without waiting further, that the extension of economic growth itself requires the overturning of economic principles – the overturning of the ethics that grounds them. Changing from the perspectives of *restrictive* economy to those of *general* economy actually accomplishes a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking – and of ethics. If a part of wealth (subject to a rough estimate) is doomed to destruction or at least to unproductive use without any possible profit, it is logical, even *inescapable*, to surrender commodities without return. Henceforth, leaving aside pure and simple dissipation, analogous to the construction of the Pyramids, the possibility of pursuing growth is itself subordinated to giving: The industrial development of the entire world demands of Americans that they lucidly grasp the

necessity, for an economy such as theirs, of having a margin of profitless operations. An immense industrial network cannot be managed in the same way that one changes a tire. . . . It expresses a circuit of cosmic energy on which it depends, which it cannot limit, and whose laws it cannot ignore without consequences. Woe to those who, to the very end, insist on regulating the movement that exceeds them with the narrow mind of the mechanic who changes a tire.

## Laws of General Economy

### *The Superabundance of Biochemical Energy and Growth*

That as a rule an organism has at its disposal greater energy resources than are necessary for the operations that sustain life (functional activities and, in animals, essential muscular exercises, the search for food) is evident from functions like growth and reproduction. Neither growth nor reproduction would be possible if plants and animals did not normally dispose of an excess. The very principle of living matter requires that the chemical operations of life, which demand an expenditure of energy, be gainful, productive of surpluses.

Let us consider a domestic animal, a calf. (In order not to go too deeply into the matter, I will first leave aside the different contributions of animal or human energy that enable its food to be produced; every organism depends on the contribution of others, and if this contribution is favorable, it extracts the necessary energy from it, but without it the organism would soon die.) Functional activity utilizes part of the available energy, but the animal commands an excess that ensures its growth. Under normal conditions, a part of this excess is lost in comings and goings, but if the stock grower manages to keep it inactive, the

volume of the calf benefits; the saving appears in the form of fat. If the calf is not killed the moment comes when the reduced growth no longer consumes all of an increased excess; the calf then reaches sexual maturity; its vital forces are devoted mainly to the turbulence of the bull in the case of a male, or to pregnancy and the production of milk in the case of a female. In a sense, reproduction signifies a passage from individual growth to that of a group. If the male is castrated, its individual volume again increases for a time and a considerable amount of work is extracted from it.

In nature there is no artificial fattening of the newborn, nor is there castration. It was convenient for me to choose a domestic animal as an example, but the movements of animal matter are basically the same in all cases. On the whole, the excess energy provides for the growth or the turbulence of individuals. The calf and the cow, the bull and the ox merely add a richer and more familiar illustration of this great movement.

Plants manifest the same excess, but it is much more pronounced in their case. They are nothing but growth and reproduction (the energy necessary for their functional activity is negligible). But this indefinite exuberance must be considered in relation to the conditions that make it possible – and that limit it.

### *The Limits of Growth*

I will speak briefly about the most general conditions of life, dwelling on one crucially important fact: Solar energy is the source of life's exuberant development. The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy – wealth – without any return. The sun gives without ever receiving. Men were conscious of this long before astrophysics measured that ceaseless prodigality; they saw it ripen the harvests and they associated its splendor with the act of someone who gives

without receiving. It is necessary at this point to note a dual origin of moral judgments. In former times value was given to unproductive glory, whereas in our day it is measured in terms of production: Precedence is given to energy acquisition over energy expenditure. Glory itself is justified by the consequences of a glorious deed in the sphere of utility. But, dominated though it is by practical judgment and Christian morality, the archaic sensibility is still alive: In particular it reappears in the romantic protest against the bourgeois world; only in the classical conceptions of the economy does it lose its rights entirely.

Solar radiation results in a superabundance of energy on the surface of the globe. But, first, living matter receives this energy and accumulates it within the limits given by the space that is available to it. It then radiates or squanders it, but before devoting an appreciable share to this radiation it makes maximum use of it for growth. Only the impossibility of continuing growth makes way for squander. Hence the real excess does not begin until the growth of the individual or group has reached its limits.

The immediate limitation, for each individual or each group, is given by the other individuals or other groups. But the terrestrial sphere (to be exact, the *biosphere*<sup>5</sup>), which corresponds to the space available to life, is the only real limit. The *individual* or group can be reduced by another individual or another group, but the total volume of living nature is not changed; in short, it is the size of the terrestrial space that limits overall growth.

### **Pressure**

As a rule the surface of the globe is invested by life to the extent possible. By and large the myriad forms of life adapt it to the available resources, so that space is its basic limit. Certain disadvantaged areas, where the chemical operations essential to life cannot take place, seem to have no real existence. But taking into account

a constant relation of the biomass to the local climatic and geological conditions, life occupies all the available space. These local conditions determine the intensity of the *pressure* exerted in all directions by life. But one can speak of pressure in this sense only if, by some means, the available space is increased; this space will be immediately occupied in the same way as the adjoining space. Moreover, the same is true every time life is destroyed at some point on the globe, by a forest fire, by a volcanic phenomenon or by the hand of man. The most familiar example is that of a path that a gardener clears and maintains. Once abandoned, the pressure of the surrounding life soon covers it over again with weeds and bushes swarming with animal life.

If the path is paved with asphalt, it is for a long time sheltered from the pressure. This means that the volume of life possible, assuming that the path were abandoned instead of being covered with asphalt, will not be realized, that the additional energy corresponding to this volume is lost, is dissipated in some way. This pressure cannot be compared to that of a closed boiler. If the space is completely occupied, if there is no outlet anywhere, nothing bursts; but the pressure is there. In a sense, life suffocates within limits that are too close; it aspires in manifold ways to an impossible growth; it releases a steady flow of excess resources, possibly involving large squanderings of energy. The limit of growth being reached, life, without being in a closed container, at least enters into ebullition: Without exploding, its extreme exuberance pours out in a movement always bordering on explosion.

