

MY BODY, THIS PAPER, THIS FIRE *

On pages 56–59 of *Histoire de la folie* [*Madness and Civilization*] I said that dreams and madness have neither the same status nor the same role in the development of Cartesian doubt: dreams allow me to doubt this place where I am, this sheet of paper I see, this hand I hold out; but madness is not an instrument or stage of doubt; for “I who am thinking cannot be mad.” Madness is therefore excluded, contrary to the skeptical tradition, which made it one of the reasons for doubting.

To sum up Derrida’s objection to this thesis, it is no doubt best to quote the passage where he gives most energetically his reading of Descartes.

Descartes has just said that all knowledge of sensory origin could deceive him. He pretends to put to himself the astonished objection of the imaginary nonphilosopher who is frightened by such audacity and says: no, not all sensory knowledge, for then you would be mad and it would be unreasonable to follow the example of madmen, to put forward a madman’s discourse. Descartes *echoes* this objection: since I am here, writing, and you understand me, I am not mad, nor are you, and we are all sane here. The example of madness is therefore not indicative of the fragility of the sensory idea. So be it. Descartes acquiesces to this natural point of view, or rather he pretends to be sitting back in this

*This essay appears as an appendix in the 1972 edition of *Histoire de la folie* (Paris: Plon) but is not included in the English translation (*Madness and Civilization*). It is a response to Jacques Derrida’s critique of the *Histoire* in “Cogito and the History of Madness” (see footnote a). This translation, by Geoff Bennington, has been slightly amended.

natural comfort the better, the more radically and the more definitively to spring out of it and unsettle his interlocutor. So be it, he says, you think that I would be extravagant to doubt that I am sitting near the fire, etc., that I would be extravagant to follow the example of madmen. I will therefore propose a hypothesis which will seem much more natural to you, will not disorient you, because it concerns a more common, and more universal experience than that of madness: the experience of sleep and dreams. Descartes then elaborates the hypothesis that will ruin *all* the sensory foundations of knowledge and will lay bare only the intellectual foundations of certainty. This hypothesis above all will not run from the possibility of extravagances—epistemological ones—much more serious than madness.

The reference to dreams does not, therefore, fall short of a madness potentially respected or even excluded by Descartes: quite the contrary. It constitutes, in the methodical order which here is ours, the hyperbolic exasperation of the hypothesis of madness. This latter affected only certain areas of sensory perception, and in a contingent and partial way. Moreover, Descartes is concerned here not with determining the concept of madness but with utilizing the popular notion of extravagance for juridical and methodological ends, in order to ask questions of principle regarding only the *truth* of ideas. ([Derrida's footnote] *Madness, theme or index*: what is significant is that Descartes, at bottom, never speaks of madness itself in this text. Madness is not his theme. He treats it as the index of a question of principle, and epistemological value. It will be said, perhaps, that this is the sign of a profound exclusion. But this silence on madness itself simultaneously signifies the opposite of an exclusion, since it is not a question of madness in this text, not even to exclude it. It is not in the *Meditations* that Descartes speaks of madness itself.) What must be grasped here is that *from this point of view* the sleeper, or the dreamer, is madder than the madman. Or, at least, the dreamer, insofar as concerns the problem of knowledge which interests Descartes here, is further from true perception than the madman. It is in the case of sleep, and not in that of extravagance, that the *absolute totality* of ideas of sensory origin becomes suspect, is stripped of 'objective value' as M. Guérault puts it. The hypothesis of extravagance is therefore not a good example, a revelatory example, a good instrument of doubt—and for at least two reasons. (a) It does not cover the *totality* of the field of sensory perception. The madman is not always wrong about everything; he is not wrong often enough, is never mad enough. (b) It is not a useful or happy example pedagogically, because it meets the resistance of the non-philosopher who does not have the au-

acity to follow the philosopher when the latter agrees that he might indeed be mad at the very moment when he speaks."

Derrida's augmentation is remarkable for its depth and perhaps even more so for its frankness. The stakes of the debate are clearly indicated: Could there be anything anterior or exterior to philosophical discourse? Can its condition reside in an exclusion, a refusal, a risk avoided, and, why not, a fear? Derrida rejects this suspicion passionately. "*Pudenda origo*," as Nietzsche said, about the religious and their religion.

Let us confront Derrida's analyses and Descartes's texts.

1. THE PRIVILEGES OF DREAMS OVER MADNESS

Derrida: "Dreaming is a more common, and more universal experience than that of madness." "The madman is not always wrong about everything." "Madness affects only certain areas of sensory perception, and in a contingent and partial way."

Now, Descartes does not say that dreaming is "more common and more universal than madness." Nor does he say that madmen are only mad from time to time and on particular points. Let us listen instead to his evocation of people who "insist constantly that they are kings." Is the madness of these men who think they are kings, or have a body made of glass, more intermittent than dreams?

Yet it is a fact that in the progression of his doubt, Descartes privileges dreaming over madness. Let us leave undecided for the moment the problem of whether madness is excluded, merely neglected, or taken up in a broader and more radical testing.

Scarcely has Descartes cited the example of madness only to abandon it, than he evokes the case of dreams: "However, I must here take into account the fact that I am a man, and consequently have the habit of sleeping, and imagining in my dreams the same or sometimes more unlikely things than these deranged people do when awake."

So dreams have a double advantage. On the one hand, they are capable of giving rise to extravagances that equal or sometimes exceed those of madness. On the other hand, they have the property of happening habitually. The first advantage is of a logical and demonstrative order: everything that madness (the example I have just left to one side) could make me doubt can also be rendered uncertain by

dreams. In their power to make uncertain, dreams are not outdone by madness; and none of the demonstrative force of madness is lost by dreams when I need to convince myself of all that I must call into doubt. The other advantage of dreams is of a quite different order: they are frequent, they happen often; my memories of them are recent, it is not difficult to have access to these vivid memories which they leave. In short, this is a practical advantage when it is no longer a question of demonstrating, but of performing an exercise, and calling up a memory, a thought, a state, in the very movement of meditation.

