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**Introduction, Subsidiary Developments in *Georges Bataille: Phenomenology and Phantasmatology* (Stanford University Press, 2012)**

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## Introduction

### SUBSIDIARY DEVELOPMENTS

Even the interdependence is only apparent: each person is finally linked with his predecessors. Phantasms linked with phantasms. It is strange to take everything so seriously. Ancient philosophy is a strange *labyrinthian aberration* of reason. The proper note to strike is that of dreams and fairy tales.  
—Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>

The foreword to this study on Georges Bataille evokes a figure—a phantasm, a scientific myth—whose analysis has become possible only now that this study has been completed. Like the eyes of Janus, the god of forewords, these subsidiary developments simultaneously glance in the direction of what is to come and look back from the results to the intention that occasioned the following arguments, in order to ascertain that this figure, which was a subjective source of inspiration, did not receive a thematic treatment. The upcoming arguments, therefore, situate themselves between these two perspectives, in the narrow gap that divides the two masks of the double-faced god, on the arch of the gateway where it is written: *Augenblick*, moment, or blink of an eye.

The figure that we have just alluded to is that of the pineal body, the inconspicuous organ that according to Descartes binds body and soul together. Even though according to Plato laughing does not constitute an argument worthy of philosophy, ever since Descartes's *Treatise of Man*

the pineal body has been an object of ridicule—of irony and sophistic or cynical laughter. So if initially we wanted to devote our attention to this figure, it was not in the least our intention to banter about in full agreement with philosophy, nor was it to obey the Platonic protest against laughter, since the laughter of philosophy and the earnestness of its argumentation are complementary. In fact, this laughter, for which Socrates reproaches Polus, merely intends to refute an argument “that nobody would accept.”<sup>2</sup>

We cannot, however, deny that it was a certain scurrility of this figure that first prompted us to pay attention to it. Scurrility in the sense that, like a foreign body, the pineal body disturbs the body and the corpus of philosophy and repeatedly provokes it to cheerfulness: but this is a cheerfulness and a laughter that merely lead to the expulsion and rejection of the pineal body. Based on the treatment that this figure had received in Georges Bataille’s texts, it appeared to us to be appropriate to demonstrate a movement on the body of philosophy, which makes the expulsion of the pineal body into a precondition of the constitution of its body. Or, to put it differently, to generate in its corpus a laughter alien to philosophy (Nietzsche’s or Bataille’s laughter), which should have unsettled it until its shattering.

But the occasion for the present work—the fascinating incongruity between the pineal body and the body *of* philosophy—and the prospect of a different way of addressing this difference are nevertheless not symmetrical. Something like a nonlogical difference has produced itself in the act of writing in the space between the occasion and the prospect. The thematic treatment of the pineal body based essentially on Plato’s *Timaeus*, Descartes’s *Treatise of Man*, and Bataille’s *Dossier of the Pineal Eye* would have attempted a deconstruction of the concept of truth, its inscription in the context of castration and blinding beyond its control. But, directing our attention to the myth and/or phantasm (the terms Bataille uses to describe the obsessive insistence of the pineal eye) of which the pineal body is merely one possible figure, the present work, while traversing Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, aims at the development of a phantasmatology that passes through the different stages of the becoming of the Spirit in an order contrary to that of the *Encyclopedia*. It appeared then that the particular phantasm of the pineal eye, as it is staged by Bataille, would require a traversing of the Hegelian philosophy of nature, a confrontation

with this weak link in the dialectical chain, that is, of nature as the fully exteriorized idea, which produces things contrary to its own norm and makes it quite difficult to hang on to its concept or idea.

The reason why we abandoned the initial project of submitting the pineal body to any of these two possible demonstrations is the already mentioned displacement in the act of writing produced by the examination of the terms organizing Bataille's text: phantasm, myth, image, sign, and so forth. As can be expected, the phantasmatology developed here will set up the rules with which we can account for a specific phantasm like the pineal body. At the same time, however, it is also clear that the possible application of these rules to the pineal body would lead only to a reduplication of phantasmatology. Rather than be an illustration or a distinguished example on which this rule can be verified or falsified, such an analysis would produce only another figure of phantasmatology.

Since the phantasm or scientific myth of the pineal eye does not constitute a symptom of Bataille's text that could be dissolved by a phantasmatology, we could not assign to it the status of an example or an illustration. This is why phantasmatology differs from the Freudian interpretation of dreams, since it is not a method or a theory but a textual formation that cannot be separated from the materiality of the text in relation to which it is being developed. With regard to the combination of the elements of the dream that elucidate the dream "so exhaustively," Freud wrote: "We might also point out in our defence that our procedure in interpreting dreams is identical with the procedure by which we resolve hysterical symptoms; and there the correctness of our method is warranted by the coincident emergence and disappearance of the symptoms, or, to use a simile, the assertions made in the text are borne out by the accompanying illustrations."<sup>3</sup>

