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Reading Between the Lines:

Derrida's Invocation of the 'Nonphilosopher'

On the surface, the disagreements between Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida might seem attributable to the interpretation (or misinterpretation) of Rene Descartes' Meditations. It is important to note, however, that there is much more at stake in their discussions. On one hand, it seems that the argument consists of Foucault's claim that Descartes excludes madness from his process of doubt, with Derrida responding that this is incorrect because Descartes actually engages with the subject in a manner that is sometimes described as hyperbolic, or even extravagant. Under this seemingly minute and inconsequential debate about Descartes' inclusion or exclusion of madness (perhaps it verges too closely to the realm of authorial intent), however, lies a series of much more serious questions about the very nature of philosophy and literature. So, on the other hand, what is largely at stake is a question of the nature of philosophy in relation to literature, and the complex relationship between silence or madness and reason. What Foucault sees as a blatant exclusion of madness in Descartes' Meditations, Derrida sees as proof of the existence of an extra-textual, implicit objector, the entity he names the 'nonphilosopher'. The nonphilosopher serves here as a centralizing figure around which significant debates surrounding philosophy and literature rotate. He/she begs the question of the interiority and exteriority of texts and philosophy, and the ability of implied rhetorical devices to occupy space in texts. The question of the nonphilosopher also introduces the argumentation of whether or not

fiction has a place in philosophy or if philosophy is only meant to involve the implementation of rigorous exercise and method. Finally, the silence attributed to the implicit nature of the nonphilosopher also highlights the debate surrounding the impossibility of speaking madness as madness is (by virtue of its nature and society), which is associated with unreason and, by extension, with silence. Thus in extracting a fictional entity, the nonphilosopher, from what he sees as an implied dialogue between the figure and Descartes, Derrida points to the greater issues at hand which will serve to comment on the very nature of his and Foucault's enterprises.

The first question raised by Derrida's invocation of the implied nonphilosopher is the question of the possibility for the exteriority of a text to exist, and by extension, the exteriority of philosophy. The passage of Descartes' Meditations which Derrida's reading hinges upon occurs at those very paragraphs in which Descartes seemingly rejects madness in favour of the example of dreaming (and to reduce a very complex argument to its barest bones, this is essentially what Foucault accuses Descartes of doing). Derrida summons the nonphilosopher based on the supposed rhetorical qualification of the choice Latin phrase '*sed forte*', which introduces these paragraphs in their original Latin version (Derrida 50). The condition implied in the translation of the significant '*sed forte*', for Derrida, serves to set up an alternative voice with whom Descartes is engaging in an implicit dialogue:

...the entire paragraph which follows [expresses...] the astonishment and objections of the nonphilosopher, of the novice in philosophy who is frightened by this doubt [the doubt of one's own body, which is attributed with madness] and protests [...]. Descartes then assumes the astonishment of this reader or naive interlocutor, pretends to take him into account when he writes (Derrida 50).

Foucault's response to Derrida's argument calls attention to the debate surrounding the exteriority and interiority of texts. Foucault argues that the invocation of the nonphilosopher is located outside the philosophical text in three important ways: first, in that the figure is another speaker (in other words, it is not Descartes); second, that the nonphilosopher speaks from a position that is (as his/her name implies) non-philosophical; and finally, because Descartes disarms the objector and forces a more extreme example on him – that of dreams (Foucault 569). Foucault claims, then, that because the nonphilosopher is not explicitly mentioned in Descartes' text (even though his/her presence may be implied through the aforementioned '*sed forte*'), Derrida must have conjured him/her up from somewhere outside of, or exterior to, the text. The tension raises the question of whether or not there even is an exterior to the text, or an exterior to philosophy. If Derrida has read the nonphilosopher into the text from in between the lines Descartes himself wrote, how can the entity (supposing that he does exist) be located outside the text? Is the nonphilosopher's very existence dependent on whether or not he/she occupies a space interior or exterior to philosophy or text? Similarly, Edward Said asks whether or not "a critical text can so easily be detached from its parent text", claiming that Derrida's work eliminates this possibility as well as the possibility of reading a text purely as it is explicitly intended (692). The implications of these questions extend to the realm of philosophy of language and literature as a whole. If the nonphilosopher does not exist purely because he/she is found outside the text, then it could be followed that the interpreted content of texts should not extend beyond the words that appear on the page. It becomes clear in this case that Foucault and Derrida are not simply arguing about Descartes' treatment (or mistreatment) of madness, but also positing arguments of much more serious implications about space and text.