The extravagance of dreams guarantees their *demonstrative* character as an *example*: their frequency ensures their *accessibility* as an *exercise*. And it is indeed this quality of accessibility which preoccupies Descartes here, certainly more so than the demonstrative quality, which he mentions once and for all, as if to make sure that the hypothesis of madness can be abandoned without regret. On the other hand, the theme that dreams happen very often returns several times. "I am a man, and consequently I am in the habit of sleeping," "how many times has it happened that I have dreamed at night," "what happens in sleep," "thinking about it carefully I remember having often been mistaken while asleep."

I am afraid that Derrida has confused these two aspects of dreaming. It is as if he had covered them both with one word that joins them together by force: "universal." If they could be described as "universal," dreams would happen to everyone and about everything. Dreams would indicate that everything could be doubted by everyone. But this forces the words; it goes far beyond what Descartes's text says; or, rather, it falls far short of the peculiarities of that text; it effaces the clear distinction between the extravagance of dreams and their frequency; it erases the specific role of these two characteristics (demonstration and exercise) in Descartes's discourse; it omits the greater importance accorded to habit than to extravagance.

But why is it important that dreams should be familiar and accessible?

2. MY EXPERIENCE OF DREAMS

Derrida: "The reference to dreams constitutes, in the methodical order which here is ours, the hyperbolic exasperation of the hypothesis of madness."

Before re-reading the paragraph on dreams,¹ let us keep in mind what has just been said: "But just a moment—these are madmen, and I should be no less extravagant if I were to follow their examples."

The discourse then runs as follows: a resolution on the part of the meditating subject to take into consideration that he is a man, that he does sometimes sleep and dream; the appearance of a memory, or rather of a multitude of memories, of dreams that coincide exactly, point by point, with today's perception (sitting here, fully dressed, beside the fire); and yet, a feeling that there is a difference between this perception and that memory, a difference not only noted but brought about by the subject in the very movement of his meditation (I look at this paper; I shake my head, I reach out my hand to make the difference between waking and sleeping stand out sharply); but then come further memories, at a second level (the sharpness of this impression has often formed part of my dreams); with these memories, the vivid feeling that I am awake disappears; it is replaced by the clear vision that there is no certain index that can separate sleep and waking; an observation that provokes in the meditating subject an astonishment such that the lack of differentiation between waking and sleeping provokes the near certainty of being asleep.

It is clear that making sleep and waking into a theme for reflection is not the only consequence of the resolution to think about dreaming. In the very movement that proposes it and makes it vary, this theme *takes effect* in the meditating subject in the form of memories, sharp impressions, voluntary gestures, felt differences, more memories, clear vision, astonishment, and a lack of differentiation very close to the feeling of being asleep. To think of dreams is not to think of something external, whose causes and effects I could know, nor is it to evoke no more than a strange phantasmagoria, or the movements of the brain which can provoke it; thinking about dreams, when one applies oneself to it, is such that its effect is that of blurring the perceived limits of sleeping and waking for the meditating subject at the very heart of his meditation. The subject who thinks of dreaming *is thereby disturbed*. Applying one's mind to dreams is not an indifferent task: perhaps it is indeed in the first place a self-suggested theme; but it quickly turns out to be a risk to which one is exposed. A risk, for the subject, of being modified; a risk of no longer being at all sure of being awake; a risk of *stupor*, as the Latin text says.

And it is here that the example of dreaming shows another of its

privileges: dreams may well modify the meditating subject to this extent, but they do not prevent him, in the very heart of this *stupor*, from continuing to meditate, to meditate validly, to see clearly a certain number of things or principles, in spite of the lack of distinction, however deep, between waking and sleeping. Even though I am no longer sure of being awake, I remain sure of what my meditation allows me to see: this is just what is shown by the following passage, which begins, precisely, with a sort of hyperbolic resolution, "let us suppose, then, that we are asleep," or as the Latin text says more forcefully, "*Age somniemus.*" Thinking about dreams had led me to uncertainty; uncertainty, through the astonishment it provoked, led me to the near-certainty of being asleep; this near-certainty is now made by my resolutions into a systematic pretense. The meditating subject is put to sleep by way of artifice: "*Age somniemus,*" and on this basis the meditation will be able to develop anew.

We can now see all the possibilities furnished by the dream's property of being, not universal, certainly, but modestly habitual.

1. It is a possible, immediately accessible experience, the model for which is put forward by countless memories.

2. This possible experience is not only a theme for meditation: it is really and actually produced in meditation, according to the following series: thinking of the dream, remembering the dream, trying to separate the dream from waking, no longer knowing whether one is dreaming or not, acting voluntarily as though one were dreaming.

3. By means of this meditative exercise, thinking about dreaming takes effect in the subject himself: it modifies the subject by striking him with *stupor*.

4. But in modifying him, in making of him a subject uncertain of being awake, thinking about dreams does not disqualify him as meditating subject: even though transformed into a "subject supposedly asleep," the meditating subject can safely pursue the progression of his doubt.

But we must go back and compare this experience of dreams with the example of madness which immediately precedes it.

3. THE 'GOOD' AND THE 'BAD' EXAMPLE

Derrida: "What must be grasped here is that from this point of view the sleeper, or the dreamer, is madder than the madman."

For Derrida, madness is not excluded by Descartes: it is simply neglected. Neglected in favor of a better and more radical example. The example of dreams extends, completes and generalizes what the example of madness indicated so inadequately. To pass from madness to dreams is to pass from a "bad" to a "good" instrument of doubt.

Now I believe that the opposition between dreams and madness is of a quite different type. We must compare Descartes's two paragraphs step by step, and follow the system of their opposition in detail.

1. The *nature* of the meditative exercise. This appears clearly in the *vocabulary* used. In the madness paragraph, a vocabulary of comparison. If I wish to deny that "these hands and this body are mine," I must "compare myself to certain deranged people" (*comparare*) but I would be extravagant indeed "if I followed their examples" (*si quod ab iis exemplum ad me transferrem*: if I applied to myself some example coming from them). The madman: an external term to which I compare myself.

