Preface and Acknowledgments

We cannot exist, we cannot live humanely except through the meanderings of time: the totality of time alone makes up and completes human life. How can we refer to this completed whole? GEORGES BATAILLE, *The Tears of Eros*

We die because we cannot connect the end to the beginning. ALCMAEON OF CROTON (fifth century B.C.)

In composing *Bacchus and Ariadne* (cf. the frontispiece to this book) Titian must have had in mind one of the most well known poems of the Roman poet Catullus (84–54 B.C.), poem 64, which describes how Bacchus and his entourage suddenly overtook Ariadne, who had just been abandoned by Theseus:

In another part the flowering Iacchus [Bacchus] was wandering
With a dance of Satyrs and Sileni from Nysa
Looking for you, Ariadne, and burning with love.
. . .
Some of the women shook long rods with covered points,
Some of them threw in the air the parts of a bull,
Some pulled round themselves a belt of twisted snakes,
Some thronged around the box which held the orgies,
The orgies which only initiates may be told of;
Others struck timbrels with palms uplifted
Or made slight tinklings with the polished brass:
Many blew horns and made a raucous noise
And barbarian pipes screamed out their horrible tunes.
(trans. C. H. Sisson)

As we will see in chapter 2, Titian was thinking of several literary depictions of this mythological scene. But consider Catullus's per-

spective, for whom the appearance of the god is synonymous with radical disruption, an anti-aesthetic din whose nerve center Catullus situates in the enigmatic "orgy box" (*orgia cistis*) around which the celebrants throng. Such caskets in fact contained the mysteries of the cult, its symbols and sacred objects, its secret language. The *ta orgia* of the ancient Greek Dionysian cults are, as Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, not simply sexual objects but rather fetishes carefully inscribed within a ritual performance and calculated to produce the experience of "the propitious moment," the ecstatic *kairos* (*The Sense of the World,* 141–42). As we will see later, the cult's time-fetishes included a basket, a winnowing cloth, and the phallic *liknon,* which are choreographed through a kind of art, or *tekné,* in order to produce, as Nancy might say, the experience of "unbound time" (*temps déchainé*) (142), the experience of being liberated into a more authentic temporality, the time of a pure and absolute disruption of time's continuous and apparently endless flow, the kind of suspensive ritual disruption that Georges Bataille called "the sovereignty of the moment over utility" (*The Accursed Share,* vols. 2–3, 380).

I want to suggest in *Time-Fetishes* that the thought, idea, doctrine, or secret of eternal recurrence is very much, à la Catullus, the *ta orgia,* "the orgiastic things," of Western philosophy and literature, the secret "orgy box" to which only the initiates have access. It is not only the case, as Nancy has remarked, that "the thought of the eternal return is the inaugural thought of our contemporary history" (*Etre singulier pluriel,* 22); we can go further than that and say, and indeed demonstrate, that the thought of eternal recurrence is "the inaugural thought" in the effort by virtually every epoch to take the measure of time's unmeasurable otherness and mystery. Nietzsche's decision to become the teacher of eternal return signaled not only what Heidegger called "the completion of the history of metaphysics" but also the need for a reassessment of the role that eternal recurrence has played throughout that history. It is Nietzsche's teaching that is truly "inaugural" in Nancy's sense, insofar as it is both the last attempt at a systematic metaphysics that sought to account for the totality of existence and the "inaugural" attempt to think ironically about all metaphysical determinations in order better to prepare ourselves to affirm

the abandonment and lack that truly characterize our historical relation to time and Being.

Because it is now apparent that the poetical-philosophical history of time and Being has concealed the fetish character of its keywords and concepts, it is important that we try to understand the relation of the *ta orgia* of the Greek and Roman bacchants to the discourses and images of Western thought quite literally and not at all analogically or metaphorically, for there are libidinal components, sadistic and erotic trends, clearly discernible within all prior determinations of the relation of time to Being. Thinkers and poets have invariably derived the nature of time from a prior determination of the meaning of Being, which has meant that the derivative character of the meaning of Being in relation to the enigma of time has generally been concealed and forgotten in Western metaphysics. Nietzsche's rediscovery of the ancient doctrine of return was at once the culmination and the reversal of a long history of secret desire and concealment. And that is why a "time-fetish" is not a critical sobriquet loosely based on a psychoanalytic analogy but rather the effort to name the fetish character of the languages of time in the West.

It was to this same scene of Bacchus's sudden discovery of Ariadne that Nietzsche turned in his poem "Ariadne's Lament," where in "a flash of lightning, Dionysus becomes visible in emerald beauty" and proclaims to Ariadne: "I am thy labyrinth" (*Dithyrambs of Dionysus,* 59). And the wisdom he proclaims is the same teaching we receive from Zarathustra, which is perhaps best summarized in this brief passage from "The Convalescent" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* This is the labyrinth into which Bacchus would lead us:

> Behold, we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally, and we ourselves too; and that we have already existed an eternal number of times, and all things with us. You teach that there is a great year of becoming, a monster of a great year [*ein grossem Jahre des Werdens, ein Ungeheuer von grossem Jahre*], which must, like an hourglass, turn over again and again so that it may run down and run out again; and all these years are alike in what is greatest as in what is smallest; and we ourselves are alike in every great year, in what is greatest as in what is smallest. (332)

As we will see repeatedly throughout *Time-Fetishes*, what is monstrous about the notion of the great year is its undecipherable labyrinthine character. There is no aesthetic or epistemological consolation in the cosmic vista of the universe as an eternally rotating hourglass but only the effect of disruption, of a break in the normative homogeneity of the time-stream. The circle or ring of sameness which time and the will appear to constitute in fact belie a monstrous labyrinth of infinite cycles in an unimaginable topology. The secret of the great year is one of the most precious of philosophy's *ta orgia*. Although the idea of eternal return readily betrays its fetish character, it also belies the monstrous non-knowledge which its figures and allegories can only hopelessly try to conceal. *Time-Fetishes* is concerned to locate material instances of the dynamic interplay of fetish prosthesis and monstrous lack in the discourses that try to articulate the relation of time and Being from the Presocratics to Nietzsche and beyond.

