

DSTP 2011: "Turning the Thread: Derrida, Montaigne, and Zarathustra on Spinning Death"

"I am fascinated," Derrida states, "by the figure of death as a thread that breaks" (II.173).

For a thinker to declare a fascination with a given thought is far from unique. Nevertheless, for Derrida, it is significant. While his confession appears at the close of *The Death Penalty* lectures, Derrida analyzes the concept of fascination itself toward the beginning. There, Derrida attributes to it two characteristics. First, fascination ties the spectator to the spectacle: "*Fascio*," he reminds us, "means to tense, tie, [or] attach, and *fasciola* is the wrapping, the ribbon, the strip, or the bandage" (I.76). But second, fascination binds the voyeur to perversion. "All fascination," he asserts, is, "fundamentally a virtual involvement [*engagement*] with perversity and perversion" (I.77). Fascination, then, is the tie that binds (*bande*). It marks the volution and involution, the wrapping up and in, of desire and its object, seer and seen.

"I am fascinated," Derrida states, "by the figure of death as a thread that breaks" (II.173).

Fascinated, what is he getting involved with, here? What is perverse about a broken thread? Derrida draws this 'figure of death as a thread that breaks' from Montaigne, who writes, "'Wherever [death] comes from, it is always [one's own]; wherever the thread may break, the whole thread is broken, the spindle is at an end'" (II.173). Here, Montaigne speaks of two figures – or he figures on two registers. First, there is the thread. The thread is spun on a spindle; it becomes itself, it is bound to itself as itself, by being turned round and round. When the thread breaks, when its becoming – although not its being – ceases to be, it still turns of course, but it turns aside. The movement of binding and breaking a thread, then, is analogous to the movement of fascination. It revolves itself [*volvere*] into perversion [*vertere*].

But Montaigne's second figure is life. Anaximenes suggested that the whole world can be explained by processes not unlike the aeration and condensation of wool. Here, Montaigne sees life itself as a woolen thread. Like the thread, life is composed as it evolves. It stretches along some delicate reach until a tear, a fray, or a bur in the wool suddenly cuts its length short. You remember, of course, the Fates: the first who spins, the second who measures, and the third who cuts the limits of human life. It is this last Fate, A-tropos, who wields eponymous shears, which, though inexorable and unwavering, nevertheless turn life from aching revolutions to an aberrant conversion: death. Life turns round until it turns aside. By a thread, then, the dynamic of life is analogous to fascination: both revolve into perversions of themselves.

In context, Derrida is commenting on Montaigne's essay, "A Custom of the Isle of Cea." According to this custom, which Derrida does not mention and Montaigne only speaks of in passing, very old persons, being well-satiated by life, throw themselves, like lemmings of legend, from a great height into the sea below. One might call this a suicide and think they have annihilated their life. By a thread, however, one might still call it suicide but think they have only carved or cut (*-cident*) an end to their life, letting it turn free, turn elsewhere, or even turn over (a new leaf) (in the grave). This line of thought gives a fresh sense to *la vie* and *la sur-vie*. Here, survival is not the preservation of life against all odds; rather, it is the perversion of life – *la sur-vie* bends or hangs over life, tensed by another impulse.

Derrida compares life and survival, *la vie et la survie*, as two separate faiths. In doing so, moreover, he extends the thread metaphor to a trapeze net and cable. Life, he hazards, is like a trapeze artist flying with a net, relying on that net to keep her safe and sound; death, on the other hand, or life at the cost of life, is like flying without a net, impelled by the force of flight irrespective of safeguards (II.173). On the one hand, then, the trapeze artist's faith is a reliance [*relier*] that rests on the net below, and, on the other hand, her faith is a leap that follows the cable above. An artist who survives is impelled by a "force that exceeds life" (II.178), *c'est a dire*, by a thread [*fil*] that exceeds the limits of the net [*filer*]. The deciding factor, then, between life and survival, life and life at its own cost, appears to be the extent of the net.

Let's take a moment, however, to consider, à la Gaudi, an architectural inversion of the scene. In this case, the net would be not the crisscrossed ropes below, but the nest of cables above. According to this inversion, the trapeze artist would live, then, when she flies as a perfect extension of the cable she grips. And she would live at the expense of life the moment she lets go of the cable and that thread breaks, the arch of her body bending away from the trailing cord. This is an-other figure of death. The net breaks at that precise moment, in that precise spot where the trapeze artist falls free. None of the cables above compel her. Their network parts. And she freefalls. Things have indeed taken a turn [*wirren*]. But then suddenly she has caught another beam, she swings again, cabling her body into yet another perfect line.

It is indecipherable – this space in between – this place where one thread breaks and another begins spinning, where life is bound to, fascinated by, survival. When a bat of wool breaks or a rolag reaches its end, the spindle's thread certainly falls limp, but only momentarily. In an instant, another bat is hitched and a bit is wound round and round the dangling end. At this point, the thread swells, much like a bone recently fractured presents a bulb of calcification. This swollen nub is precisely the point of perversion. Why? It is impossibly, maddeningly, both less than (absolute) death and more than (absolute) life. Indeed, here where life perseveres or veers off in death, here where life ends, there is exactly more life. Just as, on either side, the trapeze artist is streamlined; but here, between bars, she flies larger than life.

“You perish,” Zarathustra told the tightrope walker, “of your vocation,”— that is, your life ends due to, at the hand of, its livelihood. This is true not only of circus or domestic artistry, but of spirituality and in particular of Christianity. All religions, Derrida observes, sustain beliefs that exceed life (II.178), but Christianity is a belief system that exceeds its own life; for, Christianity is “*par excellence* the religion of forgiveness,” a divine forgiveness purchased by divine death, and therefore, ‘*par excellence* the religion of the death of god’ (II.135). When Pope Paul IV or Pope John Paul II, therefore, ask forgiveness for the Church, for its sins, its perversions, the many times it's turned aside from god, they not only sound the death knell but resuscitates the death rattle, when god himself turned aside, when divine life went slack.

“You perish of your vocation,” Zarathustra said, “for that I will bury you with my own hands.”

How does one care for the dead? How does one care for the moment when the thread or the net breaks? When the force of life's revolutions perverts its destinations? How does one respond when what hits the mark is suspended for a moment, between frames? One might seek forgiveness for it, as do the priests, and request that the past be forgotten, that wherever the thread has been be never seen again. This is to disavow the blot, the inky node of history. Or one might obscure it, as the genealogists have done, and insist that filiations pass from fathers to sons. This is to veil the bulbous shift in between from mothers and back again. Or, finally, one might finger it, rather perversely, and give it a tug, as one naturally does to an aberration in the thread. This is to tease, to tempt, to test at once its extent and its inner weakness.

And who is it that touches and tugs? There is a name for the sort of person excited by perversion, fascinated by death, and involved in a thing's undoing. There is a name for the sort of person bound when the binding breaks. It is the philosopher, is it not? This philosopher who practices death, who considers the familiar the moment it becomes strange, the philosopher who reads for genealogical rupture rather than lineage, or, again, who deconstructs the thread as such, life as such, or even the As Such as such – this is the person, no?, who gets a little wound up, a little excited about broken threads. To philosophize, then, is not simply to gape at the thread gone limp but to tug at the node where the break itself has been obscured, where all-the-more meets less-and-less.

I too am fascinated by the figure of death as a thread that breaks.

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