In the dream-paragraph, a vocabulary of memory. "I am in the habit of imagining in my dreams"; "how many times has it happened that I . . ."; "thinking carefully about it, I remember." The dreamer: that which I remember having been; from the depths of my memory rises the dreamer that I was myself, that I will be again.

2. The *themes* of the meditative exercise. They appear in the examples that the meditating subject proposed by himself.

Examples of madness: thinking one is a king when one is poor; imagining one's body is made of glass or that one is a jug. Madness is the entirely other; it deforms and transports; it gives rise to another scene.

Examples of dreams: being seated (as I am at this moment); feeling the heat of the fire (as I feel it today); reaching out my hand (as I decide, at this moment, to do). The dream does not shift the scene; it doubles the demonstratives that point to the scene where I am (this hand? Perhaps a different hand, in image. This fire? Perhaps a different fire, a dream). Dream-imagination pins itself onto present perception at every point.

3. The *central test* of the exercise. This consists in the search for difference; can I take these proposed themes into account in my meditation? Can I seriously wonder whether my body is made of glass, or whether I am naked in my bed? If I can, then I am obliged to doubt

even my own body. On the other hand, my body is saved if my meditation remains quite distinct from madness and dreams.

Distinct from dreams? I put it to the test: I remember dreaming that I was nodding my head. I will therefore nod my head again, here and now. Is there a difference? Yes—a certain clarity, a certain distinctness. But, and this is the second stage of the test, can this clarity and distinctness be found in the dream? Yes, I have a clear memory that it was so. Therefore what I supposed was the criterion of difference (clarity and distinctness) belongs indifferently to both dreams and waking perception; so it cannot make the difference between them.

Distinct from madness? The test is immediately carried out. Or, rather, looking more closely, the test does not take place as it does in the case of dreams. There is, in fact, no question of trying to take myself to be a madman who takes himself to be a king; nor is there any question of wondering if I am a king (or a captain from Tours) who takes himself to be a philosopher shut up in a room to meditate. What is different with madness does not have to be tested, it is established. Scarcely are the themes of extravagance evoked than the distinction bursts out like a shout: "*sed amentes sunt isti.*"

4. *The effect of the exercise.* This appears in the sentences, or rather in the decision-sentences, which end both passages.

Madness-paragraph: "But just a moment—these are madmen" (third person plural, they, the others, *isti*); "I should be no less extravagant if I followed their example": it would be madness (note the conditional) even to try the test, to wish to imitate all these delights, and to play the fool with fools, as fools do. Imitating madmen will not persuade me that I am mad (as thinking of dreams will in a moment convince me that I am perhaps asleep); it is the very project of imitating them that is extravagant. The extravagance applies to the very idea of putting it to the test, and that is why the test fails to take place and is replaced by a mere registering of difference.

Dream-paragraph: the sentence "*these* are madmen" corresponds to "*I* am quite astonished" (*obstupescere*: the stupor of indistinctness responds to the shout of difference); and the sentence "I should be no less extravagant if . . ." is answered by "my astonishment (*stupor*) is such that it is almost capable of convincing me that I am asleep." The test that has been effectively tried has "taken" so well that here I am (note the present indicative) in uncertainty as to whether I am awake. And it is in this uncertainty that I decide to continue my meditation.

It would be mad to want to act the madman (and I abandon the idea); but to think about dreaming is already to have the impression of being asleep (and that is what I shall meditate on).

It is extraordinarily difficult to remain deaf to the way these two paragraphs echo one another. Difficult not to be struck by the complex system of oppositions which underlies them. Difficult not to recognize in them two parallel but different exercises: that of the *demens*, and that of the *dormiens*. Difficult not to hear the words and sentences confront each other on both sides of the "however," the importance of which Derrida so deeply underlined, though I think he was wrong not to analyze its function in the play of the discourse. Difficult indeed, to say simply that among the reasons for doubt, madness is an insufficient and pedagogically clumsy example, because the dreamer is in any case much madder than the madman.

The whole discursive analysis shows that the establishment of nonmadness (and the rejection of the test) is not continuous with the test of sleep (and the observation that one is perhaps asleep).

But why this rejection of the test of the *demens*? From the fact that it does not take place, can one draw the conclusion that it is excluded? After all, Descartes speaks so little, and so briefly, about madness . . .

4. THE DISQUALIFICATION OF THE SUBJECT

Derrida: "What is significant is that Descartes, at bottom, never speaks of madness in this text . . . it is not a question of madness in this text, not even to exclude it."

On several occasions Derrida wisely points out that in order to understand Descartes's text properly it is necessary to refer to the original Latin version. He recalls—and he is quite right—the words used by Descartes in the famous sentence: "But just a moment: these are madmen (*sed amentes sunt isti*), and I should be no less extravagant (*demens*) if I were to follow their examples." Unfortunately, he takes the analysis no further than this simple reminder of the words.

Let us return to the passage itself: "How could I deny that these hands and this body are mine, except by comparing myself to certain deranged people . . . ?" (The term used here is *insani*). Now what are these *insani* who take themselves to be kings or jugs? They are *amentes*; and I should be no less *demens* if I were to apply their examples to myself. Why these three terms, or rather why use firstly the

term *insanus*, then the couple *amens-demens*? When it is a matter of characterizing them by the implausibility of their imagination, the madmen are called *insani*: a word that belongs as much to current vocabulary as to medical terminology. As far as the signs of it are concerned, to be *insanus* is to take oneself to be what one is not, to believe in fancies, to be the victim of illusions. As for its causes, it comes from having the brain gorged with vapor. But when Descartes wants no longer to characterize madness but to affirm that I ought not to follow the example of madmen, he uses the term *demens* and *amens*: terms that are in the first place juridical, before being medical, which designate a whole category of people incapable of certain religious, civil, and judicial acts. The *dementes* do not have total possession of their rights when it comes to speaking, promising, pledging, signing, starting a legal action, etc. *Insanus* is a characterizing term; *amens* and *demens* are disqualifying ones. In the former, it is a question of signs; in the others, of capacity.