The consequences of this situation do not easily enter into our calculations. We calculate our interests, but this situation baffles us: The very word *interest* is contradictory with the *desire* at stake under these conditions. As soon as we want to act reasonably we have to consider the *utility* of our actions; utility implies an advantage, a maintenance or growth. Now, if it is necessary to respond

to exuberance, it is no doubt possible to use it for growth. But the problem raised precludes this. Supposing there is no longer any growth possible, what is to be done with the seething energy that remains? To waste it is obviously not to use it. And yet, what we have is a draining-away, a pure and simple loss, *which occurs in any case*: From the first, the excess energy, if it cannot be used for growth, is lost. Moreover, in no way can this inevitable loss be accounted useful. It is only a matter of an acceptable loss, preferable to another that is regarded as unacceptable: a question of *acceptability*, not utility. Its consequences are decisive, however.

### ***The First Effect of Pressure: Extension***

It is hard to define and precisely represent the pressure thus exerted. It is both complex and elusive, but one can describe its effects. An image comes to mind, then, but I must say in offering it that it illustrates the consequences yet does not give a concrete idea of the cause.

Imagine an immense crowd assembled in the expectation of witnessing a bullfight that will take place in a bullring that is too small. The crowd wants badly to enter but cannot be entirely accommodated: Many people must wait outside. Similarly, the possibilities of life cannot be realized indefinitely; they are limited by the space, just as the entry of the crowd is limited by the number of seats in the bullring.

A first effect of the pressure will be to increase the number of seats in the bullring.

If the security service is well-organized, this number is limited precisely. But outside there may be trees and lampposts from the top of which the arena is visible. If there is no regulation against it, there will be people who will climb these trees and lampposts. Similarly, the earth first opens to life the primary space of the waters and the surface of the ground. But life quickly takes

possession of the air. To start with, it was important to enlarge the surface of the green substance of plants, which absorbs the radiant energy of light. The superposition of leaves in the air extends the volume of this substance considerably: In particular, the structure of trees develops this possibility well beyond the level of the grasses. For their part the winged insects and the birds, in the wake of the pollens, invade the air.

***The Second Effect of Pressure: Squander or Luxury***

But the lack of room can have another effect: A fight may break out at the entrance. If lives are lost the excess of individuals over the number of seats will decrease. This effect works in a sense contrary to the first one. Sometimes the pressure results in the clearing of a new space, other times in the erasing of possibilities in excess of the available room. This last effect operates in nature in the most varied forms.

The most remarkable is death. As we know, death is not necessary. The simple forms of life are immortal: The birth of an organism reproduced through scissiparity is lost in the mists of time. Indeed, it cannot be said to have had parents. Take for example the doubles  $A'$  and  $A''$ , resulting from the splitting in two of  $A$ ;  $A$  has not ceased living with the coming into being of  $A'$ ;  $A'$  is still  $A$  (and the same is true of  $A''$ ). But let us suppose (this is purely theoretical, for the purpose of demonstration) that in the beginning of life there was just one of these infinitesimal creatures: It would nonetheless have quickly populated the earth with its species. After a short time, in theory, reproduction would have become impossible for lack of room, and the energy it utilizes would have dissipated, e.g., in the form of heat. Moreover, this is what happens to one of these micro-organisms, duckweed, which covers a pond with a green film, after which it remains in equilibrium. For the duckweed, space is given within the narrowly

determined limits of a pond. But the stagnation of the duckweed is not conceivable on the scale of the entire globe, where in any case the necessary equilibrium is lacking. It can be granted (theoretically) that a pressure everywhere equal to itself would result in a state of rest, in a general substitution of heat loss for reproduction. But real pressure has different results: It puts unequal organisms in competition with one another, and although we cannot say how the species take part in the dance, we can say what the dance is.

Besides the external action of life (climatic or volcanic phenomena), the unevenness of pressure in living matter continually makes available to growth the place left vacant by death. It is not a new space, and if one considers life as a whole, there is not really growth but a maintenance of volume in general. In other words, the possible growth is reduced to a compensation for the destructions that are brought about.

I insist on the fact that there is generally no growth but only a luxurious squandering of energy in every form! The history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance; the dominant event is the development of luxury, the production of increasingly burdensome forms of life.

***The Three Luxuries of Nature:  
Eating, Death and Sexual Reproduction***

The eating of one species by another is the simplest form of luxury. The populations that were trapped by the German army acquired, thanks to the food shortage, a vulgarized knowledge of this burdensome character of the indirect development of living matter. If one cultivates potatoes or wheat, the land's yield in consumable calories is much greater than that of livestock in milk and meat for an equivalent acreage of pasture. The least burdensome form of life is that of a green micro-organism (absorbing the

sun's energy through the action of chlorophyll), but generally vegetation is less burdensome than animal life. Vegetation quickly occupies the available space. Animals make it a field of slaughter and extend its possibilities in this way; they themselves develop more slowly. In this respect, the wild beast is at the summit: Its continual depredations of depredators represent an immense squandering of energy. William Blake asked the tiger: "In what distant deeps or skies burned the fire of thine eyes?" What struck him in this way was the cruel pressure, at the limits of possibility, the tiger's immense power of consumption of life. In the general effervescence of life, the tiger is a point of extreme incandescence. And this incandescence did in fact burn first in the remote depths of the sky, in the sun's consumption.