Phantasmatology cannot exhaustively explain or be verified by privileged examples. Thus, the point of departure—even the example of the pineal body—has belatedly suspended itself until its very cancellation as the occasion for the present work. If we now choose not to pursue the possibility of a different treatment of the topic than the one provided by philosophy, and that opened up toward the end of the work, the reason is that the repetition of the Hegelian philosophy of nature in the context of this work, would, as we have already suggested, have only provided an

additional figure of phantasmatology. To be sure, the repetition is one of the “rules” that characterize phantasmatology, and the staging of the actual phantasm of the pineal eye would not have denied us the kind of bonus pleasure that we had promised ourselves at the outset. But who cares about a bonus, a mere additional pleasure, if one can carry out (without having to add to the debate with three consecutive spheres of the Hegelian system another one) a deconstruction of phantasmatology itself through which its theoretical construction itself appears as the foremost example of phantasmatology? With the deconstruction of the resulting theoretization of phantasmatology alone and its subjection to the law of repetition, a pleasure tightly bound to the death drive emerges whose perpetual repetition is the goal of even a text like *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.<sup>4</sup>

There is, however, an additional point that cannot be ignored, which originally lay at the foundation of this work and regularly programmed it, yet it was still not followed. This time, we are not talking about a thematic aspect but the systematic and methodological form of our reading.<sup>5</sup> The initial plan consisted of using the *Dossier de l'œil pinéal* (published in the second volume of the *Oeuvres complètes*) as a reference text, and of relying on the early works (the first two volumes of the collected works and the period between 1922 and 1940) to help in its interpretation. As a first attempt, we have undertaken an analysis of all five versions of “The Pineal Eye” relying on linguistic and textual methods.<sup>6</sup> A syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis of the texts uncovered the chains of metonymies and metaphors that structured them. In addition, we then identified anagrams, homophonies, “correct,” and punning etymologies as well as essential deviations from the canonical grammar and syntax of the French language. It became clear that the structure of the production of these texts obeyed the general economy of a perpetual erosion of linguistic materials. Thus, a recourse to the dictionary turned out to be unavoidable, “which composes in its own way a text involved in that of Bataille’s” to the extent that, in his own words, “the dictionary *is executed by the text* the way one is executed by firearms.”<sup>7</sup>

This preparatory work was essential not because the five versions of the *Dossier* were literary texts, but because they 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.<sup>8</sup> Situated at the borderline of what is delimited through a definition, in the domain of the transgression of a ban on touching, this wavering status opens up the following possibilities: (1) a problematization of the language of philosophy, of its repression of any consideration of the materiality of its writing, which constantly threatens to distort its transparency for meaning; (2) the problematization of literature in its dependence on philosophy, as for the most part literature allows the latter to prescribe to it its domain, themes, ideology, and its mode of writing; (3) a mode of writing, an announcement of the materiality of language that accomplishes the transgression of philosophy and literature in this space between.

By concentrating on *one* text, on the different versions of “The Pineal Eye” that remained unpublished and unfinished by Bataille, we also hoped to avoid the danger of presenting a complete and exhaustive system in our explication of the “systems and figures of Bataille’s philosophy.” The system of inscriptions and productions of the Bataillean philosophemes was to have remained tied to the “singularity” of the five versions as an effect of only the things that are at play in these few texts themselves. Not only would it thus have been possible to replace the system constructed in this manner through the privileging of another text and, consequently, to exchange it for another web of concepts, but it would have been possible to thrust it into the process of the general exchange and waste that organizes Bataille’s way of writing. To the degree that the economy of expenditure cannot be totalized, it is also impossible to unite all possible readings into a single interpretation that would function as the “true” expression of Bataille’s “thought.”

The reading that we planned to perform here was to produce something like the illusion of a system. This way we hoped to be able to avoid writing *about* Bataille. Thesis-driven academic writing presents a discourse on an author in which “the work’s becoming a work is a way in which truth becomes and happens,” and which, as Heidegger writes, strives for the open, installs itself in it, “setting and taking possession,” and according to the Greek meaning of *thesis*, sets itself up in the unconcealed.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, it is possible to discuss that which preserves and conceals itself in the openness of the unconcealed as truth. Yet Bataille’s text itself makes such an operation impossible—provided that we observe the movements

of its mode of writing. The necessary precaution to write about Bataille could be attributed to the fact that Bataille himself had explicitly posed the question of the *about*.<sup>10</sup> Bataille's simultaneous critical debate with discourses that want to write or talk about something and his strategic employment of these very discourses in the texts that we will analyze here inscribe as a sequel every discourse that attempts to write about Bataille in his own text, whose movements undermine every stable point of view. Writing about Bataille, something we do not fully get around to, we must imagine our position in him as a stand based in quicksand from which we could pull ourselves out only by our own hair.

