

Foreword

by David Farrell Krell

During the 1930s and 1940s two readers of Nietzsche were preparing lineages that would generate the major part of what has come to be called, in the English-speaking world, “Continental Philosophy.” Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), lecturing on Nietzsche’s notions of eternal recurrence of the same and of will to power—as art; as knowledge, science, and technology; and as the culmination of the history of nihilism—was opening the phenomenological movement to elements that his teacher, Edmund Husserl, never dreamed of entertaining. Heidegger was reading Nietzsche against the backdrop of the entire history of Western metaphysics. He was taking seriously Nietzsche’s claim that his thought was the inversion of Platonism and that it upset value-structures that had dominated metaphysics since its inception. Meanwhile, in Paris, then hiding out in various locales during the Nazi Occupation, Georges Bataille (1887–1962) was reading Nietzsche for a very different reason. He was reading Nietzsche, he said, in order to prevent himself from going mad. An odd therapy, a bizarre therapist, considering the final ten years of Nietzsche’s life. Yet it was clear to everyone, as it was to Bataille himself, that he wanted and needed to pursue Nietzsche’s sense of Dionysian ecstasy to the very verge of madness.

If Heidegger created a lineage that devoted itself to dismantling and reinterpreting the entire history of metaphysics, Bataille fathered a lineage that devoted itself to a phantasmatic philosophical anthropology, sociology, psychology, and genealogy of morals. One thinks of Foucault, Lacan, and Maurice Blanchot, all of them readers of Heidegger but also ignited by Bataille; one thinks also of Gilles Deleuze, seriously allergic to Heidegger but rapt to Bataille. It is difficult to find thinkers who take Heidegger and Bataille with equal seriousness, thinkers who acknowledge both lineages

as their own. In France, the late Jacques Derrida. In the English-speaking world, Alphonso Lingis—and Rodolphe Gasché.

Herewith, an anecdote that Gasché will not enjoy. When his *Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* was published in 1986, philosophers everywhere were delighted. Derrida's texts were so difficult that no one (apart from Gasché) appeared to have the background in both philosophy and literary theory that would enable an expert explication of Derrida's work. At last, Derridean deconstruction would become comprehensible! After reading the first part of Gasché's book, however, which dealt rigorously with the stringent demands of *reflexivity* in German Idealism and in contemporary German theorists of reflection, readers now had to hope that Derrida would write a book explicating Gasché.

For those whose interest in Bataille begins and ends with *The Story of the Eye*, those for whom a hard-boiled egg will never be the same, the present book may produce the same effect and result in a similar dilemma. As though he were a child of Heidegger, Gasché insists on taking the words *mythology*, *image*, and *phantasm* in Bataille seriously, tracing their impact on and in philosophy from Plato and Aristotle through Schelling, Hegel, and Nietzsche. Whereas the more relaxed reader might take Bataille's *mythology* in a very haphazard sense—mythology would simply be whatever opposes or ignores logic and science—Gasché wants to know why and how philosophy since its inception has tried to distance itself from, but also in some way to overpower and even devour and digest, the traditional stories of goddesses, gods, heroines, heroes, and world-shapers. And Gasché wants to know this in order to be able to read a very early set of texts by Bataille, begun when Bataille was about thirty years of age and completed around 1930, a set of texts devoted to a very strange and even uncanny theme—that of the “pineal eye.”

Even the most innocent reader knows about the pineal *gland*. His or her philosophy instructor got a rise out of the students by telling them of Descartes's fantastic—or phantasmatic—assertion that the human soul has its “seat” in the pineal gland. The less innocent, for example, those in pre-med, will know that the pineal gland sits deep in the bicameral brain, not quite at the center but a bit off-side, that it has its name (in Latin, *conarium*) because of its pinecone shape, and that its functions are still not altogether clear: it almost seems a vestigial organ, the intestinal appendix

of the brain, as it were, having to do with the hormone melatonin and thus affecting sleep patterns, inhibiting gonadal activity (something one can look upon only with suspicion and apprehension), and being involved in some way with the phenomena of jet lag and the cycles of time, as well as with the passage of time in general. Some researchers say that the gland's activity diminishes as soon as children reach seven years of age, the traditional age of reason, as though reason now dispenses what the pineal gland once secreted. Perhaps most mysteriously, the pineal gland is photosensitive, as though it has, or at one time had, some connection with vision: it seems to be present in the development of all amphibians and mammals, and at some point far back in our phylogenetic history, it was a third, unpaired, dorsal eye situated at the crown of the head. The sutures of the skull harbor a reminiscence of its place at the surface of the brain and opening onto the sky. Crocodile Dundee, knife at the ready, knows about these sutures, still remarkably gaping among some amphibians. Georges Bataille has no interest in exterminating and exploiting these amphibian reminiscences, but he is gripped by the evolutionary tale of this unpaired third eye, this eye of Polyphemus pushed back from the forehead to the top of the skull. It is perhaps an anthropological myth, a story that encapsulates the complex story of humankind's effort to find its feet, to stand up, and to shoot for the stars.