The two sentences: In order to doubt my body, I must "compare myself to certain deranged people," and "but just a moment—these are madmen," are not the proof of an impatient and annoyed tautology. It is in no way a matter of saying, "one must be mad or act like madmen," but, "these are madmen and I am not mad." It would be a singular flattening of the text to sum it up as Derrida does: "since I am here . . . I am not mad, nor are you, we are all sane here." The development of the text is quite different: to doubt one's body is to be like those with deranged minds, the sick, the *insani*. Can I follow their example and at least feign madness for my own part, and make me uncertain in my own mind whether I am mad or not? I cannot and must not. For these *insani* are *amentes*; and I would be just as *demens* as they, and juridically disqualified if I followed . . .

Derrida has obscurely sensed this juridical connotation of the word. He returns to it several times, insistently and hesitantly. Descartes, he says, "treats madness as an index of a question of principle and epistemological value." Or again: "Descartes is concerned here not with determining the concept of madness but with utilizing the popular notion of extravagance for juridical and methodological ends, in order to ask questions of principle regarding only the truth of ideas." Yes, Derrida is right to emphasize that it is a question of right at this point. Yes, he is right again to say that Descartes did not want to "determine the concept of madness" (and who ever made out that he

did?). But he is wrong not to have seen that Descartes's text plays on the gap between two types of determinations of madness (medical on the one hand and juridical on the other). Above all, he is wrong to say hastily that the question of right posed here concerns "the truth of ideas," when in fact, as is clearly stated, it concerns the qualification of the subject.

The problem can, then, be posed thus. Can I doubt my own body, can I doubt my actuality? The example of madmen, of the *insani* invites me to do so. But comparing myself to them and acting like them implies that I, too, will become demented, incapable and disqualified in my enterprise of meditation: I should be no less *demens* if I followed their examples. But if, on the other hand, I take the example of dreaming, if I pretend to dream, then *dormiens* though I am, I will be able to continue meditating, reasoning, seeing clearly. *Demens* I shall be unable to continue: at the hypothesis alone I am obliged to stop, envisage something else, see if another example allows me to doubt my body. *Dormiens*, I can continue with my meditation; I remain qualified to think, and I therefore make my resolution: "*Age somniemus*," which leads to a new stage of meditation.

It would have to be a very distant reading which could assert that "it's not a question of madness in this text."

Alright, you say. Let us admit, in spite of Derrida, that it is necessary to pay such great attention to the text, and to all its little differences. For all that, have you demonstrated that madness is well and truly excluded from the progress of doubt? Does not Descartes refer to it again with reference to the imagination? Will it not be a question of madness when he discovers the extravagance of painters, and all the fantastic illusions they invent?

5. THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF PAINTERS

Derrida: "What [Descartes] seemed previously to exclude . . . as extravagance, he here admits as a possibility in dreams . . . Now, within these representations, these images, these ideas in the Cartesian sense, everything may be fictitious and false, as in the representations of those painters whose imaginations, as Descartes expressly says, "are extravagant enough to invent something so new that its like has never been seen before."

It will indeed be a question of madness several more times in the rest of Descartes's work. And its disqualifying role for the meditating sub-

ject will in no way prevent meditation from bearing on it, for it is not for the content of these extravagances that madness is put out of play; that only happens for the subject who wants "to play the fool" and meditate at the same time, when in fact it is a matter of knowing if the subject can take madness in hand, imitate it, feign it, and risk no longer being sure whether or not he is rational. I think I have made this point: madness is excluded by the subject who doubts as a means of qualifying himself as doubting subject. But it is not excluded as an object of reflection and knowledge. Is it not characteristic that the madness talked of by Descartes in the paragraph studied above is defined in medical terms, as the result of a "brain deranged or gorged with the black vapors of bile"?

But Derrida could insist and stress the fact that madness is found again in the movement of doubt, mixed up with the imagination of painters. It is manifestly present as is indicated by the word "extravagant" used to describe the imagination of painters: "If it is possible that their imagination is extravagant enough to invent something so new that we have never seen anything like it . . . certainly at the very least the paints [*couleurs*] with which they compose it must be real." Derrida has realized perfectly what is odd about the expression: "their imagination is extravagant enough." So well has he realized it that he underlines it in his quotation as the peg on which to hang his whole demonstration. And I subscribe wholly to the necessity of isolating these words and keeping them well to one side.

But for a different reason—simply because they *do not appear* in Descartes's text. They are an addition by the translator. The Latin text says only: "*si forte aliquid excogitent ad eo novum ut nihil . . .*"; "if perhaps they invent something so new." It is curious that in support of his thesis Derrida should have spontaneously chosen, retained and underlined what precisely is *only* found in the French translation of the *Meditations*; curious, too, that he should insist, and assert that the word "extravagant" has been "expressly" used by Descartes.

It does not appear, then, that the example of dreaming is for Descartes only a generalization or radicalization of the case of madness. It is not as a feeble, inferior, "unrevealing," "ineffectual" example that madness is distinguished from dreaming; and it is not for its lesser value that, once evoked, it is as if left to one side. The example of madness stands against that of dreaming; they are confronted the one

with the other and opposed according to a whole system of differences which are clearly articulated in Descartes's discourse.

And I am afraid that Derrida's analysis neglects many of these differences. Literal differences between words (*comparare/reminiscere; exemplum transferre*/to persuade; conditional/indicative). Thematic differences between images (being beside the fire, holding out one's hand and opening one's eyes/taking oneself to be a king, being covered in gold, having a body made of glass); textual differences in the disposition and opposition of paragraphs (the first plays on the distinction between *insanus* and *demens*, and on the *juridical implication of demens by insanus*; the second plays on the distinction "remembering being asleep/being persuaded that one is asleep," and on the *real passage* from the one to the other in a mind that applies itself to such a memory). But, above all, differences at the level of what happens in the meditation, at the level of the *events* that follow one another; *acts* carried out by the meditating subject (comparison/reminiscence); *effects* produced in the meditating subject (sudden and immediate perception of a difference/astonishment—stupor—experience of a lack of distinction); the qualification of the meditating subject (invalidated if he were *demens*; validated even if he were *dormiens*).