However, the purpose of this meticulous analysis of the textual movements of the *Dossier* was not to dissect and describe the text from the outside with the reliable instruments of tried and tested methods in order to escape its entanglements. To the contrary, the textual and linguistic methods helped us to work out clearly the operations and movements of Bataille's mode of writing in such a way that we (who must write about Bataille) could subject our conceptualizations to the same laws that govern his texts. Therefore, it should no longer come as a surprise if the traversal of *phenomenology* is supposed to lead to a *phantasmatology*. Up to this point, we have merely tried to show how our work here deviates from its original plan, but it remains that it would not exist without its first subjective motivation and the already mentioned technical discussion of the *Dossier*. Let us return to the praxis of our reading. In order to be able to allow the text of "The Pineal Eye" to unfold itself in its complete and complex materiality, we read it in such a way that we did not fix our attention either on this or that theme or on this or that signifier. Reading with "evenly-suspended attention,"<sup>11</sup> our objective was, as Lucette Finas has demonstrated in her amazing work on *Madame Edwarda*, "to resend the story to itself, if possible, excluding all external references with the exception of making it traverse my own self; to detach and then reattach its retina. Nothing but its retina—the web of its noises."<sup>12</sup> Such a procedure is led by an economy of interpretation that renounces every profit (every extraction of meaning) that would come in the form of a surplus value from an investment of labor. To be more precise, it avoids every attempt at the constitution of a fixed meaning.

The question, then, concerns not only what makes such a reading of Bataille's text possible but precisely what makes it necessary. First of all, this reading unavoidably calls for a certain set of themes staged by Bataille: above all, the theme of an economy of expenditure of riches as well as of meaning. But this theme does not yet constitute a sufficient ground for a reading of this nature, since a thematic interpretation implies that the reader can break down the text into its complexes of meaning and sense, which could then be grasped in a profit-oriented interpretation as the sense, the statement, or the meaning of the text. From such a perspective, the reading of the text would appear to be merely the in-itself meaningless investment of labor, which is nevertheless necessary to render the text's intention and meaning transparent so that the latter can be brought out and conserved as the original idea. This process presupposes a form of blindness in relation to the text in its materiality and movements, the blindness of the philosopher, for example. As Derrida has it, "The philosopher is blind to Bataille's text because he is a philosopher only through the desire to hold on to, to *maintain* his certainty of himself and the security of the concept as security against this sliding. For him, Bataille's text is full of traps: it is, in the initial sense of the word, a *scandal*."<sup>13</sup> This "sliding" that makes every conceptual and thematic reading unsatisfactory and necessitates a textual reading cannot be demonstrated on a theme like "expenditure" or the "gift." It can be demonstrated only on the movements of the text itself. In other words, we must show that the particular theme is merely the surface effect of the expenditure practiced by this mode of writing. The stake of reading, therefore, cannot be only the explication of the way the text produces a concept. It also needs to reveal the movement that releases the concept produced as the effect of the play of signifiers and syntax to the movement of the text, which then ruins it as a concept.

How are we supposed to read the text then?

Usually, we read with what we could call an "inner sense," since in the process of understanding we separate the essential from the inessential, the precious metal from the slag, the signified from the signifier. This inner sense is constituted in a similar way, in that the senses are deprived of their materiality as bodily organs: the eyes, the ears, and the tongue are sublimated in such a way that they make it feasible—in their henceforth



possible cooperation and unison—to comprehend, grasp, and conceptualize the pure intelligibility of the written. Under the primacy of sense, in the purity of the mutual penetration of *logos* and *phonē* to the degree of their indistinguishability, the individual senses (the eye, the ear, and tongue) fuse into this inner sense.<sup>14</sup> *Reading* a text, however, means that we give back to the individual senses their materiality so that the eye can abide by the insistence of the letters and the graphic organization of the written, and the ear can abide by the sound produced by the tongue, and, as a result, the “unison” of the organs fades away.<sup>15</sup> Yet the differences between the graphematic, the sounds and the tones, and the gestural articulations and movements of the tongue correspond to the differences between the three organs of sensation that cannot be sublated.<sup>16</sup> Reading Bataille or, in a more general sense, reading a text means, therefore, to assume the task of dismembering the body: “In order to recover in oneself that which was miserably aborted at the beginning of the constitution of the human body, one would have to break oneself into pieces and feel in one’s body the madness of a contortionist while, at the same time, one would have to become a drooling fetishist simultaneously of the eye, the behind, and the foot.”<sup>17</sup> The fetishistic eruption of the individual organs from the homogeneous body or, what amounts to the same, their eroticization restores to them once again their heterogeneous difference upon which the process of sublation works itself out. Indeed, it is only through the annihilation of difference—through which the individual organs are reduced to functions and ideal parts of a whole—that their harmonious interplay becomes thinkable in the form of the ideality that we call a human being.

The dismembered organs open themselves to the equally diverse material instances that constitute a text. The already mentioned fetishization and eroticization, however, are not yet sufficient to prevent the realization of the unison. The individual organ is still an *organon* of the perception of a sense, even if the latter is only a restricted sense: the ear hears through sounds; the eye perceives essences through images and forms; the tongue produces sense and meaning in the ideal element of a diaphanous *phonē*. Thus, another operation needs to be performed on the residual ideality of the sense organs so that they become capable of reading a text without subjecting it to the violence of totalization that represses the text’s materiality and the structure of its networks.