

GEORGES BATAILLE: # PHENOMENOLOGY AND PHANTASMOLOGY

*By Rodolphe Gasché, trans. Roland Végsö.
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REVIEWED BY JAN PLUG

In 1979, a full seven years before *The Tain of the Mirror* would make his reputation as one of the premier readers of Derrida, in particular in terms of the continental philosophical tradition, Rodolphe Gasché published an essay on deconstruction that, although not included in it, set the tone for that later work. The title of that essay, “Deconstruction as Criticism,” resonates with a certain irony as it nearly doubles the title of the statement publication of what has for better or worse come to be known as the Yale school of deconstruction, *Deconstruction and Criticism*. The “as structure” of Gasché’s title hints at a critical stance he soon makes explicit and for which his seminal books on Derrida have come to be known: “The stand taken here is critical of deconstructive literary criticism and maintains that it is incapable of living up to its pretensions” (178).¹ Gasché’s criticism, not to be confused with the criticism of which he is critical, is leveled at those pretensions of a so-called deconstructive criticism that has become a “mechanical exercise similar to academic thematism or formalism” and that has become mechanical primarily because of its “naive and sometimes even . . . ridiculous *application* of the *results* of philosophical debates to the literary field” (178). “Theory,” as this mode of commentary came to be called, suffered in Gasché’s eyes from a “generally intuitive understanding of conceptual systems,” from the “absence of all rigorous formation in pilot sciences such as anthropology, linguistics, and especially philosophy” (178-9). While acknowledging the contributions of deconstructive criticism to an investigation of the manifold linguistic density of the work of literature itself” (181), Gasché nonetheless identifies the

1 “Deconstruction as Criticism” in *Glyph Textual Studies 6* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979): 177-215.

limitations of its “philosophically untrained readers” and finds problems in deconstructive criticism that, while hidden from its practitioners, are “obvious to the philosopher” (183). And so the problem with the literary deconstructive critics is plain and simple: they are *not* philosophers.

The itinerary for Gasché’s work on Derrida was thus set. While the debate may seem remote today, Gasché was all too aware of the controversy that an account of Derrida “in the perspective of philosophy” (1)—and indeed as a philosopher—would have with his 1986 publication of *Tain*.² Given the often polemical tone against literary deconstructive criticism with which he cleared a path in order to resituate Derrida and deconstruction in general, the crucial fact that Gasché does so in order to rescue literature and with it the possibility of a genuinely literary mode of interpretation *from philosophy* is easily overlooked. Indeed, already in *Tain*, while repeating his criticism of the reductive application of Derridean thought in “deconstructive criticism,”³ Gasché begins to outline the conditions necessary for a literature that would possess a “specificity of its own,” that would no longer be a stillborn proxy for concerns that are ultimately philosophical⁴. The interrogation comes together in a “fundamental reflection of the nature of literature”⁵ in Gasché’s collection of essays on literature, *The Stelliferous Fold*. The “distinctness of literature”, Gasché argues, lies in its “response to the trace of an other that divides it from within”⁶, and the “appropriate attitude” one must take when faced with literature is thus “to refrain from imposing one’s own gaze on the work and instead to let oneself be surprised by the work”.⁷ Gasché’s contribution to the understanding of deconstruction as an engagement with philosophy, then, has at the same time been a project to define and elucidate the literary as such.

It will come as no surprise to those already familiar with his seminal work on Derrida, de Man, Kant, on the concept of relation, and on Europe, just for starters, that Gasché’s work on Bataille is characterized by the

2 *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

3 *Ibid.*, 255-6.

4 *Ibid.*, 256.

5 *The Stelliferous Fold: Toward a Virtual Law of Literature’s Self-Formation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 4

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*

same painstaking attention to the details of the texts he reads as his more recent work. Written as his doctoral dissertation at the Free University of Berlin, the book in fact shows that reading at something close to its sublime limit and in a syntax still more Germanic than Gasché's works penned in English. (One of the many qualities of the translation is *not* to have over-translated the text's syntax, and with it an entire mode of thinking, into an English too familiar and comfortable.) But that this most careful of thinking should be ushered forth in the service of an argument about how crucial texts by Bataille "can be located at the point of intersection at which the usually clearly separated domains of philosophy and literature overlap, cut across each other, and mutually cut into each other" (4-5) is decidedly less evident given Gasché's statements about a kind of willy-nilly blurring of disciplinary lines in recent deconstructive criticism.