It is clear that this last set of differences controls all the others; it refers less to the signifying organization of the text than to the series of events (acts, effects, qualifications) which the discursive practice of meditation carries with it: it is a question of the modifications of the subject by the very exercise of discourse. And I have the feeling that if a reader as remarkably assiduous as Derrida has missed so many literary, thematic or textual differences, then this is through having misunderstood those differences which are the principle of these others; namely, the "discursive differences."

We must keep in mind the very title of "meditations." Any discourse, whatever it be, is constituted by a set of utterances which are produced each in its place and time, as so many discursive events. If it is a question of a pure demonstration, these utterances can be read as a series of events linked one to another according to a certain number of formal rules; as for the subject of the discourse, he is not implicated in the demonstration—he remains, in relation to it, fixed, invariable and as if neutralized. On the other hand, a "meditation" produces, as so many discursive events, new utterances that carry with them a

series of modifications of the enunciating subject: through what is said in meditation, the subject passes from darkness to light, from impurity to purity, from the constraint of passions to detachment, from uncertainty and disordered movements to the serenity of wisdom, and so on. In meditation, the subject is ceaselessly altered by his own movement; his discourse provokes effects within which he is caught; it exposes him to risks, makes him pass through trials or temptations, produces states in him, and confers on him a status or qualification he did not hold at the initial moment. In short, meditation implies a mobile subject modifiable through the effect of the discursive events that take place. From this one, one can see what a demonstrative meditation would be: a set of discursive events which constitute at once groups of utterances linked one to another by formal rules of deduction, and series of modifications of the enunciating subject which follow continuously one from another. More precisely, in a demonstrative meditation the utterances, which are formally linked, modify the subject as they develop, liberating him from his convictions or on the contrary inducing systematic doubts, provoking illuminations or resolutions, freeing him from his attachments or immediate certainties, including new states. But, inversely, the decisions, fluctuations, displacements, primary or acquired qualifications of the subject make sets of new utterances possible, which are in their turn deduced regularly one from another.

The *Meditations* require this double reading: a set of propositions forming a *system*, which each reader must follow through if he wishes to feel their truth, and a set of modifications forming an *exercise*, which each reader must effect, by which each reader must be affected, if he in turn wants to be the subject enunciating this truth on his own behalf. And if there are indeed certain passages of the *Meditations* which can be deciphered exhaustively as a systematic stringing together of propositions—moments of pure deduction—there exist on the other hand sorts of “chiasmas,” where the two forms of discourse intersect, and where the exercise modifying the subject orders the succession of propositions, or controls the junction of distinct demonstrative groups. It seems that the passage on madness and dreaming is indeed of this order.

Let us take it up again now as a whole and as an intersection of the demonstrative and ascetic schemas.

1. The immediately preceding passage presents itself as a practical syllogism.

I ought to be wary of something that has deceived me once

My senses, through which I have received the truest and surest things I possess, have deceived me, and more than once

I ought therefore no longer to trust them.

Clearly, it is here a question of a deducive fragment whose import is completely general: *all* that I have taken to be the most *true* falls under the sway of doubt, along with the senses which furnished it. A fortiori, there can therefore remain nothing that does not become at least as doubtful. Need I generalize any further? Derrida's hypothesis, that the (ineffectual) example of madness, and the (effectual) example of dreaming are summoned to operate this generalization, and to carry the syllogism of doubt farther forward, can thus not be retained. But then by what are they summoned?

2. They are summoned less by an objection or restriction than by a resistance: there are perceptible things that “one cannot rationally doubt.” It is the word “*plane*” that the translator renders by “rationally.” What then is this “impossibility,” given that we have just established a completely binding syllogism? What, then, is this obstacle that opposes our doubting “entirely” “wholly,” “completely” (rationally?) given that we've just performed a rationally unassailable piece of reasoning? It is the impossibility of this subject's really effecting such a generalized doubt in the exercise which modifies him; it is the impossibility of constituting oneself as universally doubting subject. What is still a problem, after a syllogism of such general import, is the taking-up of the advice of prudence into effective doubt, the transformation of the subject “knowing he must doubt everything” into a subject “applying his resolution-to-doubt to everything.” We see why the translator has rendered “*plane*” as “rationally”: by wanting to carry through this qualification “rational” that I brought into play at the very beginning of the meditations (and in at least three forms: having a sufficiently mature mind, being free of cares and passions, being assured of a peaceful retreat). If I am to resolve myself to doubt everything thoroughly, must I first disqualify myself as rational? If I want to maintain my qualification as rational, must I give up carrying out this doubt, or at least carrying it out in general terms?

The importance of the words “being able to doubt completely” consists in the fact that they mark the point of intersection of the two

discursive forms—that of the system and that of the exercise: at the level of ascetic discursivity, one cannot yet doubt rationally. It is thus this level that will control the following development, and what is involved in it is not the extent of doubtful things but the status of the doubting subject, the qualificative elaboration that allows him to be at once “all-doubting” yet rational.

But what, then, is the obstacle, the resistance point of the exercise of doubt?