Eating brings death, but in an accidental form. *Of all conceivable luxuries, death, in its fatal and inexorable form, is undoubtedly the most costly.* The fragility, the complexity, of the animal body already exhibits its luxurious quality, but this fragility and luxury culminate in death. Just as in space the trunks and branches of the tree raise the superimposed stages of the foliage to the light, death distributes the passage of the generations over time. It constantly leaves the necessary room for the coming of the newborn, and we are wrong to curse *the one without whom we would not exist.*

In reality, when we curse death we only fear ourselves: The severity of *our will* is what makes us tremble. We lie to ourselves when we dream of escaping the movement of luxurious exuberance of which we are only the most intense form. Or perhaps we only lie to ourselves in the beginning the better to experience the severity of this will afterward, carrying it to the rigorous extreme of consciousness.

In this respect, the luxury of death is regarded by us in the same way as that of sexuality, first as a negation of ourselves,

then – in a sudden reversal – as the profound truth of that movement of which life is the manifestation.

Under the present conditions, independently of our consciousness, sexual reproduction is, together with eating and death, one of the great luxurious detours that ensure the intense consumption of energy. To begin with, it accentuates that which scissiparity announced: the division by which the individual being foregoes growth for himself and, through the multiplication of individuals, transfers it to the impersonality of life. This is because, from the first, sexuality differs from miserly growth: If, with regard to the species, sexuality appears as a growth, in principle it is nevertheless the luxury of individuals. This characteristic is more accentuated in sexual reproduction, where the individuals engendered are clearly separate from those that engender them and *give* them life as one *gives to others*. But without renouncing a subsequent return to the principle of growth for the period of nutrition, the reproduction of the higher animals has not ceased to deepen the fault that separates it from the simple tendency to eat in order to increase volume and power. For these animals sexual reproduction is the occasion of a sudden and frantic squandering of energy resources, carried in a moment to the limit of possibility (in time what the tiger is in space). This squandering goes far beyond what would be sufficient for the growth of the species. It appears to be the most that an individual has the strength to accomplish in a given moment. It leads to the wholesale destruction of property – in spirit, the destruction of bodies as well – and ultimately connects up with the senseless luxury and excess of death.

***Extension Through Labor and Technology,  
and the Luxury of Man***

Man's activity is basically conditioned by this general movement

of life. In a sense, *in extension*, his activity opens up a new possibility to life, a new space (as did tree branches and bird wings in nature). The space that labor and technical know-how open to the increased reproduction of men is not, in the proper sense, one that life has not yet populated. But human activity transforming the world augments the mass of living matter with supplementary apparatuses, composed of an immense quantity of inert matter, which considerably increases the resources of available energy. From the first, man has the option of utilizing part of the available energy for the growth (not biological but technical) of his energy wealth. The techniques have in short made it possible to extend – to develop – the elementary movement of growth that life realizes within the limits of the possible. Of course, this development is neither continuous nor boundless. Sometimes the cessation of development corresponds to a stagnation of techniques; other times, the invention of new techniques leads to a resurgence. The growth of energy resources can itself serve as the basis of a resumption of biological (demographic) growth. The history of Europe in the nineteenth century is the best (and best known) illustration of these vast living proliferations of which technical equipment is the ossature: We are aware of the extent of the population growth linked at first to the rise of industry.

In actual fact the quantitative relations of population and tool-making – and, in general, the conditions of economic development in history – are subject to so many interferences that it is always difficult to determine their exact distribution. In any case, I cannot incorporate detailed analyses into an overall survey that seems the only way of outlining the vast movement which animates the earth. But the recent decline in demographic growth by itself reveals the complexity of the effects. The fact is that the revivals of development that are due to human activity, that are made possible or maintained by new techniques, always have a

double effect: Initially, they use a portion of the surplus energy, but then they produce a larger and larger surplus. This surplus eventually contributes to making growth more difficult, for growth no longer suffices to use it up. At a certain point the advantage of extension is neutralized by the contrary advantage, that of luxury; the former remains operative, but in a disappointing – uncertain, often powerless – way. The drop in the demographic curves is perhaps the first indicator of the change of sign that has occurred: Henceforth what matters *primarily* is no longer to develop the productive forces but to spend their products sumptuously.

At this point, immense squanderings are about to take place: After a century of populating and of industrial peace, the temporary limit of development being encountered, the two world wars organized the greatest orgies of wealth – and of human beings – that history has recorded. Yet these orgies coincide with an appreciable rise in the general standard of living: The majority of the population benefits from more and more unproductive services; work is reduced and wages are increased overall.

Thus, man is only a roundabout, subsidiary response to the problem of growth. Doubtless, through labor and technique, he has made possible an extension of growth beyond the given limits. But just as the herbivore relative to the plant, and the carnivore relative to the herbivore, is a luxury, man is the most suited of all living beings to consume intensely, sumptuously, the excess energy offered up by the pressure of life to conflagrations befitting the solar origins of its movement.

### ***The Accursed Share***

This truth is paradoxical, to the extent of being exactly contrary to the usual perception.

This paradoxical character is underscored by the fact that, even at the highest point of exuberance, its significance is still veiled.

Under present conditions, everything conspires to obscure the basic movement that tends to restore wealth to its function, to gift-giving, to squandering without reciprocation. On the one hand, mechanized warfare, producing its ravages, characterizes this movement as something alien, hostile to human will. On the other hand, the raising of the standard of living is in no way represented as a requirement of luxury. The movement that demands it is even a protest against the luxury of the great fortunes: thus the demand made in the name of *justice*. Without having anything against justice, obviously, one may be allowed to point out that here the word conceals the profound truth of its contrary, which is precisely *freedom*. Under the mask of justice, it is true that general *freedom* takes on the lackluster and neutral appearance of existence subjected to the necessities: If anything, it is a narrowing of limits *to what is most just*; it is not a dangerous breaking-loose, a meaning that the word has lost. It is a guarantee against the risk of servitude, not a will to assume those risks without which there is no freedom.

