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Thomas Moynihan

SPINAL  
CATASTROPHISM

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But if from the comparative dimensions of the whale's proper brain, you deem it incapable of being adequately charted, then I have another idea for you. If you attentively regard almost any quadruped's spine, you will be struck with the resemblance of its vertebrae to a strung necklace of dwarfed skulls, all bearing rudimental resemblance to the skull proper. It is a German conceit, that the vertebrae are absolutely undeveloped skulls. But the curious external resemblance, I take it the Germans were not the first men to perceive. A foreign friend once pointed it out to me, in the skeleton of a foe he had slain, and with the vertebrae of which he was inlaying, in a sort of basso-relieve, the beaked prow of his canoe. Now, I consider that the phrenologists have omitted an important thing in not pushing their investigations from the cerebellum through the spinal canal. For I believe that much of a man's character will be found betokened in his backbone. I would rather feel your spine than your skull, whoever you are. A thin joist of a spine never yet upheld a full and noble soul. I rejoice in my spine, as in the firm audacious staff of that flag which I fling half out to the world.

—Herman Melville

At its core, Thomas Moynihan's *Spinal Catastrophism* is a proposal that formally appears common—let us treat something potentially provincial or strange in the land of concepts as a skeleton key to the vast manor of the human mind. Established philosophers are allowed to indulge in chasing a narrow interest to the ends of the earth (Sloterdijk's spheres, Nancy's touchiness, Malabou's plasticity), which is often couched in poetic license. But Moynihan's book treats our very own skeletal structure as the means to understanding the history of thought itself. The text damns academic suspicion and disciplinary shrewdness and seeks to trace the filiation of inorganic structure and mind.<sup>2</sup> Moynihan discusses dozens of figures:

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<sup>2</sup> Moynihan, 7.

Burroughs, Kant, Hartmann, Schelling, Margulis, to name a few, following the morphology of the skeletal system as infecting all aspects of human life. In this sense the text meshes the anatomical with the geological—the tectonics of bone structure disturb yet inform the bedrock of consciousness.

By transgressing contemporary boundaries of philosophical, scientific, and literary speculation, Moynihan excavates a philosophical naturalism that appears self-consistent to the point of explosion—a maximal naturalism (to borrow from Iain Hamilton Grant who penned the book's preface) that would seem to make the scientific ground of any naturalism impossible to delineate because, how can mind think nature if both are indistinguishable from each other? Thus every starting point will appear both arbitrary and crucial, every speck a fulcrum.

The notion of a contingent origin of human life and thought that unfolds through history, understood as a material stratification over time, is the very thread that runs the length of the book and one that is redoubled by the aesthetic uptake of such a theme—the titular spinal catastrophism. Because of the ever more twisted generation of living organisms, the steps along the way are forgotten or manifest themselves indirectly in the mechanical structures of the spine or the nervous system. Catastrophe names the sudden shifts in organic structure and material history, which require piecemeal detection long after they have occurred. The entwinement of speculative fiction and speculative thought is unmistakable, and while reading the book one can be left asking whether this is a text of theory fiction or a theoretical text that addresses theory fiction as a material always alongside the speculations of theory (especially of theories which come from a time that seems altogether different from ours).

The research and the flow of the text are impressive though such speculative questions leave the author potentially vulnerable to 'why' questions, or 'what is it that we can do with this book'. Such worries are compacted by taking (in the wrong way, I suggest) the tone of the book as fatalistic or nihilistic, as well as asking whether the text functions as a secret history that only confirms human existence as a never-ending chain of traumas. The invocation of Professor Barker, the theory fictional and CCRU-invented figure, resides at the book's imaginative center signaling to the reader that one can engage simultaneously in both skeptical distance and narrative immersion. If thought itself is a catastrophe in which we only know the ruins of its emergence, then to what extent do we remain uncertain and to what degree do we fictionalize our own capacities from incomplete data?

Following this it is no surprise that Moynihan's book is a fossil collection of extinct theories of the unconscious, discredited biological screeds, cosmic pessimism, and fringe psychoanalysis. What this in turn highlights is how the book exhibits the further tension of interesting speculation and libidinal fascination. This is emphasized in I. H. Grant's foreword in which he writes that the intelligible and the sensible are knotted together in the very recording of thought (in a line, a symbol, a word). The maximum effect of a concept or theme (thinking thought through the spine in this case) is not just about a surfeit of facts or instances, but about the picture

or diagram that emerges from a given cabinet of curiosities. In this sense it is the act of writing itself which makes the intelligible sensible via aesthetics.

As a whole the book is an utterly stimulating adventure in *Naturphilosophie* as well as an exercise in the limits of metaphor linking Hans Blumenberg to the Romantics to J. G. Ballard to Bataille. As an example, Lorenz Oken's claim that 'the skull is a bloom of spine' is taken as an entry into understanding the emergence of intelligence from the inorganic; the spine bears the weight of mental trauma; the nervous system is treated as nature trying to escape its own limitations via cognition. The text argues and demonstrates that every causal structure has a series of afterimages and unintended effects. It is hard to summarize the sheer vastness of weirdness that occurs throughout and how it leaves the reader with a paranoiac high—everything is connected but not by straight lines or prepackaged networks. Vertebrate existence is one of auto-paleontology and back pain as a result of having a gravitationally beleaguered fat head.

If there is one critical complaint that I have of the book it would be the scant mention of race (though there is one passing mention of eugenics). Given how much of the text builds upon biology and geology of the 18th century, it is difficult to avoid the problem of race, of the fascistic tendencies that would then emerge in the 19th century partially appropriating Haeckel, or the 'progressive' rearticulations of Darwinism, building off of the vile pronouncements of craniometry, phrenology, and the like. This poses a larger question (and one that challenges everyone including myself who works with *Naturphilosophie*), which is: how do we account for apparently human structures (social, religious ethical) imposed upon the world that attempt to force a parochial or otherwise limited idea of progress, development, or superiority? How does one ground the ethical or political in the *Naturphilosophical* if the co-imbrication of concept and matter allows for total reversibility?

It is in response to such problems that many run into the arms of normativity and back to the anti-genealogical mode that Moynihan attempts to override at the outset of the book. It is a pressing question and extends beyond but is central to such adventures in rabid analogizing—what is the mode of epistemological operation that follows a tectonic analysis of nature which seems to undermine epistemology as such? Or does *Naturphilosophie* entail the cortical export of epistemology for a fever-dream of another kind, one that can only be drawn and outlined, not spelled out. The problem centers on the book's impressive move—to make conceptual history material history. ▣