Shakespeare's role in the secret history of eternal recurrence is perhaps one of the more novel contentions of *Time-Fetishes*. Although he was not an advocate or disciple of the doctrine, his poetic understanding of the world was largely determined by Ovid's presentation of Pythagorean and Heraclitean versions of the doctrine. In several important respects, Shakespeare's stratagems in what he calls his "war with time" recall and repeat those of Ovid. Furthermore, Shakespeare's reinscription of Ovid's Heraclitean "river of time" follows all the diverse Ovidian tonalities, from the enlightened irony about desire and language in the Sonnets to the savage cruelties of the sexual will in virtually all of the plays. What could be more cruel, for example, than the monstrous mutilation of King Pentheus by his mother, Agave, and her bacchants when, in a trance of orgiastic passion, she beheads her son with her own hands, while her companions tear off his hands (*Metamorphoses* bk. 3, ll. 720–33)? I will return to the Dionysian elements underlying Shakespeare's accounts of the savage and ironic force of the will and what, like Georges Bataille, we might call an "acephalic" monstrosity at the heart of the moment's sovereignty; as though the acephalic body of time resembled nothing so much as a mutilated corpse. And yet, Ovid repeatedly proclaimed himself a disciple of Bacchus and dedicated his poetic vocation to the

god. The sovereign or heterological disruption which the thought of eternal return brings into our everyday sense of time and world causes the world to tremble, to become unsteady, and yet also to reveal something of its essential nature. Shakespeare's "war with time" brings the irony and the savagery of the ancient world back to the forefront of European thought.

In my treatment of "The Ancients" I turn to some little known texts and images, above all to the role of Bacchus and Ariadne in the cult of Liber Pater, Libera, and Ceres, which flourished well into the late third century A.D. In an effort to set the iconographic context behind the literary imagery of Catullus, Ovid, or Plotinus, I turn to the sarcophagal art of the first and second centuries. What we will discover are the material remains of a culture and a cult that focused on the question of time and the possibility of eternal recurrence. This history still remains for the most part secret and long since buried by the success of Christianity in subduing all rival sects.

There are many other ancient images of circular or recurrent time, like the ouroboros, or serpent biting its own tail, which doubtless seemed to someone somewhere a perfectly serviceable image of time long before the first inscription of an Egyptian hieroglyph; or the image of the cosmic tree, which understandably fascinated Europeans as civilization spread further north and deeper into the forest. We will consider the Platonic and Neoplatonic genealogy of the well-known image of the Yggdrasill or "World Tree" in the Old Norse *Prose Edda* (c. 1200 A.D.), which, as it happens, also includes the serpentine figure of time's circularity.

In situating my readings of the philosophy of time, and of the poetic and iconographic imagery of eternity and eternal recurrence, my decisions were governed by a penchant for both the more highly figurative character of language and image and a concern to present what I thought were scenes that have generally gone unrecognized. Certain elements of *Time-Fetishes* will be elaborated and illuminated by a companion volume of readings that I call *Matter-Pieces: Toward a New History of Being,* which examines texts by St. Augustine, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Bataille, and Blanchot. *Matter-Pieces* examines both the connection between the doctrine of return and the nature of poetic

or literary language and the relation of my "secret history of eternal recurrence" to Heidegger's effort to decipher a more authentic "history of Being" beneath the now devalued and deconstructed history of Being as metaphysics. As Heidegger often remarks, what remained a secret throughout the history of Being as metaphysics was precisely the fact that it had forgotten *the question* of Being. *Time-Fetishes* is an account of those hitherto secret moments in the poetic-philosophical history of time in which the forgotten temporal horizon of the meaning of Being appears to be struggling toward some kind of recognition or iteration.

My selection of "Moderns" in *Time-Fetishes* is organized largely around the peculiarities of Nietzsche's articulation of the doctrine and thus seeks to trace pathways through which a characteristically Nietzschean dynamic of irony and a fetishizing aesthetic impulse works its way through the Marquis de Sade, Kant, Hegel, Schelling, and Schopenhauer before finding the way to Nietzsche, Trakl, Heidegger, Freud, and Derrida. Since the metaphysical determinations of the meaning of Being and the nature of time lie beyond the pale of logic and philosophy, it is tempting to regard the fictions of metaphysics as a literary ornament that can be easily shuffled off. But what is most significant about the "poetizing essence of reason," as Heidegger calls it, is that, although thinking and poetry both rely on it utterly, they do so in very different ways; for while poets often recognize the violence of their imposition of form upon the enigmatic stuff of time and Being, philosophers appear often not to recognize the poetic core of their thinking. There are, of course, exceptions and asymmetries that make this distinction nongeneralizable. Whether literary language is more alert and thus more ironic than philosophical language to the persistent dilemma of the aporia of time, or whether poets can be just as deluded and mesmerized by the time-fetish as the run-of-the-mill metaphysician, are among the many topics we will consider. If I had an overall goal in *Time-Fetishes*, it might be the effort to decipher the fundamentally ironic character of all the fetishized discursive and cultural formations that I treat. It is not for me to say whether I myself end up being captivated by the very fetishes I set out to expose, and whose rhetorical/aesthetic power, their illusion of transcendence,

I had meant to defuse. The general imperative that this book somehow tries to invoke might be something like "Build your time-fetishes ironically."

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