### ***Opposition of the "General" Viewpoint to the "Particular" Viewpoint***

Of course, the fact of being afraid, of turning away from a movement of dilapidation, which impels us and even *defines* us, is not surprising. The consequences of this movement are distressing from the start. The image of the tiger reveals the truth of eating. Death has become our horror, and though in a sense the fact of being carnivorous and of facing death bravely answers to the demand of virility (but that is a different matter!); sexuality is linked to the scandals of death and the eating of meat.<sup>6</sup>

But this atmosphere of malediction presupposes anguish, and anguish for its part signifies the absence (or weakness) of the pressure exerted by the exuberance of life. Anguish arises when the

anxious individual is not himself stretched tight by the feeling of superabundance. This is precisely what evinces the isolated, individual character of anguish. There can be anguish only from a personal, *particular* point of view that is radically opposed to the *general* point of view based on the exuberance of living matter as a whole. Anguish is meaningless for someone who overflows with life, and for life as a whole, which is an overflowing by its very nature.

As for the present historical situation, it is characterized by the fact that judgments concerning the *general* situation proceed from a *particular* point of view. As a rule, *particular* existence always risks succumbing for lack of resources. It contrasts with *general* existence whose resources are in excess and for which death has no meaning. From the *particular* point of view, the problems are posed *in the first instance* by a deficiency of resources. They are posed *in the first instance* by an excess of resources if one starts from the *general* point of view. Doubtless the problem of extreme poverty remains in any case. Moreover, it should be understood that *general economy* must also, whenever possible and first of all, envisage the development of growth. But if it considers poverty or growth, it takes into account the limits that the one and the other cannot fail to encounter and the dominant (decisive) character of the problems that follow from the existence of surpluses.

Briefly considering an example, the problem of extreme poverty in India cannot immediately be dissociated from the demographic growth of that country, or from the lack of proportion with its industrial development. India's possibilities of industrial growth cannot themselves be dissociated from the excesses of American resources. A typical problem of *general economy* emerges from this situation. On the one hand, there appears the need for an exudation; on the other hand, the need for a growth. The present state of the world is defined by the unevenness of the (quantitative or qualitative) pressure exerted by human life. General

economy suggests, therefore, as a correct operation, a transfer of American wealth to India without reciprocation. This proposal takes into account the threat to America that would result from the pressure – and the imbalances of pressure – exerted in the world by the developments of Hindu life.

These considerations necessarily give first priority to the problem of war, which can be clearly regarded only in the light of a fundamental ebullition. The only solution is in raising the global standard of living under the current moral conditions, the only means of absorbing the American surplus, thereby reducing the pressure to below the danger point.

This theoretical conception differs little from the empirical views that have recently appeared concerning the subject, but it is more radical, and it is interesting to note that these views have agreed with the above ideas, which were conceived earlier: This confirmation gives added strength, it seems, to both contradictions.

### ***The Solutions of General Economy and “Self-Consciousness”***

But it has to be added at once that, however well-defined the solutions, their implementation on the required scale is so difficult that from the outset the undertaking hardly looks encouraging. The theoretical solution exists; indeed, its necessity is far from escaping the notice of those on whom the decision seems to depend. Nevertheless, and even more clearly, what *general economy* defines first is the explosive character of this world, carried to the extreme degree of explosive tension in the present time. A curse obviously weighs on human life insofar as it does not have the strength to control a vertiginous movement. It must be stated as a principle, without hesitation, that the lifting of such a curse depends on man and *only on man*. But it cannot be lifted if the movement from which it emanates does not appear clearly *in con-*

*sciousness*. In this regard it seems rather disappointing to have nothing more to propose, as a remedy for the catastrophe that threatens, than the "raising of the living standard." This recourse, as I have said, is linked to a *refusal to see*, in its *truth*, the exigency to which the recourse is intended to respond.

Yet if one considers at the same time the weakness and the virtue of this solution, two things become immediately apparent: that it is the only one capable of rather wide acceptance; and that, due to its equivocal nature, it provokes and stimulates an effort of lucidity all the greater for seeming to be far removed from such an effort. In this way the avoidance of the truth ensures, in reciprocal fashion, a recognition of the truth. In any case, the mind of contemporary man would be reluctant to embrace solutions that, not being negative, were emphatic and arbitrary; it prefers that exemplary rigor of consciousness which alone may slowly make human life commensurate with its truth. The exposition of a *general economy* implies intervention in public affairs, certainly; but first of all and more profoundly, what it aims at is consciousness, what it looks to from the outset is the *self-consciousness* that man would finally achieve in the lucid vision of its linked historical forms.

Thus, *general economy* begins with an account of the historical data, relating their meaning to the *present data*.

PART TWO

**The Historical Data I**

The Society of Consumption

## Sacrifices and Wars of the Aztecs

### *Society of Consumption and Society of Enterprise*

I will describe sets of social facts manifesting a general movement of the economy.

I want to state a principle from the outset: By definition, this movement, the effect of which is prodigality, is far from being equal to itself. While there is an excess of resources over needs (meaning real needs, such that a society would suffer if they were not satisfied), this excess is not always consumed to no purpose. Society can grow, in which case the excess is deliberately reserved for growth. Growth regularizes; it channels a disorderly effervescence into the regularity of productive operations. But growth, to which is tied the development of knowledge, is by nature a transitory state. It cannot continue indefinitely. Man's science obviously has to correct the perspectives that result from the historical conditions of its elaboration. Nothing is more different from man enslaved to the operations of growth than the relatively free man of stable societies. The character of human life changes the moment it ceases to be guided by fantasy and begins to meet the demands of undertakings that ensure the proliferation of given works. In the same way, the face of a man changes if he goes from the turbulence of the night to the serious business of the morn-

ing. The serious humanity of growth becomes civilized, more gentle, but it tends to confuse gentleness with the value of life, and life's tranquil duration with its poetic dynamism. Under these conditions the clear knowledge it generally has of things cannot become a full self-knowledge. It is misled by what it takes for full humanity, that is, humanity at work, living in order to work without ever fully enjoying the fruits of its labor. Of course, the man who is relatively idle or at least unconcerned about his achievements – the type discussed in both ethnography and history – is not a consummate man either. But he helps us to gauge that which we lack.