3. My body, and the immediate perception I have of it? More exactly an area defined as “the vivid and the near” (in opposition to all those “distant” and “weak” things which I can *place* in doubt without difficulty): I am here, wearing a dressing gown, sitting beside the fire—in short, the whole system of actuality which characterizes this moment of my meditation. It is of the first importance that Descartes here involves not the certainty that one may have in general of one’s own body but, rather, everything that, at this precise *instant* of meditation, resists *in fact* the carrying-out of doubt by the subject who is *currently* meditating. Clearly, it is not certain things that in themselves (by their nature, their universality, their intelligibility) resist doubt but, rather, that which characterizes the actuality of the meditating subject (the place of his meditation, the gesture he is in the process of making, the sensations that strike him). If he really doubted all this system of actuality, would he still be rational? Would he not precisely be renouncing all these guarantees of rational meditation which he gave himself in choosing, as has just been said, the moment of the undertaking (quite late in life, but not too late: the moment that must not be allowed to slip past has come), its conditions (peace and quiet, with no cares to form distractions), its place (a peaceful retreat). If I must begin doubting the place where I am, the attention I am paying to this piece of paper, and this heat from the fire which marks my present moment, how could I remain convinced of the rational character of my undertaking? In placing this actuality in doubt, am I not at the same time going to render impossible all rational meditation and remove all value from my resolution to discover the truth at last?

It is in order to reply to this question that two examples are called on, side by side, both of which force one to call into doubt the subject’s system of actuality.

4. First example: madness. Madmen indeed are completely deluded as to what constitutes their actuality: they believe they are

dressed when they are naked, kings when they are poor. But can I take up this example on my own account? Is it through this that I shall be able to transform into an effective resolution the proposition that we must doubt everything which comes to us from dreams? Impossible: “*isti sunt dementes*,” that is, they are juridically disqualified as rational subjects, and to qualify myself among them, following them (“transfer their example to me”) would disqualify me in my turn, and I should not be able to be a rational subject of meditation (“I should be no less extravagant” . . .) If one uses the example of madness to move from systems to *askēsis*, from the proposition to the resolution, it is quite possible to constitute oneself as a subject having to call everything into doubt, but it is impossible to remain qualified as a subject conducting rationally his meditation through doubt to an eventual truth. The resistance of actuality to the exercise of doubt is reduced by too strong an example: it carries away with it the possibility of meditating validly; the two qualifications “doubting subject” and “meditating subject” are not in this case simultaneously possible.

That madness is posited as disqualificatory in any search for truth, that it is not “rational” to call it up to carry out necessary doubt, that one cannot feign it even for a moment, that this impossibility is immediately obvious in the assignation of the term *demens*: this is indeed the decisive point at which Descartes parts company with all those for whom madness can be in one way or another the bringer or revealer of truth.

5. Second test: dreaming. Madness has therefore been excluded, not as an insufficient example but as an excessive and impossible test. Dreaming is now invoked: because it renders the actuality of the subject no less doubtful than does madness (one thinks one is sitting at table and one is naked in one’s bed); and because it offers a certain number of differences with respect to madness—it forms part of the virtualities of the subject (I am a man), of his frequently actualized virtualities (I often sleep and dream), of his memories (I clearly remember having dreamed), and of his memories, which can return as the most vivid of impressions (to the point where I can compare my present impression validly with my memory of my dream). From these properties of dreaming, it is possible for the subject to conduct the exercise of a calling into doubt of his own actuality. First stage (which defines the test): I remember having dreamed what I now perceive as my actuality. Second stage (which for a moment appears

to invalidate the test): the gesture I make in the very instant of my meditation to find out if I am asleep indeed appears to have the clarity and distinction of waking perception. Third stage (which validates the test): I remember not only the images of my dream, but also their clarity, as great as that of my current impressions. Fourth stage (which concludes the test): at one and the same time *I see manifestly* that there is no certain mark for distinguishing dream from reality; *and* I am so *surprised* that I am no longer sure whether at this precise moment I am asleep or not. These two sides of the successful test (uncertain stupor and manifest vision) indeed constitute the subject as *effectively doubting* his own actuality, and as *validly continuing a meditation* that puts to one side everything that is not manifest truth. The two qualifications (doubting everything that arrives through the senses and meditating validly) are really effected. The syllogism had required that they be simultaneously in play; the subject's consciousness of his actuality had formed an obstacle to the accomplishment of this requirement. The attempt to use the example of madmen as a base had confirmed this incompatibility; the effort made to actualize the vividness of dreams showed, on the one hand, that this incompatibility is not insurmountable. And the meditating subject becomes doubting subject at the end of opposing tests: one that has constituted the subject as rational (as opposed to the disqualified madman), and one that also constituted the subject as doubting (in the lack of distinction between dreaming and waking).

Once this qualification of the subject has finally been achieved ("*Age somniemus*"), systematic discursivity will once again be able to intersect with the discourse of the exercise, take the upper hand, place intelligible truths under examination, until a new ascetic stage constitutes the meditating subject as threatened with universal error by the "great trickster." But even at that stage of the meditation, the qualification as "nonmad" (like the qualification as "potential dreamer") will remain valid.

It seems to me that Derrida has vividly and deeply sensed that this passage on madness has a singular place in the development of the *Meditations*. And he transcribes his feeling into his text, at the very moment at which he attempts to master it.

1. In order to explain that the question of madness should appear at this precise point of the *Meditations*, Derrida invents an alternation of

voices that would displace, reject, and drive out of the text itself the difficult exclamation: "but just a moment—these are madmen."

Derrida did indeed find himself faced with a knotty problem. If, as he supposes, it is true that this whole movement of the first meditation operates a generalization of doubt, why does it pause, if only for a moment, over madness or even over dreaming? Why take pains to demonstrate that vivid and recent sensations are no less doubtful than the palest and most distant ones, once it has been established, *in general terms*, that what comes via the senses must not be trusted? Why make this swerve toward the particular point of my body, this paper, this fire? Why make a detour toward the singular trickeries of madness and dreaming?

Derrida gives to this deviation the status of a break. He imagines a foreign intervention, the scruple or reticence of a straggler worried by the movement overtaking him and fighting a last-minute rearguard action. Descartes has scarcely said that we must not trust the senses when a voice would be raised, the voice of a peasant foreign to all philosophical urbanity; he would, in his simple way, try to broach, or at least to limit the thinker's resolution: "I'm quite happy for you to doubt certain of your perceptions, but . . . that you are sitting here, by the fire, saying these things, holding that paper in your hands and other things of the same nature."² You'd have to be mad to doubt them, or rather, only madmen can make mistakes about such certain things. And I'm certainly not mad. It is at this point that Descartes would take over again and say to this obstinate yokel: I'm quite prepared to admit that you're not mad, since you're unwilling to be so; but remember that you dream every night, and that your nightly dreams are no less mad than this madness you refuse. And the naive reticence of the objector who cannot doubt his body because he does not want to be mad would be conquered by the example of dreaming, so much "more natural," "more common," "more universal."