This is not to say that Gasché himself participates in that obfuscation that he later identifies, still less that he finds in Bataille an early instance of disciplinary messiness run amok. Rather, Gasché's early work offers a fuller perspective on the relation between literature and philosophy and another opportunity to ascertain how his own deep commitment to a certain mode of philosophical thinking might offer a way of reading that relation without succumbing to the bad faith of subsuming it to a philosophical inquiry or the naiveté of having philosophy's claim neutralized in light of the blurring of the lines between philosophy and literature that they expose. *Georges Bataille: Phenomenology and Phantasmology* is a masterful and sometimes magisterial account of a "movement on the body of philosophy, which makes the expulsion of the pineal body ["the conspicuous organ that according to Descartes binds body and soul together"⁸] into a precondition of the constitution of its body".⁹ What that means, here, is staging the "concepts that secure the linearity of philosophical representation" in order to confront them with the irreducible element that had to be excluded so that the concepts could constitute themselves".¹⁰ In other words, Gasché's minute analysis, one that we can no longer simply label "philosophical," given that its emphasis on the materiality of language refuses the supremacy of the concept, given too this very disclosure of the elements constitutive of

8 Gasché, *Georges Bataille*, 1

9 *Ibid.*, 2.

10 *Ibid.*, 23.

philosophical discourse, his quasi-philosophical analysis, then, allows for the formulation of what he calls *phantasmology*: “the irreducible movement of Bataille’s text”.¹¹

While Gasché marshals a good many discursive and conceptual weapons (the military rhetoric of his Introduction [see page 24, for example] is noteworthy) in the service of a “deconstruction of philosophy” by way of a reading of “The Pineal Eye,” this is hardly the only text he considers. To the contrary, one of the most satisfying aspects of *Georges Bataille* is its exploration of texts both familiar and understudied, both for themselves and for what they can tell us about Bataille. The long exposition of Schelling’s *Philosophy of Mythology* is the clearest instance of a text outside the mainstream of philosophical and theoretical investigation to receive close attention here. That attention produces one of the most incisive accounts of mythological representation and both the dangers of the Romantic conception of myth (in a manner that fleshes out beautifully the more elliptical remarks in a similar vein by Nancy in “Myth Interrupted”) and an alternative understanding that seeks to formulate a genuine “outside of philosophy” and to understand how philosophy “establishes itself . . . through its rejection of the mythical code of explanation”.¹² What Schelling allows Gasché to think, then, is “an area that, being excluded from philosophy . . . exceeds it as something in which it is included and represents the kind of ‘blind spot’” in which he can see “Bataille’s ‘concept’ of the mythical operate”.¹³ The devil of Gasché’s argument is in the mythical details, of course, not least because the kind of reading he calls for and enacts is inextricable from the material, textual particulars he reads—and writes. Suffice it to say here, then, that the detailed account of Schelling (the chapter comes in at nearly 85 pages) are well worth the slow reading they require for their performance of a deconstruction of philosophy that falls prey to none of the superficial and reductive applications of which Gasché would later pronounce himself wary.

With his second chapter and its exploration of how precisely Bataille, in his own words, introduces “a lawless intellectual series into the world of legitimate thought” (111), Gasché begins to formulate what might well be his most thorough intervention. As Gasché points out, Bataille

11 Ibid., 24.

12 Ibid., 31.

13 Ibid., 37.

slips the lawless into the legitimate in the form of a chain of “intelligible images”,¹⁴ and Gasché follows the logic of this chain and of these images by reading Bataille with Hegel and Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. Bataille’s images, and Gasché’s tracing of their philosophical and psychoanalytic lineage, serve to “shatter the systematic order of science and philosophy”,¹⁵ but can do so only by shifting from the order of concepts to the irrationalism of symbols.¹⁶ As Gasché puts it, “to drive reason, philosophy, and science beyond their own limits, what is required is merely the injection of the signifier, the image, or the primal scene into that which keeps the signifier in a slavish dependence on the signified”.¹⁷ In Bataille’s “phantasms produced by science or philosophy after the injection of their repressed or cast-down elements” Gasché finds “the confrontation of the homogeneous world of knowledge with the heterogeneous element of the signifier”.¹⁸ Indeed, one of the great merits of Gasché’s work is his careful tracing of what might otherwise appear to be “merely” playful elements in Bataille. Thus, he is able to show not only how the phantasm is born from a crack that tears the body apart, from the “crack of the buttocks”¹⁹ (his commentary—“Nocturnal pit, abyss, hell!”—gets a vote here for one of the most satisfying in the book), but why such a birth is necessary to tear apart the “phraseology of philosophical homogeneity”.²⁰