### ***Consumption in the Aztec Worldview***

The Aztecs, about whom I will speak first, are poles apart from us morally. As a civilization is judged by its works, their civilization seems wretched to us. They used writing and were versed in astronomy, but all their important undertakings were useless: Their science of architecture enabled them to construct pyramids on top of which they immolated human beings.

Their world view is singularly and diametrically opposed to the activity-oriented perspective that we have. Consumption loomed just as large in their thinking as production does in ours. They were just as concerned about *sacrificing* as we are about *working*.

The sun himself was in their eyes the expression of sacrifice. He was a god resembling man. He had become the sun by hurling himself into the flames of a brazier.

The Spanish Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún, who wrote in the middle of the sixteenth century, reports what some old Aztecs told him:

It is said that before the light of day existed, the gods assem-

bled at the place called Teotihuacan . . . and spoke among themselves, saying: "Who will take it upon himself to bring light to the world?" On hearing these words, a god called Tecuciztecatl presented himself and replied: "I will be the one. I will bring light to the world." The gods then spoke again and said: "Who else among you?" They looked at one another then, wondering who this would be, and none dared accept the charge; all were afraid and made excuses. One of the gods who usually went unnoticed did not say anything but only listened to what the other gods were saying. The others spoke to him, saying, "Let it be you, *bubosito*." And he gladly accepted, replying: "I receive your order gratefully; so be it." And the two that were chosen began immediately to do penance, which lasted four days. Then a fire was lit in a hearth made in a rock. . . . The god named Tecuciztecatl only offered costly things. Instead of branches he offered rich feathers called *quetzalli*; instead of grass balls he offered gold ones; instead of maguey spines he offered spines made with precious stones; and instead of bloodied spines he offered spines of red coral. And the copal he offered was of a very high quality. The *buboso*, whose name was Nanauatzin, offered nine green water rushes bound in threes, instead of ordinary branches. He offered balls of grass and maguey spines bloodied with his own blood, and instead of copal he offered the scabs of his *bubas*.

A tower was made for each of these two gods, in the form of a hill. On these hills they did penance for four nights. . . . After the four nights of penance were completed, the branches and all the other objects they had used were thrown down there. The following night, a little before midnight, when they were to do their office, Tecuciztecatl was given his adornments. These consisted of a headdress of *aztacomitl* feathers and a sleeveless jacket. As for Nanauatzin, the *buboso*, they tied a paper

headdress, called *amatzontli*, on his hair and gave him a paper stole and a paper rag for pants to wear. When midnight had come, all the gods gathered round the hearth, which was called *teotexcalli*, where the fire had burned for four days.

They separated into two lines on the two sides of the fire. The two chosen ones took their places near the hearth, with their faces to the fire, in the middle of the two lines of gods. The latter were all standing and they spoke to Tecuciztecatl, saying: "Go on, Tecuciztecatl. Cast yourself into the fire!" Hearing this, he started to throw himself into the flames, but the fire was burning high and very hot, and he stopped in fear and drew back. A second time he gathered his strength and turned to throw himself into the fire, but when he got near he stopped and did not dare go further; four times he tried, but could not. Now, it had been ordered that no one could try more than four times, so when the four attempts had been made the gods addressed Nanauatzin, saying: "Go on, Nanauatzin. It is your turn to try!" As soon as these words were said, he shut his eyes and, taking courage, went forward and threw himself into the fire. He began at once to crackle and sizzle like something being roasted. Seeing that he had thrown himself into the fire and was burning, Tecuciztecatl also cast himself into the flames and burned. It is said that an eagle went into the fire at the same time and burned, and this is why the eagle has scorched-looking and blackened feathers. An ocelot followed thereafter but did not burn, only being singed, and this is why the ocelot remains spotted black and white.<sup>1</sup>

A short while later, having fallen on their knees, the gods saw Nanauatzin, "who had become the sun," rising in the East. "He looked very red, appearing to sway from side to side, and none of them could keep their eyes on him, because he blinded them with his light. He shone brightly with his rays that

reached in all directions." The moon in turn rose up over the horizon. Because he had hesitated, Tecuciztecatl shone less brightly. Then the gods had to die; the wind, Quetzalcoatl, killed them all: The wind tore out their hearts and used them to animate the newborn stars.

This myth is paralleled by the belief that not only men but also wars were created "so that there would be people whose hearts and blood could be taken so that the sun might eat."<sup>2</sup> Like the myth, this belief obviously conveys an extreme value placed on consumption. Each year, in honor of the sun, the Mexicans observed the four days of fasting that were observed by the gods. Then they immolated lepers who were like the *buboso* with his skin disease. For in their minds thought was only an exposition of actions.

### *The Human Sacrifices of Mexico*

We have a fuller, more vivid knowledge of the human sacrifices of Mexico than we do of those of earlier times; doubtless they represent an apex of horror in the cruel chain of religious rites.

The priests killed their victims on top of the pyramids. They would stretch them over a stone altar and strike them in the chest with an obsidian knife. They would tear out the still-beating heart and raise it thus to the sun. Most of the victims were prisoners of war, which justified the idea of wars as necessary to the life of the sun: Wars meant consumption, not conquest, and the Mexicans thought that if they ceased the sun would cease to give light.