It is all about erection. The Angelic Doctor, Thomas Aquinas, knew about the erection of humankind even in the thirteenth century. He noticed that animals, at least many of them, go on all fours across the surface of the earth, whereas plants grow upward toward the moon and sun. Did God know what he was doing when he made humankind stand on two feet with its head in the clouds? Was he not confusing them with trees and vegetables, for are not the horizontally committed animals of a "higher" nature than plants? His answer to this predicament was based on Scripture: *Deus fecit hominem rectum*. The last word in the phrase has to be translated very carefully. Let us say, and hope, that God made human beings straight up. Their election depends upon their erection. Thomas isolates four points in his demonstration:

1. Among human beings, who are "superior" to both plants and animals, the senses serve not only for defense but also for knowledge and pleasure. Humanity experiences the elevating

beauty of food and of other humans. Whereas the animal, with its prone posture, grubs for food and sniffs out its partners, the human face graces a head that swivels freely not only from left to right but also up and down, and, most notably, up and back toward things celestial. Even without a pineal eye, the human being's verticality shows it the way to go.

2. The brain in humankind is located not low down in its body but high up, *super omnes partes corporis elevatum*. The foot, by contrast, smacks of earth, reeks of sex and corruption, whereas the head is exposed to heavenly breezes. If the heart supplies heat, the brain, separated from the torso by what Plato's *Timaeus* called "the isthmus of the neck," remains cool-headed. The brain contains the scintillating glacial light in the aerie of the house, the light of the soul.
3. To consider matters by way of the negative, the contrary-to-fact: If humankind scurried about on all four, its hands would soon become rough, its fingers stiff and maladroit—the *utilitas manuum* would be lost. Without the free use of its hands, humankind would become altogether pedestrian.
4. If hands regressed to the status of feet, humankind would have to seize its food with its snout; its head would then be oblong in shape, like a sow's or a dog's, arranged for convenient foraging. The lips and tongue would grow coarse, "lest they be wounded by the outside world," and this coarsening and elongation would impede speech—which, for its part, constitutes "the proper work of reason," reason being the heart of the soul.

Thomas already knows what neurophysiologists centuries later will demonstrate, namely, that those portions of the brain once dedicated to the sense of smell are in humankind dedicated to the higher intellectual functions. If humanity is possessed of *pessimum olfactum*, it has by way of compensation *maximum cerebrum*. As the species rose to its feet, there was less and less to sniff out on the surface of the earth, but more and more to think about. And whereas other animals had fur and shells and carapaces to protect them, human beings had little more than their cunning and artifice.

Sigmund Freud too was intrigued by the story of human erection. His *Civilization and Its Discontents*, published in 1930, by which time Bataille had completed his series of reflections on the pineal eye, contains two long footnotes on the fateful rise of a bipedal humankind. For Freud, one of the things that changed most dramatically for human beings was that the periodicity of sexual excitement—based on the menstrual cycle and the capacity of mammals to follow this cycle by the nose—receded and made way for a primarily *visual* excitation, which is to say, a *permanent* excitation. Human sexuality became unhinged, as it were, from the frame of reproduction. Eros got mixed up with everything the eye could see.

Georges Bataille was gripped by such reflections and stories. Humanity's desire to fly as high as the sky, its passion for the overview, its love of sky gods and all their Ascensions, but also its sunny good nature's exposure always and everywhere to lunacy—these threads began to weave a very strange tapestry in his imagination and to impose multiple tasks for his research. Nor could he fail to descry in humanity's fateful and fatal erection the shadow of that other sense of *Deus fecit hominem rectum*. He had already written a text on what he called "the solar anus." He hypothesized that as the pineal eye sank into the interior of the brain, the rectum rose high between the globes of the buttocks. This *enteric* view of the species, recapitulated in every developing embryo, along with the production by culture of multiple and variegated means (religions, moralities, totems, and taboos) to obscure and to obfuscate entirely the enteric view, suggested to him that something at the very origins of humankind *miscarried*. If for Descartes the pineal gland was the noble and tender receptacle of the soul, itself a flame, a tiny spark of heaven kept alive in the darkling chambers of the brain, the pineal eye and the vanishing anus became for Bataille corporeal symbols of the hapless, hopeless struggle of human beings against animality, gravity, and the earth; eye and anus became carnal symbols of humanity's vain attempts to soar in the heights of the open sky and to inherit heaven.