Gasché moves on to the linguistic nature of the phantasmatic text in his third chapter in order to explore how the sign itself is displaced²¹ in Bataille. The move produces some of the most exciting readings in the entire book, not least the brilliant exploration of the sign or scene of girls visiting a zoo and finding themselves “stunned by the . . . lugubrious rear ends of apes”.²² The sign (*signe*) of the ape (*singe*) becomes in Bataille’s hands, and again in Gasché’s exploration of it, a dramatic performance and rewriting of the Lacanian bar to signification, that bar here made material in the bars of the cage.

14 Ibid., 111.

15 Ibid., 141.

16 Ibid., 142.

17 Ibid., 145.

18 Ibid., 146.

19 Ibid., 148.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 173-4.

22 Ibid., 171.

In the signs anagrammatically inscribed in the text, we have found what henceforth we want to call the sign *of* the phantasmatic text: a reversed sign. It only ever appears in the text as an image in accordance with the phantasmatic “theories”: it is always already staged, and only this way is it effective. It cannot be removed from this stage and be defined in a positive way.²³

Thus, while one can generalize to say that the development of an “economy of expenditure is the objective of *every* one of Bataille’s texts”,²⁴ precisely how that economy functions cannot be dislocated from its stage and staging. Gasché is masterful at working those stages and relating them to that economy without allowing either stage or economy to take precedence; that is, he is masterful at disclosing their interweaving. Tracing the various strands of this fabric in Gasché’s treatment of Bataille will ultimately mean touching upon some of the more tantalizing aspects of his work, but to lend them the rigor they are due. In this way, for example, Gasché will elucidate the liberating effects of sexual aberration and sacrifice.²⁵

What is utterly novel here and what constitutes one of the book’s most important contributions is the elaboration of freedom in terms of the phantasm and phantasmology that Gasché is alone to articulate fully. Freedom here consists of the “abolition of mastery as such, of the explosion of the dialectic of the master and the slave”,²⁶ which is of course to say that it consists of a headlong engagement with Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In his final full chapter, Gasché’s careful, indeed minute, analysis bears full fruit, not least because it frees Bataille and deconstruction from some of the clichés that have dogged both. Now, the freedom from the Hegelian system does not indulge in a simple “glorification of the individual or the self, “and Bataille does not stop at the simple disproportionality of irreducible opposites”.²⁷ Rather, Gasché follows the movements whereby Bataille’s text undoes that system in a “reciprocal fragmentation of the self and the universe” that are “unreal elements of the nonplace of infinite

23 Ibid., 179.

24 Ibid., 181.

25 Ibid., 187-9.

26 Ibid., 200.

27 Ibid., 243.

particularization”.²⁸ This particularization refuses the “illusion of being and fullness”.²⁹ Gasché himself describes his reading of Bataille and Hegel best.

Bataille conducts his disagreement with Hegel through the perspective of materialism, psychoanalysis, and anthropology, which shake themselves to their own scientific foundations through their mutual intersections. Such a disagreement with Hegel can no longer simply be called negative: Hegel is in no way a victim of an attack. The contact of particular “scientific” discourses with the Hegelian text will, rather, disturb his philosophy in such a way that it brings for the from within itself what it cannot master: one Hegel exceeds the other. What takes place in this debate with Hegel and the simultaneous shattering of the invoked scientific discourses is not the birth of a new science resting on reinforced foundations but rather the “birth” of what we call *phantasmology*.³⁰

It is no doubt the greatest achievement of *Georges Bataille* to have articulated this phantasmology, a “science” that is not one, an alternative to (Hegelian) phenomenology that nevertheless neither inverts nor merely opposes the master discourse of spirit but rather is the “product of the deconstruction of phenomenology”,³¹ as Gasché puts it in his concluding chapter. The light of this phantasmology, a light Gasché is alone to have allowed to shine, is necessarily not the bright and full light of day but merely a “splitter of light”.³² To have let it shine without blinding us in the radiance of philosophy, to have allowed it to peak through and with it Bataille’s achievement, is a task at once monumental and absolutely small, minute, fleeting.

28 Ibid., 244-5.

29 Ibid., 245.

30 Ibid., 255-6.

31 Ibid., 285.

32 Ibid.