"Around Easter time," they undertook the sacrificial slaying of a young man of irreproachable beauty. He was chosen from among the captives the previous year, and from that moment he lived like a great lord. "He went through the whole town very

well dressed, with flowers in his hand and accompanied by certain personalities. He would bow graciously to all whom he met, and they all knew he was the image of Tezcatlipoca [one of the greatest gods] and prostrated themselves before him, worshipping him wherever they met him."<sup>3</sup> Sometimes he could be seen in the temple on top of the pyramid of Quauhxicalco: "Up there he would play the flute at night or in the daytime, whichever time he wished to do it. After playing the flute, he too would turn incense toward the four parts of the world, and then return home, to his room."<sup>4</sup> Every care was taken to ensure the elegance and princely distinction of his life. "If, due to the good treatment he grew stout, they would make him drink salt-water to keep slender."<sup>5</sup> "Twenty days previous to the festival they gave this youth four maidens, well prepared and educated for this purpose. During those twenty days he had carnal intercourse with these maidens. The four girls they gave him as wives and who had been reared with special care for that purpose were given names of four goddesses.... Five days before he was to die they gave festivities for him, banquets held in cool and gay places, and many chieftains and prominent people accompanied him. On the day of the festival when he was to die they took him to an oratory, which they called Tlacuchcalco. Before reaching it, at a place called Tlapituoaian, the women stepped aside and left him. As he got to the place where he was to be killed, he mounted the steps by himself and on each one of these he broke one of the flutes which he had played during the year."<sup>6</sup> "He was awaited at the top by the satraps or priests who were to kill him, and these now grabbed him and threw him onto the stone block, and, holding him by feet, hands and head, thrown on his back, the priest who had the stone knife buried it with a mighty thrust in the victim's breast and, after drawing it out, thrust one hand into the opening and tore out the heart, which he at once offered to the sun."<sup>7</sup>

Respect was shown for the young man's body: It was carried down slowly to the temple courtyard. Ordinary victims were thrown down the steps to the bottom. The greatest violence was habitual. The dead person was flayed and the priest then clothed himself in this bloody skin. Men were thrown into a furnace and pulled out with a hook to be placed on the executioner's block still alive. More often than not the flesh consecrated by the immolation was eaten. The festivals followed one another without interruption and every year the divine service called for countless sacrifices: Twenty thousand is given as the number. One of the victims incarnating a god, he climbed to the sacrifice surrounded, like a god, by an attendance that would accompany him in death.

### *Intimacy of Executioners and Victims*

The Aztecs observed a singular conduct with those who were about to die. They treated these prisoners humanely, giving them the food and drink they asked for. Concerning a warrior who brought back a captive, then offered him in sacrifice, it was said that he had "considered his captive as his own flesh and blood, calling him son, while the latter called him father."<sup>8</sup> The victims would dance and sing with those who brought them to die. Efforts were often made to relieve their anguish. A woman incarnating the "mother of the gods" was consoled by the healers and midwives who said to her: "Don't be sad, fair friend; you will spend this night with the king, so you can rejoice." It was not made clear to her that she was to be killed, because death needed to be sudden and unexpected in her case. Ordinarily the condemned prisoners were well aware of their fate and were forced to stay up the final night, singing and dancing. Sometimes they were made to drink until drunk or, to drive away the idea of impending death, they were given a concubine.

This difficult wait for death was borne better by some victims

than by others. Concerning the slaves who were to die during one of the November festivals, we are told that "they went to the homes of their masters to bid them good-bye.... They were singing in a very loud voice, so loud that it seemed to split their breast, and upon reaching the house of their masters they dipped both hands in the bowls of paint or of ink and put them on the lintels of the doors and the posts of the houses, leaving their imprint in colors; the same they did in the houses of their relatives. Some of them who were lion-hearted would eat as usual, others could not eat thinking of the death they soon would have to suffer."<sup>9</sup> A slave who represented the goddess Illamatecutli was dressed entirely in white, adorned with white and black feathers, and her face was painted half black and half white. "Previous to being killed, this woman had to dance, and the old men played the tune for this dance, and the singers sang the songs; and while she danced she cried, sighed and worried, knowing that her death was so close at hand."<sup>10</sup> In the autumn women were sacrificed in a temple called Coatlan. "Some of them, upon climbing the steps, were singing, others screamed, and still others cried."<sup>11</sup>

### *The Religious Character of the Wars*

These sacrifices of prisoners cannot be understood apart from the conditions that made them possible: wars and the assumed risk of death. The Mexicans shed blood only provided that they risked dying.

They were conscious of this enchantment of war and sacrifice. The midwife would cut the umbilical cord of the newborn baby boy and say to him:

I cut your navel in the middle of your body. Know and understand that the house in which you are born is not your dwelling.... It is your cradle, the place where you lay your head....

Your true land is elsewhere; you are promised for other places. You belong to the countryside where battles are fought; you were sent to go there; your function and your skill is warfare; your duty is to give the sun the blood of your enemies to drink and to supply the earth with the bodies of your enemies to eat. As for your native land, your legacy and your happiness, you will find them in the house of the sun in the sky. . . . You will be fortunate to be found worthy of dying on the battlefield, decorated with flowers. What I now cut from your body and from the middle of your stomach rightly belongs to Tlatecutli who is the earth and the sun. When war begins to seethe and the soldiers assemble, we shall put it in the hands of those who are valorous soldiers, so that they might give it to your father and mother, the earth and the sun. They will bury it in the middle of the field where the battles are fought: This will be the proof that you are offered and promised to the earth and the sun; this will be the sign that you profess this office of warfare, and your name will be written in the field of battle so that your name and your person will not be forgotten. This precious offering collected from your body is like the offering of a maguey spine, of reeds for smoking and *axcoyatl* branches. Through it your vow and sacrifice are confirmed. . . .<sup>12</sup>

The individual who brought back a captive had just as much of a share in the sacred office as the priest. A first bowl of the victim's blood, drained from the wound, was offered to the sun by the priests. A second bowl was collected by the sacrificer. The latter would go before the images of the gods and wet their lips with the warm blood. The body of the sacrificed was his by right; he would carry it home, setting aside the head, and the rest would be eaten at a banquet, cooked without salt or spices — but eaten by the invited guests, not by the sacrificer, who regarded his vic-

tim as a son, as a second self. At the dance that ended the feast, the warrior would hold the victim's head in his hand.