Yet if Bataille's admittedly phantasmatic reading of human evolution is lucid at least in its outline, startlingly clear if not edifying, why must Gasché approach that reading in terms of both the history of metaphysics and the intricacies of literary theory? Why the complex and demanding readings of Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Freud, among others?

Why, beyond the challenges of Freudian psychoanalysis, the outrageous demands of Lacan? Why once again Heidegger on Nietzschean will to power? Why yet another turn to Hegel, to ask whether Bataille is in battle with, and is thus engaged to, Hegel's *Phenomenology*? And why, beyond all these, the specter of Derrida, who identifies the phenomenology of appearances (*phainesthai*) with the phantasm (*phantasma*) itself? No quick answers here, nothing to forward by way of foreword to the reader holding this book now in hand, but only the obvious reply: Gasché is convinced that the images and phantasms of Georges Bataille's "pineal eye" are in the lineage of the very best that philosophy, psychology, and literature have offered us and can offer us. Bataille's text has "unheard-of consequences," argues Gasché, even if we have been listening for millennia. If the reader is incredulous, incredulity would be a perfect place to begin to read. If we may delay that beginning a moment longer, let us take Gasché's chapter on mythology, devoted principally to F. W. J. Schelling's *Philosophy of Mythology*, as exemplary for his approach to the Bataillean phantasm.

If mythology is simply ideology, if it is irrational and dangerous, as the racist and sexist ideologies of our own time seem to demonstrate, then should we not simply set Bataille none too gently aside? Or could mythology, and even the phantasm, be something more than ideology, something that thinkers and scientists could never set aside even if they wanted to? Schelling's entire career—and it lasted a long time, from the early 1790s to the mid-1850s—was dedicated to demonstrating over and over again the power of "the oldest narratives" of humankind. These old stories, these myths, especially those of the Greeks, ought to have been absorbed by philosophy, as today philosophy is largely absorbed by the sciences. Yet the old narratives *resisted* such absorption. Not only did poets and artists continue to be inspired by them but the myths and stories themselves reappeared on the periphery—and sometimes at the very center—of the philosophical and scientific systems that tapped into them. The more philosophy and science tried to found or ground their systems, the more they were subject to a strange catabolism: the very movement of founding, deducing principles, and justifying themselves, or even of recounting the history of their origins, became a movement of downfall and collapse. Such catabolism was already in full evidence by the time Plato wrote, not a Platonic Dialogue that does not refer to the ancient stories, myths, and

mysteries as essential resources for a foundational discourse and a dialectic that are forever getting stuck. And whereas philosophers after Plato have expended endless amounts of energy trying to convince their disciples that philosophy replaces mythology, they have expended even greater volumes of energy trying to sweep under the rug all the evidence that the old stories have more to tell than any system of thought can capture. Many scientists today find themselves engaged in the same effort vis-à-vis philosophy; and many “logical” philosophers are themselves trying hard to show that all past thinking and storytelling have by now been systematized, mathematically reduced, and successfully computerized; such efforts succeed only in making their own sciences and logics more opaque than they were to begin with. Schelling knew that he too was tempted by the dream of absorbing into his various systems all the wisdom and uncanniness of the mythologies—to subsume, for example, all the gods of sky and goddesses of earth across all cultures under the edifying story of Christianity—but he was compelled to see that all the evidence to the contrary, all the inexhaustible newness and surprising relevance of the oldest stories could not be swept under the rug. Hegel and others were much better with a broom, but Schelling was a disaster in this respect, and that is why Gasché musters the patience to take us readers through Schelling’s *Philosophy of Mythology*. One of the results of Schelling’s lifelong encounter with myth was that no concept of deity or divinity could ever be liberated from matters sexual and mortal. (That’s mortal, with a *t*.) Christianity would be able to absorb most if not all of the older stories if only it could learn that the Father was a woman and that (s)he, like the rest of us animals, was bound to mortality.

One final word, about words. Gasché is not only an extraordinarily knowledgeable philosopher but also a literary theorist of the greatest perspicacity and sensitivity. He approaches the dossier of Bataille’s “Pineal Eye” as one that contains *texts*. What is a text? Like a myth, a text is always telling more than it admits to telling or even knows to tell; it is always releasing forces and energies that are impossible for it to control. *Reading* we might define as a gleaning of texts, a gathering of the fruit that in the span of time falls to the ground. Yet that span of time is long, and the fruit quite various; the labor of gleaning is often backbreaking, the resulting harvest almost always full of surprises. If in the end we wish that Bataille

could have written a book explaining Gasché to us, Gasché's wonderful book on Bataille confirms our judgment that Bataille's work is as important and as worthy of study as that of any other thinker of the twentieth century. And this heady confirmation returns us to the phantasm of the pineal eye with both sharper focus and enhanced openness to ecstasy.