The argumentations between Derrida and Foucault expand from the discussion of the interiority and exteriority of the text to the question of whether or not Descartes' use of the evil genius and dreams in place of madness are examples of hyperbolic metaphor and fiction, or whether or not they serve as conduits along Descartes' way of excluding madness in his rigorous thought experiment. Derrida argues for the fictional existence of the evil genius in a way that can also be applied to the existence of the nonphilosopher. To him, "the fiction of the evil genius will invoke, conjure up, the possibility of a *total madness*, a total derangement over which I could have no control because it is inflicted upon me – hypothetically – leaving me no responsibility for it" (Derrida 52). The fictionality of the evil genius is similar to that of the nonphilosopher. Derrida's invocation of the nonphilosopher is fictional in that this silent objector is not an actual figure standing before Descartes, calling him crazy for doubting his own body. This occurs in the same way that Descartes' evil genius is arguably also a fictional 'character' in that he/she is not a real living, breathing entity insofar as anyone can tell. In addition, Derrida insists that the evil genius allows for dreams to be used as a better example of a more complete madness for which individuals have no responsibility for their illusions whatsoever. In the same way, the nonphilosopher is a conduit for the replacement of madness by dreams. Without the implicit objector, Descartes might potentially have carried on talking about madness rather than replacing it with the idea of dreams. Derrida argues that the example of dreams is actually a hyperbolic manifestation of the example of madness, "that the sleeper, or the dreamer, is madder than the madman. Or, at least [...] is further from true perception" (51). According to Edward Said, writing (*écriture*) itself is, for Derrida, an exercise in excess (683) and so one might interpret that fiction is a prime example of this excess, and is a reflection of the excessiveness of the example of dreams as extreme forms of madness. In this way, the fictionality which Derrida claims

underlies the subtext of Descartes' Meditations reinforces the hyperbolic quality of dreams as an example of madness. The nonphilosopher is a fictional entity in the same way that the evil genius is, and both 'exist' as excess in the text, rhetorical or metaphorical devices which allow Descartes to engage with madness on the highest level he can imagine.

Foucault disagrees with Derrida's interpretation of the Meditations on several grounds. The first and most immediately relevant of these points is that Foucault believes Derrida ignores the evidence that the "episode of the evil genius is a voluntary exercise, controlled, mastered, and carried out from beginning to end by a meditating subject who never allows himself to be surprised" (Foucault 571). For Foucault, Derrida's argument unravels because Descartes' project involves a rigorous and organized method of doubt, a meditation, which cannot be synonymous with a fiction. Foucault also disputes Derrida's assertion that madness is engaged with hyperbolically by emphasizing the way in which Descartes does not include it in his testing process. Foucault notes that there are important structural similarities between the dreaming and madness paragraphs, but that the paragraph devoted to madness is cut short (558). In his paragraph on madness, Descartes begins with a lengthy explanation of why it is infeasible and insane to doubt the existence of one's body: "There are many other things which we cannot reasonably doubt, even though we know them through the senses – as, for example, that I am here, seated by the fire, wearing a (winter) dressing gown, holding this paper in my hands, and other things of this nature" (Descartes 16 [emphasis added]). Comparatively, the paragraph concerning dreams which proceeds after that of madness also makes mention of the author's body and clothing, the fire he sits beside, and the paper before him: "the night made me dream (of my usual habits:) that I was here, clothed (in a dressing gown), and sitting by the fire, although I was in fact lying undressed in bed! It seems apparent to me now, that I am not looking at this paper

with my eyes closed” (Descartes 16 [emphasis added]). The parallels between the paragraphs are obvious; however, the difference which Foucault addresses lies in how each paragraph – each example – is concluded. Where the madness paragraph ends after Descartes dismisses the idea as folly, the paragraph concerning dreams continues forth with a rigorous testing of Descartes’ aforementioned beliefs in his sensory experiences. In fact, Foucault argues that the testing is hardly carried out at all for madness, and the extent to which it is tested is simply to say that it is barely worth thinking about, that “madness does not have to be tested: it is noted” (Foucault 557). The place where Derrida believes the nonphilosopher makes his silent and implicit appearance, Foucault sees as more of a chiasmic crossing between madness and dreaming in which the opposition between the two is underlined (Flynn 212). In short, the paragraphs parallel one another, but they also switch positions of focus and the paragraph on dreams occupies more significance for Descartes. Far from the nonphilosopher being an entity that emphasizes the hyperbolic nature of Descartes’ engagement with madness, Foucault believes that section of the text actually exists as the point in which madness is tossed aside and replaced instead with the more convenient and acceptable example of dreaming.

