

John Sallis

The Gathering of Reason

Second Edition

THE GATHERING
OF REASON

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DENNIS J. SCHMIDT, EDITOR

THE GATHERING OF REASON

Second Edition

JOHN SALLIS

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for Lauren and Kathryn

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“C’est l’imagination qui étend pour nous la mesure des possibles soit en bien soit en mal, et qui par conséquent excite et nourrit les desirs par l’espoir de les satisfaire.”

J.-J. ROUSSEAU, *Émile*

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

In this text I trace a way to the issue of imagination. It is intended to be a way around that closure of the issue, which, in play throughout the history of metaphysics, now obtrudes in the utter conflation of the difference that once separated imagination from fancy and in the allied displacement of them, indistinguishably, into an innocuous self-entertaining activity of conjuring up mental images. Radical measures are required in order to elude that closure: They must be capable of measuring out to imagination a space in which the traditional conceptual oppositions predetermining it can be thrown out of joint, infused with indeterminacy, anarchy.

The particular way traced runs through reason, through the problem of reason (in its Kantian form), which coincides with the problem of metaphysics. Or rather, it is a matter of treading carefully along the edge of a certain deforming of reason—a phenomenon which, at a different level and in that unconditioned form manifest today, might well be called “nihilism.” At certain decisive turns on this way I shall also allude to certain other elements belonging to the relevant conceptual configuration, e.g., the oppositions between reason and experience and between reason and madness; and I shall take some steps toward transposing them in a direction that gives space to the issue of imagination, e.g., that of the oppositions between presence and absence and between self-possessed positing and self-dispossessed ecstasy.

In a sense this way remains peripheral, a merely “historical” complement, a critical preparation for a direct approach to the issue itself.

But is it merely a matter of restoring the issue, of reopening the question of imagination within a new, indeterminate space? Would not even the most rigorous direct approach to the issue be compelled by its very rigor to reproduce within itself a movement within the same torsion in which the present critical preparation is almost directly engaged—the torsion between reason and imagination, the movement between a (rational) theory of imagination and an application of imagination to itself, a releasing of imagination's own intrinsic reflexivity? Is it yet possible even to envisage the radical measure that such movement would require?

Portions of this text were presented in a paper, "Imagination and Truth," which I delivered at a colloquium in memory of Martin Heidegger that was held at Pennsylvania State University in April 1977; in a paper "Immateriality and the Play of Imagination," read at the meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association in April 1978; and in several graduate lecture courses given at Duquesne University. For their generous contributions at various stages and in various ways I am grateful to the Sankt Ulrich scholarly community, David Krell and Kenneth Maly, Charles Sherover, James Risser, Karen Barson, Marshall Bradley, and my wife. I owe special gratitude to the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung for support during the year in which the present text first began to take shape.

Mill Run, Pa.
August 1978

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

With only the slightest fancy one could envisage this book as a tissue of translations. Most comprehensively it translates Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, not only exposing it to the drift of another language but also reinscribing it in this language in such fashion as to remark the breaks, connections, and openings of the critical discourse. The reinscribed text is, in turn, carried over to other hermeneutical levels, the translation being governed at each level by a different directionality, by a different turning. Thus *The Gathering of Reason* not only doubles the critical discourse but also ventures to project it, to invert it, and to subvert it.

The network of translations is composed with the aim of laying out a way to imagination, to what at the time of composition I called the issue of imagination, thereby designating, at once, the emergence, lineage, and manifestation of imagination. This way necessarily leads through the critique of reason, yet not simply in order to arrive at Kant's theory of imagination, as though this theory could be set apart and developed independently of critique as a whole. Neither does this way through critique lead finally—as Kant had hoped—out of critique into a beyond where it would become possible to institute, in place of crisis, a system of pure reason, the true metaphysics. It is rather a way that swings indecisively between two sites, on the one side, a site where reason seems—to its detriment—to be abandoned by imagination and, on the other side, a site where the very potency of reason in its failure appears to derive from imagination's complicity in the production of dialectical illusion. It is as if, in the gathering of reason, imagination

were to efface its operation while remaining nonetheless the very force most responsible for the dialectic in which pure reason is ensnared. Kant insists that this dialectic is natural and unavoidable, even though—paradoxically—it would seem most remote from nature, even though it would seem to trace precisely those lines along which metaphysics would always have sought to transcend nature and everything merely natural. Kant himself tacitly broaches the paradox by declaring dialectical illusion to be just as irrepressible (even after its detection by critique) as is the illusion that the moon is larger at its rising (even after its astronomical explanation).

