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Pedagogy's Death: Notes on Derrida's *La bête et le souverain*

In the 5th Session of the second year of his seminar on *La bête et le souverain*, Derrida speaks of the other as the one who makes a thing of you and whom you can only *imagine*: "The other might bury me alive, eat me or swallow me alive, burn me alive. S/he can put me to a living death, and exercise thus his or her sovereignty" (140). The other, then, must be imagined, can only be imagined, in the phantasmatic fiction of experiencing one's own death. Following this discussion, Derrida introduces a remarkable fiction that takes pages to unfold: "Suppose now, as hypothesis or fiction, that I say the following. If I say "Robinson Crusoe was indeed 'buried alive,' he was indeed 'swallow'd up alive,' you would not believe me."

Who is the "you" that Derrida ventriloquizes here? Here is the creation of a pedagogical scene in which Derrida fabulates a fantasy, in the name of a certain reality principle, to bring into relief the reality principle of the "you", you who are *really* the one seized by the fantasy of sovereignty if you don't know about the power of fantasy, about the fact that the phantasmatic event *does happen*.

This imputation of disbelief to the listening you may perhaps spark belief or conversion, or at the very least make one listen with a more personal interest. No

doubt this is an extraordinary fabulation of the pedagogical scene, and it redoubles infinitely, perhaps, the staging of the other at the scene of my death, especially since Derrida implicitly indicates the present reality of the very story or projection which he is fabricating, when, on p. 141 of the manuscript, in his somewhat didactic questioning about the modality of fantasy and the fictional, he calls into question the very difference between the conditional and the future. By logical extension, the story that JD tells is itself a conditional phantasm that itself shifts to the future tense, that is unfixed in its relation to the "present" or the "indicative" or apophantic mode (a problematic that will emerge in the later sessions' readings of Heidegger).

In a certain way, then, Derrida addresses his auditors as those who believe most firmly in the phantasm of a sovereign reason without belief, of a sovereign reality principle or pragmatics, etc, thereby setting up the students as those who demand the sovereignty of the masterful lecture or captain.

The "would" and the "will" of this "suppose" story suggest also the necessity of thinking death as a *mourir vivant*, as a living death, as living through death into the horror of an infinite, mute consciousness with no possibility for change. The terror in the face of death is then a sort of terror in the face of immortality, since the phantasm that would preserve life beyond death is as terrifying as the horror of being buried alive, of living buried, sequestered, on an island telling a story that no one will hear.

The *mourir-vivant* then remarks the ambivalence of any thinking of death as, on the one hand, the truth (as Heidegger shows us) of any living being--extending through the always fictional and phantasmatic logic of *survivance*--this is *mourir*

*vivant* as a fantasy but not a dismissible illusion, since the thought of death can only partake of and belong to fantasy or imagination.

On the other hand, the *mourir-vivant* is ridiculed as a sort of foolish *fantasme* in the case of Robinson Crusoe, as a denial of mortality or a failing in the face of a *Sein zum Töde* that cannot really ever know death *except* as a fiction yet which insists on the possibility of *knowing* or predicting it as an extension of some empirically verifiable experience of life.

In this light, Derrida presents his fable as his own *mourir vivant*. Like any writing, this "'suppose I were to say'" remarks the irreducible possibility and necessity of the "I's" death, making of the other a thing that will make of him a thing in this very text, that will read his text in disbelief, making of him a dead thing, a corpse by the very autoimmunity of a belief in the transmissibility of a sovereign reason that works without a force, without work, without the performative force of an *oeuvre* that is instituted in response to and as traces.

What Derrida is remarking here, in a performative fashion that steps at or over the edge into the violence of a performative *pouvoir*, is the autoimmune sovereignty of the pedagogical scene, of the extent to which a desire for the passing on of reason is subject to the perverse autoimmunity of a reason that always bears and can violently unveil its basis in the fantasy of a pedagogical transmission of constative knowledge, of a university that transmits knowledges but does not produce *oeuvres*.

The students or auditors or readers always survive the text that survives him and them, and the fact of this reading bears the possibility of the student

perpetrating a sovereign exercise with regard to the text. Yet the very pedagogical scene consistently denies this possibility while remaining, even in its most seemingly violent *chosification* of the student itself, the knowing performance of a sovereign *fiction*.