If the warrior had himself been overcome instead of returning a victor, his death on the field of battle would have had the same meaning as the ritual sacrifice of his prisoner: It would also have satisfied the hungry gods.

This was said in the prayer to Tezcatlipoca for the soldiers: "In truth, you are not wrong to want them to die in battle, for you did not send them into this world for any other purpose than to serve as food for the sun and the earth, with their blood and their flesh."<sup>13</sup>

Satiated with blood and flesh, the sun gave glory to the soul in his palace. There the war dead mingled with the immolated prisoners. The meaning of death in combat was brought out in the same prayer: "Make them bold and courageous; remove all weakness from their hearts so that they may not only receive death joyfully, but desire it and find charm and sweetness therein; so that they do not fear arrows or swords but rather consider them a pleasant thing, as if they were flowers and exquisite dishes of food."

### ***From the Primacy of Religion to the Primacy of Military Effectiveness***

The value of warfare in Mexican society cannot mislead us: It was not a *military* society. Religion remained the obvious key to its workings. If the Aztecs must be situated, they belong among the warrior societies, in which pure, uncalculated violence and the ostentatious forms of combat held sway. The reasoned organization of war and conquest was unknown to them. A truly *military* society is a venture society, for which war means a development of power, an orderly progression of empire.<sup>14</sup> It is a relatively mild society; it makes a custom of the rational principles of enterprise, whose purpose is given in the future, and it excludes the

madness of sacrifice. There is nothing more contrary to military organization than these squanderings of wealth represented by hecatombs of slaves.

And yet the extreme importance of warfare had brought about a significant change for the Aztecs, in the direction of the *rationality* of enterprise (which introduces, together with the concern for results and for effective force, a beginning of humanity) as against the cruel *violence* of consumption. While "the king remained in his palace," the court favored the victim (who was given "the honors of a god") with one of the most solemn sacrifices of the year. There is no possibility of a mistake here: This was a sacrifice of substitution. A softening of the ritual had occurred, shifting onto others the internal violence that is the moral principle of consumption. To be sure, the movement of violence that animated Aztec society was never turned more within than without; but internal and external violences combined in an economy that put nothing in reserve. The ritual sacrifices of prisoners commanded the sacrifices of warriors; the sacrificed victims represented at least the sumptuary expenditure of the sacrificer. The substituting of a prisoner for the king was an obvious, if inconsequent, abatement of this sacrificial frenzy.

### ***Sacrifice or Consumption***

This softening of the sacrificial process finally discloses a movement to which the rites of immolation were a response. This movement appears to us in its logical necessity alone and we cannot know if the sequence of acts conforms to it in detail; but in any case its coherence is evident.

Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane. Servile use has made a *thing* (an *object*) of that which, in a deep sense, is of the same nature as the *subject*, is in a relation of intimate participation with the subject.

It is not necessary that the sacrifice actually destroy the animal or plant of which man had to make a *thing* for his use. They must at least be destroyed as things, that is, *insofar as they have become things*. Destruction is the best means of negating a utilitarian relation between man and the animal or plant. But it rarely goes to the point of holocaust. It is enough that the consumption of the offerings, or the *communion*, has a meaning that is not reducible to the shared ingestion of food. The victim of the sacrifice cannot be consumed in the same way as a motor uses fuel. What the ritual has the virtue of rediscovering is the intimate participation of the sacrificer and the victim, to which a servile use had put an end. The slave bound to labor and having become the property of another is a *thing* just as a work animal is a thing. The individual who employs the labor of his prisoner severs the tie that links him to his fellow man. He is not far from the moment when he will sell him. But the owner has not simply made a *thing*, a commodity, of this property. No one can make a *thing* of the second self that the slave is without at the same time estranging himself from his own intimate being, without giving himself the limits of a *thing*.

This should not be considered narrowly: There is no perfect operation, and neither the slave nor the master is entirely reduced to the *order of things*. The slave is a thing for the owner; he accepts this situation which he prefers to dying; he effectively loses part of his intimate value for himself, for it is not enough to be this or that: One also has to be for others. Similarly, for the slave the owner has ceased to be his fellow man; he is profoundly separated from him; even if his equals continue to see him as a man, even if he is still a man for others, he is now in a world where a man can be merely a *thing*. The same poverty then extends over human life as extends over the countryside if the weather is overcast. Overcast weather, when the sun is filtered by the clouds and the play

of light goes dim, appears to "reduce things to what they are." The error is obvious: What is before me is never anything less than the universe; the universe is not a *thing* and I am not at all mistaken when I see its brilliance in the sun. But if the sun is hidden I more clearly see the barn, the field, the hedgerow. I no longer see the splendor of the light that played over the barn; rather I see this barn or this hedgerow like a screen between the universe and me.

In the same way, slavery brings into the world the absence of light that is the separate positing of each *thing*, reduced to the use that it has. Light, or brilliance, manifests the intimacy of life, that which life deeply is, which is perceived by the subject as being true to itself and as the transparency of the universe.

