

Derrida vs. Foucault— A Fragment

(Unpublished excerpt from Chapter 7 of the *Ideology of Tyranny*)

At the École Normale —France’s State-factory of intellectuals, — Derrida (1930–2004) had been an “admiring and grateful disciple” of Foucault.* But after building a momentum of his own, he resolved to part from the master by reneging him in public, on the occasion of a lecture on the relation between Descartes and the history of madness. This took place in the mid-sixties. Directing his attack against *Madness and Civilization*, Derrida argued that to let “madness speak for itself” was the “*maddest aspect* [of Foucault’s] project.”*

He had admired his teacher’s attempt to give Madness a voice, but to have given Madness, in the end, the tongue of *logic* was, in truth, to betray the very cause of the sacred insanity. Because Folly, as they all knew, was *silent*. And, truly, Derrida inveighed, it is when we want “to speak the madmen’s silence that we pass over to the side of the enemy, to the side of order, even if, within order, we fight it and question its origin.”* This wasn’t a disavowal of the Bataillean project, of course. It seemed rather a polemic driven by envy and rivalry. Wanting to break free of Foucault’s shadow, Derrida was accusing his teacher of not being Bataillean enough; he had stirred one of those classic back-stabbing incidents, whereby the junior runner-up defies the senior incumbent by disputing before the conclave the purity of his rival’s orthodoxy. And it worked. Derrida was skillful.

According to Derrida, Foucault’s imprecision was to have cast maladroitly the conflict opposing sense to nonsense as a *historical* theme:

as if the chasm between the clear rays of reason and the “dark light” of madness could only be grasped as a significant development of our times. Derrida contended that there existed, in fact, a “virgin soil” —some sort of primordial grounds— upon which, “obscurely,” this battle had forever unfolded.* The madman himself *does* think: the “ancient madness” is the ultimate wisdom, but the difference is that the madman cannot *articulate* (“speak”) such madness. His is “the garrulous silence of a mind that cannot think its words.”* There wasn’t madness *before* modernity, and reason *thereafter*. Rather there exists a plane, for Derrida, where the two appetites lie inextricably, though antagonistically twined to each other, and the alternate convulsions of the one and the other are what we designate as the signs of reason or unreason. Bataille’s project was thereby vigorously reaffirmed; Derrida referred to it as the “hyperbolic project,” which was to enable “the violent release of the word” —a word shedding its “alien” light on the inexpressible realm of the impossible, of nothingness.

So, there was something deeper and prior to madness, and in the vision of Derrida, this was a pseudo-divine principle of “difference” (*le différant*, that which must differ): that is, a life- and meaning-giving essence by which the play of opposites —like reason and unreason— punctuate a *trace*, a scribble, a text.

Since Being has never had a ‘meaning’, has never been thought or said as such, except by dissimulating itself in beings, then *différance*, in a certain and very strange way, is ‘older’ than the ontological difference of than the truth of Being.*

The “trace” is, so to speak, the footprint of “*différance*,” it is the pen stroke incised by this “gesture of aboriginal violence.” Violence

* Derrida, J. (1968) “Différance,” *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 10.

which oscillates in the environs of discourse: now sufficiently close, now sufficiently far from reason, but never united to it: it is a love/hate affair. Madness breathes within reason, and vice versa; one cannot live with, nor can it live without the other.

The reign of finite-thought can only be established upon the enclosure and the humiliation and the chaining and the more or less disguised derision of the madman in us (...) This crisis within which reason is madder than madness—for it is nonsense and abandon—, and where folly is more rational than reason, for it is nearer to the live fount (*source vive*) of meaning, albeit silent and murmuring; this crisis has always already begun and it is interminable.*

Therefore, to know and to conduct an investigation (to “deconstruct” the text, as the Derrideans put it), one ought to study the “trace,” as the written, ambivalent testimony of the dualistic battle raging inside the heart of the God that is by differing (a God, in fact, with a left and right hand but no head: l’Acéphale, we may surmise). What Derrida had accomplished in one blow was to have composed Bataille’s project, the energy of the core (*la source vive du sens*), Foucault’s play with simulacra, and the panegyric of madness, into a modern grammarian’s re-edition of Basilides’s “God that is not.” A neo-Gnostic synthesis.

* Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London & New York: Routledge, 1978 [1967]), p. 76.