In its title *The Gathering of Reason* announces another translation in which it is, as a whole, engaged, a translation belonging to another order. It is a double translation: of reason into λόγος and of λόγος into gathering—in both cases a translation both of sense and of word. In strict terms it would need to be called a double countertranslation, since it runs backward, reversing or undoing translations effected in the history of metaphysics and before that history. This countertranslation would confront reason with its largely forgotten origin; it would draw both the crisis of reason and the resultant task of critique back toward the Greek beginnings. Thus it would let that origin both inform the sense of reason and open it to deconstruction.

From the translation of reason a web of further translations extends. Among the most decisive is the translation of the two stems that Kant identifies as arising from the common root of the power of knowledge. These two stems, the rational and the empirical, are directly translatable—or rather, countertranslatable—into the terms by which the Platonic Socrates delimited the inauguration of philosophy. This delimitation is carried out in the *Phaedo* in the guise of a second sailing (δεύτερος πλούς): it consists in having recourse to λόγοι, as, in the absence of wind, sailors have recourse to the oars. It is a turn from things in their sensible presence that seeks their truth by engagement with λόγος. As such, it comes to be translated ever again in the course of the history of metaphysics, translated, most notably, into the metaphysically definitive turn from the empirical to the rational. The inaugural move thus becomes and remains one of having recourse to reason. Confronted with the fragmentation of experience and of experience-based knowledge, unable to see beyond the plethora of things, blinded by their presence, metaphysics has recourse to reason as its means of

conveyance beyond. Or rather, metaphysics is precisely this having recourse to reason's power to convey one's vision on beyond the mere shards strewn across the site of human experience, on toward sense and coherence.

Recourse to reason may also be had—doubled—in the guise of critique. Reinscribing the inaugural move systematically, according to the inner law of reason itself, critique brings reason before a tribunal that would determine the very possibility and limits of purely rational knowledge. Thus critique translates the recourse to reason by staging the scene of a trial in which judgment would be pronounced regarding the lawfulness of reason's claims to power. Yet the tribunal can be nothing other than reason itself and, as Kant recognizes, critique nothing other than reason's self-knowing. As critique is itself, in turn, reiterated, retranslated—as it has been from Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* to *The Gathering of Reason* and beyond—the tribunal cannot but be exposed to the recoil of the very limits it determines, the recoil of these limits upon itself and upon the determinations it carries out. At the limit of the reiterating translation, what becomes manifest is the inevitable operation of spacing within reason, of spacings of reason. My later work on Kant is situated at this limit.

But in *The Gathering of Reason* the distinctness of the hermeneutical strata is rigorously maintained, and this separation serves to defer the recoil, to hold subversion at bay until, at the end, its force can be released without compromising—except retrospectively—the outcome at the other levels. Strict separation is sustained throughout even between, on the one hand, the most direct transcription of Kant's text, the commentary on the Transcendental Dialectic, and, on the other hand, the projection in which the translation of reason as gathering is carried through. The separation prescribes also that nothing further be ventured, that no other directionality be brought into play, until the projective translation has been carried through to the point of showing just how the gatherings of reason fail. What comes to be shown is that in each case, whether the idea posited by reason be that of the soul, of the world, or of God, the actual gathering of the manifold falls short of the unity of the idea. Only in relation to this result does inversion come into view and open the possibility of exposing still another, more concealed layer of critical thought. For the gathering of pure reason proves to be precisely the inverse of the gathering of pure understanding,

which is assured its fulfillment by the operation of transcendental schematism, that is, by the synthetic power, the gathering force, of imagination. Yet if reason fails to gather into unity, it fails even more obtrusively to gather *into presence*. Only in the case of the cosmological idea, which uniquely is posited within the domain of appearances, does the pertinent gathering have linkage to a gathering into presence. And though, as in every case, the gathering—especially as a gathering into presence—goes unfulfilled, it is presumably because of this unique linkage that the sole reference to imagination in the entire Transcendental Dialectic occurs in the discussion of the cosmological idea. Retrospectively, the working out of the inversion serves to complete the translation of reason as gathering, since it brings into play the character of gathering as gathering into presence, into manifestness. At every level, whether the gathering be that of intuition, of understanding, or of reason and whether the gathering be fulfillable or not, it would be a gathering of a manifold in such a way as to make something manifest in its articulated coherence.