Derrida's hypothesis is a seductive one. It resolves with the utmost nicety his problem, which is to show that the philosopher goes directly to the calling into question of the "totality of beingness" [*la totalité de l'étantité*], that this is precisely the form and philosophical mark of his procedure; if he happens to stop for a moment at a "beingness" as singular as madness, this can only be if some innocent tugs at his sleeves and questions him; by himself he would never have lingered among these stories of jugs and naked kings. In this way the

rejection of madness, the abrupt exclamation "but just a moment—these are madmen" is itself rejected by Derrida and three times enclosed *outside* philosophical discourse: first, since it is another subject speaking (not the philosopher of the *Meditations* but the objector raising his scarcely refined voice); second, because he speaks from a place which is that of nonphilosophical naïveté; and, finally, because the philosopher takes over again and by quoting the "stronger," more "telling" example of dreaming disarms the objection and makes the very man who refuses madness accept something far worse.

But it is now clear what price Derrida has to pay for his skillful hypothesis. The omission of a certain number of *literal* elements (which appear as soon as one takes the trouble to compare the Latin text with the French translation); the elision of *textual* differences (the whole play of semantic and grammatical opposition between the dream paragraph and that on madness); finally, and above all, the erasure of the essential *discursive* determination (the double web of exercise and demonstration). Curiously, by imagining that other naïve objecting voice behind Descartes's writing, Derrida has fudged all the text's differences; or, rather, in erasing all these differences, in bringing the test of madness and that of dreaming as close together as possible, in making the one the first faint failed draft of the other, in absorbing the insufficiency of the one in the universality of the other, Derrida is continuing the Cartesian exclusion. For Descartes, the meditating subject had to exclude madness by qualifying himself as not mad. And this exclusion is, in its turn, no doubt too dangerous for Derrida: no longer for the disqualification with which it threatens the philosophizing subject but for the qualification with which it would mark philosophical discourse; it would indeed determine it as "other" than the discourse of madness; it would establish between them a relationship of exteriority; it would send philosophical discourse across to the "other side," into the pure presumption of not being mad. Separation, exteriority, a determination from which the philosopher's discourse must indeed be saved if it is to be a "project for exceeding every finite and determinate totality." This Cartesian exclusion must then be excluded because it is determining. And Derrida is obliged to proceed to three operations to do this, as we can see: first, he affirms, against all the visible economy of the text, that the power of doubt specific to madness is a fortiori included in dreaming; second, he imagines (to account for the fact that there is any question of madness

in spite of everything) that it is someone else who excludes madness, on his own account and following the oblique line of an objection; finally, he removes all philosophical status from this exclusion by denouncing its naïve rusticity. Reverse the Cartesian exclusion and make it an inclusion; exclude the excluder by giving his discourse the status of an objection; exclude the exclusion by rejecting it into prephilosophical naïveté: Derrida has needed to do no less than this to get through Descartes's text and reduce the question of madness to nothing. We can see the result: the elision of the text's differences and the compensatory invention of a difference of voices lead Descartes's exclusion to a second level; philosophical discourse is finally excluded from excluding madness.

2. But madness does not allow itself to be reduced in this way. Even supposing that Descartes was "not speaking" of madness, at the point in his text where it is a question of *insani* and *dementes*, supposing that he gave way for a moment to a yokel in order to raise such a crude question, could it not be said that he proceeds, albeit in an insidious and silent manner, to exclude madness?

Could it not be said that Descartes has *de facto* and constantly avoided the question of madness?

Derrida replies to this objection in advance: Yes indeed, Descartes fully faces up to the risk of madness; not as you pretend in a prefatorial and almost marginal way with reference to some business about jugs and naked kings, but at the very heart of his philosophical enterprise, at the precise moment where his discourse, separating itself from all natural considerations on the errors of the senses or the engorgements of the brain, takes on its radical dimension in hyperbolic doubt and the hypothesis of the evil genius. *That* is where madness is called into question and faced up to; with the evil genius I indeed suppose that I am even more radically mistaken than those who think they have a body made of glass—even go so far as persuading myself that two and three do not perhaps add up to five; then with the *cogito* I reach that extreme point, that excess with respect to any determination which allows me to say, whether mistaken or not, whether mad or not, I am. The evil genius would indeed be the point at which philosophy itself, in the excess proper to it, risks madness; and the *cogito* would be the moment at which madness is erased (not because of an exclusion but because its determination when faced with reason would stop being pertinent). According to Derrida, then, we should

not attach too much importance to this little farce of the peasant who interrupts at the beginning of the text with his village idiots: in spite of all their molley, they do not manage to pose the question of madness. On the other hand, all the threats of Unreason would be at play beneath the far more disturbing and gloomy figure of the evil genius. Similarly, the taking up by dreams of the worst extravagances of madmen at the beginning of the text would be an easy victory; on the other hand, after the great panic of the evil genius, we should need no less than the point of the *cogito* (and its excess with respect to the "totality of beingness") to make the determinations of madness and dreams appear to be nonradical. The great solemn theater of the universal trickster and of the "I think" would repeat the still natural fable of the madman and the sleeper, but this time in philosophical radicality.

To hold such an interpretation, Derrida had to deny that it was a question of madness at the point where madness was named (and in specific, carefully differentiated terms); now he has to demonstrate that there is a question of madness at the point where it is not named. Derrida puts this demonstration into operation through two series of semantic derivations. It is enough to quote them:

Evil genius: "total madness," "total panic," "disorder of the body" and "subversion of pure thought," "extravagance," "panic that I cannot master."