But the reduction of "that which is" to the *order of things* is not limited to slavery. Slavery is abolished, but we ourselves are aware of the aspects of social life in which man is relegated to the level of *things*, and we should know that this relegation did not await slavery. From the start, the introduction of *labor* into the world replaced intimacy, the depth of desire and its free outbreaks, with rational progression, where what matters is no longer the truth of the present moment, but, rather, the subsequent results of *operations*. The first labor established the world of *things*, to which the profane world of the Ancients generally corresponds. Once the world of things was posited, man himself became one of the things of this world, at least for the time in which he labored. It is this degradation that man has always tried to escape. In his strange myths, in his cruel rites, man is *in search of a lost intimacy* from the first.

Religion is this long effort and this anguished quest: It is always a matter of detaching from the *real* order, from the poverty of *things*, and of restoring the *divine* order. The animal or plant that man *uses* (as if they only had value *for him* and none for them-

selves) is restored to the truth of the intimate world; he receives a sacred communication from it, which restores him in turn to interior freedom.

The meaning of this profound freedom is given in destruction, whose essence is to consume *profitlessly* whatever might remain in the progression of useful works. Sacrifice destroys that which it consecrates. It does not have to destroy as fire does; only the tie that connected the offering to the world of profitable activity is severed, but this separation has the sense of a definitive consumption; the consecrated offering cannot be restored to the *real* order. This principle opens the way to passionate release; it liberates violence while marking off the domain in which violence reigns absolutely.

The world of *intimacy* is as antithetical to the *real* world as immoderation is to moderation, madness to reason, drunkenness to lucidity. There is moderation only in the object, reason only in the identity of the object with itself, lucidity only in the distinct knowledge of objects. The world of the subject is the night: that changeable, infinitely suspect night which, in the sleep of reason, *produces monsters*. *I submit that madness itself gives a rarefied idea of the free "subject," unsubordinated to the "real" order and occupied only with the present.* The *subject* leaves its own domain and subordinates itself to the *objects* of the *real* order as soon as it becomes concerned for the future. For the *subject* is consumption insofar as it is not tied down to work. If I am no longer concerned about "what will be" but about "what is," what reason do I have to keep anything in reserve? I can at once, in disorder, make an instantaneous consumption of all that I possess. This useless consumption is *what suits me*, once my concern for the morrow is removed. And if I thus consume immoderately, I reveal to my fellow beings that which I am *intimately*: Consumption is the way in which *separate* beings communicate.<sup>15</sup> Everything shows through,

everything is open and infinite between those who consume intensely. But nothing counts then; violence is released and it breaks forth without limits, as the heat increases.

What ensures the return of the *thing* to the *intimate* order is its entry into the hearth of consumption, where the violence no doubt is limited, but never without great difficulty. It is always the purpose of sacrifice to give destruction its due, to save the rest from a mortal danger of contagion. All those who have to do with sacrifice are in danger, but its limited ritual form regularly has the effect of protecting those who offer it.

Sacrifice is heat, in which the intimacy of those who make up the system of common works is rediscovered. Violence is its principle, but the works limit it in time and space; it is subordinated to the concern for uniting and preserving the commonality. The individuals break loose, but a breaking-loose that melts them and blends them indiscriminately with their fellow beings helps to connect them together in the operations of secular time. It is not yet a matter of *enterprise*, which absorbs the excess forces with a view to the unlimited development of wealth. The works in question only aim at continuance. They only predetermine the limits of the festival (whose renewal is ensured by their fecundity, which has its source in the festival itself). But the community is saved from ruination. The *victim* is given over to violence.

### ***The Victim, Sacred and Cursed***

The victim is a surplus taken from the mass of *useful* wealth. And he can only be withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed. Once chosen, he is the *accursed share*, destined for violent consumption. But the curse tears him away from the *order of things*; it gives him a recognizable figure, which now radiates intimacy, anguish, the profundity of living beings.

Nothing is more striking than the attention that is lavished on him. Being a thing, he cannot truly be withdrawn from the real order, which binds him, unless destruction rids him of his "thinghood," eliminating his usefulness once and for all. As soon as he is consecrated and during the time between the consecration and death, he enters into the closeness of the sacrificers and participates in their consumptions: He is one of their own and in the festival in which he will perish, he sings, dances and enjoys all the pleasures with them. There is no more servility in him; he can even receive arms and fight. He is lost in the immense confusion of the festival. And that is precisely his undoing.

The victim will be the only one in fact to leave the real order entirely, for he alone is carried along to the end by the movement of the festival. The sacrificer is divine only with reservations. The future is heavily reserved in him; the future is the weight that he bears as a thing. The official theologians<sup>16</sup> whose tradition Sahagún collected were well aware of this, for they placed the voluntary sacrifice of Nanauatzin above the others, praised warriors for being consumed by the gods, and gave divinity the meaning of consumption. We cannot know to what extent the victims of Mexico accepted their fate. It may be that in a sense certain of them "considered it an honor" to be offered to the gods. But their immolation was not voluntary. Moreover, it is clear that, from the time of Sahagún's informants, these death orgies were tolerated because they impressed foreigners. The Mexicans immolated children that were chosen from among their own. But severe penalties had to be decreed against those who walked away from their procession when they went up to the altars. Sacrifice comprises a mixture of anguish and frenzy. The frenzy is more powerful than the anguish, but only providing its effects are diverted to the exterior, onto a foreign prisoner. It suffices for the sacrificer to give up the wealth that the victim could have been for him.

This understandable lack of rigor does not, however, change the meaning of the ritual. The only valid excess was one that went beyond the bounds, and one whose consumption appeared worthy of the gods. This was the price men paid to escape their downfall and remove the weight introduced in them by the avarice and cold calculation of the real order.