It is in the elaboration of inversion that the way to the issue of imagination comes to swing between two extreme sites. At one of these sites it would seem that what is lacking almost completely in the gathering of reason is imagination, that in any case it is this lack that decisively determines the character of such gathering as the inverse of the gathering of understanding. In its arrival at this site, the way would seem to have come to a dead end; it would have proven to be a way, not to the issue of imagination, not to the emergence, the manifestness, of imagination in its lineage, but only to the absence of such force and to the consequences of this absence. And yet, there is another site to which this way crosses over, a site where imagination proves to be in complicity with reason in the production of dialectical illusion. At this site it would turn out that thought alone never suffices for setting before our minds such ideas as those of the soul, of the world, and of God, that such ideas would always have been brought forth in and through imagination, rendered effective through the force of imagination, even through a lawless and ecstatic imagination alarmingly akin to madness. But once this encroachment of imagination upon reason is released, subversion is inevitable: critique will be driven in the direction of spacings, subjectivity will be submitted to thorough dismantling, and imagination will be redetermined through its most exorbitant traits.

Two occurrences following the publication of the first edition of this book deserve mention here. The first was a public discussion of the book in which, among others, Reiner Schürmann took part. Some record of the discussion is preserved in *Delimitations* (chapter 3). What I want to attest to here is the force of the questions that were posed. Most provocative was Schürmann's question as to whether the various forms of the subject's fragmentation (of subject and object, of intuition, of thought, and of intuition and thought) originate from a basic hiatus, from a radical breach that would constitute the very finitude of human knowledge. By developing this question, Schürmann brought the discussion, by quite another route, to the edge of the same abyss at which I had sought to compose the book.

The other occurrence was a matter of surprise. It came about when, shortly after the book appeared, a German translation was undertaken. What came as a surprise had to do with the word *gathering*, with the resonances it proved capable of evoking and with the semantic resources it was able to bring into play. For in the preparation of the German translation, the title proved virtually untranslatable; thus an extended note had to be added at the beginning of the book explaining how the word *gathering* was to be understood in the English title, how it had no German equivalent, and how it had been, only inadequately, translated into German. This note also provided indirect justification for the disparity between the English title and the title adopted for the translation (*Die Krisis der Vernunft*). It would be difficult to imagine a more provocative attestation to the wonder of translation: having taken up the word in order to translate effectively certain turns of phrase in a German text on Greek thought, having taken it over into a discourse on Kant aimed at translating critique, as it were, back into Greek, having sought to bring into play the full resources of the English word—its force, its δύναμις—I then had finally to acknowledge that it could not be translated back into the German from which it had come.

Hofheim am Taunus
January 2004

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INTRODUCTION

1.

Reason—the very word now bespeaks crisis, failure of every available sense to fulfill what cannot but be intended. The crisis is radical, for in every other instance reason would serve as that to which recourse would be had in order to isolate and resolve crisis, in order to open up and appropriate a fulfilling sense. Even to thematize the conceptuality of crisis is already to lay claim in deed to a certain resolution of the crisis of reason—that is, such crisis withdraws, renders provisional, the very possibility of its being thematized as such. The crisis is so radical that even this schema itself, that of crisis, has been emptied in such fashion as to accommodate almost anything that becomes somehow problematic; the schema of crisis has itself entered upon a crisis.