Cogito: "mad audacity," "mad project," "project which recognizes madness as its freedom," "disorder and inordinate nature of hyperbole," "unheard-of and singular excess," "excess tending toward Zero and Infinity," "hyperbolic point which ought to be, like all pure madness in general, silent."

All these derivations around Descartes's text are necessary for the evil genius and the *cogito* to become, as Derrida wishes, the true scene of confrontation with madness. But more is needed: he has to erase from Descartes's texts themselves everything showing that the episode of the evil genius is a voluntary, controlled exercise, mastered and carried out from start to finish by a meditating subject who never lets himself be surprised. If it is true that the hypothesis of the malign genius carries the suspicion of error far beyond those illusions of the senses exemplified by certain madmen, then he who forms this fiction (and by the very fact that he forms it voluntarily and as an exercise) escapes the risk of "receiving them into his belief," as is the case and

misfortune of madmen. He is tricked, but not convinced. Perhaps everything is illusion, but no credulity attaches to it. No doubt the evil genius tricks far more than does an engorged brain; he can give rise to all the illusory decors of madness, but he is something quite different from madness. It could even be said that he is the contrary of madness: since in madness *I believe* that an illusory purple covers my nudity and my poverty, while the hypothesis of the evil genius permits *me not to believe* that my body and hands exist. As to the extent of the trap, it is true that the evil genius is not outdone by madness; but, in the position of the subject with respect to the trap, there is a rigorous opposition between evil genius and madness. If the evil genius takes on the powers of *madness*, this is only after the exercise of meditation has excluded the risk of *being mad*.

Let us reread Descartes's text. "I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colors, figures, sounds, and all other external things are nothing but illusions and daydreams" (whereas the madman thinks that his illusions and daydreams are really the sky, the air and all external things). "I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes . . . but believing falsely that I have all these things" (whereas the madman believes falsely that his body is made of glass, but does *not* consider himself as believing it falsely). "I shall take great care not to receive any falsity into my belief" (whereas the madman receives all falsities).

It is clear: faced with the cunning trickster, the meditating subject behaves not like a madman in a panic at universal error but as a no less cunning adversary, always alert, constantly rational, and remaining in the position of master with respect to his fiction: I shall prepare my mind so well for all the ruses of this great trickster that however powerful and cunning he may be, he will be unable to catch me out. How far we are from Derrida's pretty variations on themes: "total madness, total panic which *I am unable to master*, since it is *inflicted* by hypothesis and *I am no longer responsible for it*." How is it possible to imagine that the meditating subject should no longer be responsible for what he himself calls "this painful and laborious design"?

Perhaps we should ask how it is that an author as meticulous as Derrida, and as attentive to texts, could have been guilty of so many omissions but could also operate so many displacements, transpositions, and substitutions? But perhaps we should ask this to the extent that in

his reading Derrida is doing no more than revive an old tradition. He is, moreover, aware of this; and this conformity seems, justifiably, to comfort him. He shies in any case from thinking that the classical interpreters have missed through lack of attention the singularity of the passage on madness and dreaming.

On one fact at least I am in agreement: it is not as an effect of their lack of attention that, before Derrida and in like manner, the classical interpreters erased this passage from Descartes. It is by system. A system of which Derrida is the most decisive modern representative, in its final glory: the reduction of discursive practices to textual traces: the elision of the events produced therein and the retention only of marks for a reading; the invention of voices behind texts to avoid having to analyze the modes of implication of the subject in discourses; the assigning of the originary as said and unsaid in the text to avoid placing discursive practices in the field of transformations where they are carried out.

I will not say that it is a metaphysics, metaphysics itself or its closure which is hiding in this "textualization" of discursive practices. I'll go much farther than that: I shall say that what can be seen here so visibly is a historically well determined little pedagogy. A pedagogy that teaches the pupil there is nothing outside the text, but that in it, in its gaps, its blanks and its silences, there reigns the reserve of the origin; that it is therefore unnecessary to search elsewhere, but that here, not in the words, certainly, but in the words under erasure, in their *grid*, the "sense of being" is said. A pedagogy that gives conversely to the master's voice the limitless sovereignty that allows it to restate the text indefinitely.

Father Bourdin supposed that, according to Descartes, it was impossible to doubt things that were certain, even if one were asleep or mad. With respect to a well-founded certainty, the fact of dreaming or of raving would not be pertinent. Descartes replies very explicitly to this interpretation: "I do not remember having said anything of the sort, nor even having dreamed it while asleep." Indeed—nothing can be clearly or distinctly conceived of which is not true (and at this level, the problem of knowing whether or not the conceiver is dreaming or raving does not need to be asked). But, Descartes adds immediately, who then can *distinguish* "what is clearly conceived and what only seems and appears to be so"? Who, then, as thinking and meditating subject, can know whether he knows clearly or not? Who, then,

is capable of not deluding himself as to his own certainty and of not being caught out by it? Except precisely those who are not mad? Those who are "wise." And Descartes retorts, with Father Bourdin in his sights: "But as only the wise can distinguish what is clearly conceived from what only seems and appears to be so, I am not surprised that this fellow can't tell the difference between them."

NOTES

- a Translations of the passages quoted from Derrida are taken, with some modifications, from the version by Alan Bass in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978). The translation of the French words "extravagance" and "extravagant" poses some problems: Bass habitually, but not exclusively, uses "insanity" and "insane," and it is true that the French words carry an overtone of madness absent from most uses of the English cognate forms. However, in the discussion of the "extravagance" of painters, the translation "insanity" is clearly excessive, and Bass resorts to the English "extravagance." I have preferred to use this form throughout in the interests of consistency and clarity and have modified Bass's version of Derrida accordingly. — Ed.
- 1 I use this term paragraph out of amusement, convenience, and fidelity to Derrida. Derrida says in a picturesque and jocular manner: "Descartes starts a new paragraph" [*va à la ligne*]. We know this is quite mistaken.
- 2 I am quoting Derrida. In Descartes's text, these things it is so difficult to doubt are characterized not by their "nature," but by their proximity and their vividness — by their relation to the meditating subject.