It is also interesting that Derrida should invoke the nonphilosopher, a silent critic, in order to explain Descartes’ supposed silence on the topic of madness in his Meditations. Thus the discussions around silence, madness, and reason are introduced. First, it is important to note that the nonphilosopher whom Derrida reads into Descartes does not play any active, explicit role in the Meditations, but plays a rhetorical and hypothetical role that is not actually voiced aloud by Descartes. The nonphilosopher is therefore, in other words, a silent entity. One thing which both Derrida and Foucault agree upon is that madness is linked with silence and unreason. Derrida muses, however, that Foucault is attempting to speak on behalf of madness even as he is

admitting that madness is, by its very nature, silent (33-4). As soon as madness is spoken of, or spoken for, it becomes a work of reason (for speech is associated with reason) which immediately and necessarily objectifies madness: “The expression ‘to say madness itself’ is self-contradictory. To say madness without expelling it into objectivity is to let it say itself. But madness is what by essence cannot be said: it is the ‘absence of the work,’ as Foucault profoundly says” (Derrida 43). Derrida’s solution to this problem lies in fiction, metaphor, and hyperbole. As discussed above, the nonphilosopher is a fictional ‘character’ of sorts, and (at least for Derrida) he/she serves as a hyperbolic manifestation of madness. As Shoshana Felman explains on one hand, madness lends itself to fiction and literature, but on the other, in the realm of literature madness often serves to disguise philosophy (207). Derrida therefore acknowledges that any philosopher who wishes to invoke the subject of madness must do so through the realm of fiction (54). By this explanation, the nonphilosopher exists in the text (as a fictional character) so that Descartes can discuss madness – even if it is only in an implied discussion. Even though the nonphilosopher appears to be afraid of or concerned about Descartes’ example of madness, causing him to appear to dismiss it, the figure exists as an embodiment of madness for two important reasons: first, he/she is like madness in that they are both silent and silenced; and second, because he/she is a fictional entity, implied and rhetorical, yet hyperbolic and excessive. The nonphilosopher is also opposed with reason. In his/her silent opposition to the introduction to madness in Descartes’ rigorous exercise, the nonphilosopher is contrasted with the philosopher. He/she has no explicit voice, but Descartes does and he/she is horrified by Descartes’ pretence to doubt his own body. Descartes’ reason is therefore opposed by the nonphilosopher, placing madness in a position in which it is regarded as extremely unreasonable. However, as Felman explains, this placement of opposition actually explains that “Reason and

madness are thereby inextricably linked” and “Madness can only occur in a world of conflict, within a conflict of thoughts. The question of madness is nothing less than the question of thought itself” (206). The nonphilosopher, therefore, as a hyperbolic manifestation of madness itself (even in its condemnation of its own spirit), occupies a space which allows Descartes to engage with madness on a higher level. While the nonphilosopher is unphilosophical, unreasonable, and mad, it is only through him/her that Descartes is able to engage with madness in a philosophical and reasonable fashion.

Derrida’s invocation of the implied nonphilosopher carries with it important implications that extend beyond the immediate argument between him and Foucault as to whether or not Descartes excludes madness in his Meditations. The argument might seem, at first glance, to be so easily outlined, but what is at stake is rather more complex. Foucault and Derrida are engaging with one another in a disagreement about the very nature of philosophy and reason and Derrida’s nonphilosopher serves as a central figure around which all of these concepts rotate. Because Derrida finds the nonphilosopher lurking between the lines Descartes wrote, the question arises as to whether or not he/she exists inside or outside of the text, and whether or not there can even be an outside of the text, and by extension, an outside of philosophy. Furthermore, because the nonphilosopher is a fictional identity, Derrida argues that Descartes’ engagement with madness is hyperbolic because the fictional element in the work is a product of excess. For Foucault, however, fiction has no place within Descartes’ philosophical project, for it is a rigorous exercise, conducted with reason. Finally, the nonphilosopher also carries with it the question of the opposition between madness and philosophy, silence and discourse, reason and unreason. One could contend that the evil genius plays a more important role in Descartes’ text and the argument between Derrida and Foucault. However, the evil genius does not have this



important element of rhetorical implicitness which bears such significance to the questions of exteriority, fictionality, and silence. The effectiveness of the nonphilosopher as the implied centre of this argument lies in the fact that he/she is silent and hidden in Descartes' text. That is, if he/she is even there at all.

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