Recourse to reason in the face of crisis (to use this schema provisionally) is a strategy deeply embedded in the Western tradition. More precisely, it defines the turning by which this tradition was founded and subsequently constituted. The founding turn is traced in the Platonic dialogues—most openly, in that swan song sung by Socrates in the *Phaedo* in hope of charming away fear in the face of death, the absolute crisis. Among the Socratic incantations there is one in which Socrates, looking back into himself, back into his past, away from death, retraces the way to philosophy: he tells of how he began with a wondrous desire for the wisdom to be had by investigating natural things, of how, disillusioned, he turned in vain to the teachings of Anaxagoras, of how finally he came to set out on a “second sailing in search of causes.” This second sailing, the founding turn of the tradition,

commenced through a turning away from the immediately present, in which Socrates foresaw a threat of blindness: fearing that he might suffer such misfortune as befalls those who look at the sun during an eclipse, fearing that his soul might be blinded should he look directly at things with his eyes, he decided, as he tells his interlocutors, that he “must have recourse to λόγοι and examine in them the truth of beings.”¹

In the tradition thus founded, the Socratic recourse to λόγοι was translated into a recourse to *ratio*, reason. The translation served to establish the recourse in a definitive course: Withdrawal from the immediately present for the sake of a reappropriation of those beings in their truth became a matter of recourse from the sensible (τὸ αἰσθητόν) to the intelligible (τὸ νοητόν). Through recourse to reason the shallowness of inarticulate immersion in the immediate and particular was replaced by the depth and comprehensiveness of theoretical knowledge. Man was translated into rational animal.

Today that translation has become radically questionable. It is not primarily a matter of man’s now proving resistant to the translation, not a matter of a contemporary testimony to an inevitable resurgence of irrationality. On the contrary, contemporary man, technological man, attests to an insistent rationality of unprecedented consistency, reconfirms the translation through the pervasive rationalization of all sectors of human life. What has become questionable in the highest degree is not the rationalization of man but rather the very rationality that defines that translation; it is reason itself that has come into question, that has become suspect. The juridical metaphor is appropriate—or rather, its very inappropriateness serves to announce the abyss opened up by the crisis of reason: Reason, previously constituting the tribunal before which all disputes, all differences, were to be resolved, is itself in dispute, appears to harbor difference within itself; it is itself to be summoned before a tribunal and required to give proof of its identity against the charge that it is sheer prejudice, a mask for other interests. But the very demand for proof—to say nothing of the demand for resolution of difference—is inconceivable apart from reason, and the possibility of a sufficiently detached judgment and resolution is threatened from the very moment the summons is issued to reason. Could reason ever be so detached from itself as to be capable of constituting its own tribunal? Can such distance ever be opened up within reason?²

Without suppressing the difference, one may nonetheless discern in the Platonic-Socratic turn an image of the crisis of reason. Even before the translation into reason, the profound ambivalence that haunts all recourse to λόγοι was experienced as the problem of *sophistry*: Socrates, allied with the sophists in having recourse to λόγοι, found in those sophists his most formidable opponents, most formidable precisely because of the alliance. He was compelled to reiterate continually the almost self-effacing difference, to reestablish Socratic recourse, hence discourse, in its integrity, to differentiate philosophy from sophistry. The trial and condemnation of Socrates attest to the political limit of that differentiation—that is, to the depth of the crisis.

The crisis has also its images within the tradition, and it is to one of these, the Kantian image, that I propose to attend. More precisely, I shall initiate a reflection on that *critique* of reason with which Kant responds to the *crisis* of reason, to the “conflict of reason with itself.”³ In this critique the problem of sophistry is quietly renewed:⁴ It is a matter of determining to what degree the inferences of reason “are sophistications not of men but of pure reason itself” (A 339/B 397). It is a matter of exposing the sophistry that belongs to pure reason itself, of measuring the division of reason against itself. Such measuring is traced in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which will accordingly serve as the focal text for the reflection.

2.

Metaphysics—this too bespeaks crisis, no less than does *reason*. It bespeaks the same crisis: Almost from the beginning, recourse to reason has understood itself to be, correlatively, an establishing of the distinction between intelligible and sensible. Through this establishing, metaphysics was inaugurated.

The distinction is not, however, simply constituted by such establishing; it is constitutively linked neither to reflection nor to history. Rather, it is a distinction already in force in the very event of speech, which both reflection and history presuppose; it is a distinction opened up once and for all in that moment when speech first transgressed the limits of sense, a moment in principle irretrievable, an absolute past. Such is the radicalness with which we are bound to the distinction. We are not given the choice of relinquishing it—not even in silence,