

Jeu d'écart: Derrida's Descartes

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Jeu d'écarts: Derrida's Descartes

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...défaite d'une réponse bifide, écartant d'elle-même la question...¹

...tout écart contient sa simulation...²

Critical commentary has linked Derrida with écarts from the first: *Écarts*, that is to say, was the title of the very first collection of critical essays devoted to Derrida's work.³ It is arguably only quite recently, however, in Sean Gaston's *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida*, that the theme has received its most sustained treatment, tracing the twists and turns of the word 'écart', and the gaps and swerves of the trace in Derrida's writing. Perhaps the most tantalising moment in Gaston's meditation comes in a brief section where he considers how we might read des écarts in 'dEsCARTeS'.⁴ I say 'tantalising' because Gaston's typography also suggests the converse possibility; that 'Descartes' might be disseminated in Derrida's 'écarts'. Yet it seems for Gaston this reversal is not on the cards: far

¹ Jacques Derrida, 'La double séance', in *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p.203.

² Paul Valéry, 'Suite', in *Tel quel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996; repr. 2008), p.467.

³ Lucette Finas, Sarah Kofman, Roger Laporte, Jean-Michel Rey, *Écarts: Quatre essais à propos de Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Fayard, 1973).

⁴ Sean Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida* (London: Continuum, 2006), pp.86-88.

from blazing a trail for dissemination and the trace, Gaston's 'dEsCARTeS' is anxious to have done with his écarts so as to shore up his name. So, Descartes's claim, in the *Discours de la méthode*, that his move to Amsterdam allowed him to live a life as solitary and retired as in 'les déserts les plus écartés', is a way of placing 'a gap between himself and Paris' and so finding a 'place where the gap works'.

He wages [sic] everything on a gap that works: on a clean break, on a total separation, on a name that does not wander, depart, deviate or swerve, on a gap whose edges are always clear and distinct.

In effect, the move to a remote place whose language and ways are strange to him provides Descartes with a mundane sort of remoteness and solitude which serve to displace a more radical self-separation. Différance is rationalised as a series of differences cantoned within a distinctly bounded location, placeable on the map of a rational, calculable, manageable geometry. Gaston goes on to underscore Descartes's predilection for what is 'clear and distinct' by citing an apt passage from the *Meditations*. Once Descartes has thus effectively convicted himself out of his own mouth, Gaston leaves him, save to mention in passing his reliance on the name of God (Gaston 92).

Descartes, it seems, is an open and shut case. But there is something troubling in this. Can it really be deconstruction that comes to rest in a verdict that is itself so clear and distinct; or, for that matter, that proceeds from such clear and distinct premises, by assuming that Descartes just is his declared theses and, con-

versely, that he has no part in the disseminative potential of ‘déserts...écartés’? What can deconstruction want with such a wholly orthodox, which is to say wholly Cartesian, Descartes? This is not to say there is anything remarkable in this move; quite the contrary. The disregard to which the father of modern philosophy succumbs is in itself quite familiar: it is the contempt that familiarity breeds, and which seeks and finds nothing in ‘Descartes’ that would resist compression into the tiny volume of the adjective ‘Cartesian’. This is, perhaps, one of the most common and convenient of gestures in writing on Modern philosophy. But it is surely not the sort of thing we associate with Derrida.

And, indeed, as Michel Lisse points out, albeit in a footnote, Derrida has called, in his paper ‘La langue et le Discours de la méthode’,⁵ for a re-reading of Descartes that would precisely not reduce his text to what a Cartesian tradition has made of him.⁶ Similarly, for Hassan Melehy one of the virtues of ‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’ is that it allows us to read aspects of Descartes ‘that escape the institution of philosophy in which Descartes subsists’.⁷ In such remarks one might even glimpse the possibility of a deconstructive Descartes; a reading of his text that would keep open the écart between its incipiently orthodox and its more errant aspects. Indeed, Dalia Judovitz goes some way towards such a thing in her reading of

⁵ Jacques Derrida, ‘La langue et le Discours de la méthode’, in *Recherches sur la philosophie et le langage*, 3 (1983), 35-51.

⁶ Michel Lisse, ‘Déconstructions’, in *Etudes françaises* 38:1-2 (2002), 59-76, p.68.

⁷ Hassan Melehy, *Writing Cogito: Montaigne, Descartes, and the Institution of the Modern Subject* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p.42.

‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’, suggesting ways in which Descartes’s recourse to fiction, fable, and feint in the constitution of truth and certainty might prompt Derridean questions of supplementarity. And yet, at the close, Descartes disappears, and it is in ‘Nietzsche’s footsteps’ that we are to see Derrida following.⁸ It is as if, when it comes to the crucial question of filiation, we cannot quite credit the name of Descartes as a deconstructive antecedent, even where he has done much of the heavy lifting in the course of analysis.

What I propose in this essay is not a deconstructive reading of Descartes, though the bones of something of the sort will emerge in the course of exploration. Rather it is the place of ‘Descartes’, as a name and as a force, in Derrida’s writing that I want to track. This place or role may indeed seem peripheral, subservient to the needs of more urgent discussion, often relating to a Kant, a Hegel, or a Heidegger. Yet, given everything that Derrida has done to complicate our ideas of genealogy, succession, and supersession, ought we not to be a little suspicious of this? What follows is by no means a complete survey of Descartes’s appearances in Derrida’s writing. Notably, there is simply not space to do justice to the seminars of 2001-2003 published as *La bête et le souverain* (2008-10). This is a pity. For the winding, looping form of the seminars, as much as the themes they invoke, marks an intensification in an engagement with Descartes whose earlier stages I will

⁸ Dalia Judovitz, ‘Derrida and Descartes: Economizing Thought’, in *Continental Philosophy II: Derrida and Deconstruction* ed. by Hugh J. Silverman (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.39-56.

chart, up to *L'animal que donc je suis* (2006). In their delays and anticipations, the seminars thematise and perform the sorts of deconstructive move that hope to foil, or as they say in French outplay (*déjouer*), the prescribed, calculable sequences of method and the assurance of a map, but in ways that bring these moves into the most intimate and uncomfortable proximity with the very method and mastery deconstruction hopes to escape. It has perhaps never been clearer than in these seminars to what extent mastery is the risk of deconstruction. As I hope to show, Descartes has always been, in Derrida, an exemplary name for both sides of this double bind; and the ritual sacrifice of one side so as to expropriate the other is only one of the shortest roads by which the most patient and attentive deconstruction may fall into a facile mastery. I will work my way towards these 'écarts' in Descartes and the Cartesian, and touch briefly on the problem of the 'carte', or map. But first I must begin with something in appearance more conclusive.

Donc

In *L'animal que donc je suis* (2006), Derrida claims, on two separate occasions and in almost the same fastidious wording, that the word 'donc' was a late addition to the title.⁹ One may believe this, or not: the repetition of the claim does not necessarily bear witness to its candour. At any rate, it is rather late in the day, on the

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *L'animal que donc je suis* (Paris: Galile, 2006), pp.82, 107.

second occasion, that Derrida finally spells out why he added this ‘done’: it was, he says, designed not to commemorate Descartes, but to summon him to court; ‘à faire comparaître Descartes’ (107-8). Such a direct, ad hominem, judicial summons is unusual in Derrida’s writing. But, as it is a question of animals, the *prima facie* case against Descartes may well seem unanswerable. As Derrida says, Descartes did all he could not to be ‘un philosophe animalier’; an ‘animal philosopher’, in the sense that we have animal painters (L’animal 106-7). As everyone knows, the ‘Co-gito’—je pense, donc je suis—categorically excludes animals, as automata lacking the reasonable soul needed to think, and therefore be. For Derrida, this exclusion is crucial because it is the place where the grounding of metaphysics in the human pretention to absolute difference and sovereignty, which so preoccupies him in his later writing, stages itself with exemplary clarity.

For these very reasons, however, there is something odd about the timing of this arraignment, halfway through the book. By this stage, Derrida has already summoned and dismissed Descartes numerous times, often summarily. Once one has, for instance, brought into question Alice’s ‘très cartésien’ proposition that one cannot speak to a cat because it cannot respond (L’animal 24), is the verdict really in doubt? And, for that matter, just by affirming the animal that therefore I am, Derrida’s title can scarcely not be a challenge to Descartes. So, when the summons finally arrives, it is to attend what might appear, were it not a matter of such a

rogue as Descartes, a show trial; an ostentatious form of due process to deliver a verdict already long settled. There is, nevertheless, Derrida insists, a serious, perhaps even a methodological, point to this delay. The first time ‘donc’ is trailed, some thirty or forty pages before the arraignment, it is expressly as a path we will have to go down more than once; as something that must take its time: ‘cette démarche devrait être suivie’ (L’animal 82). Of course, my manner of proceeding (démarche) should always be steady and thorough (suivie) when on the trail of a big beast; none more than ‘l’animal que donc je suis’, the animal that therefore I follow. Here Derrida practises a slight gap or swerve in the fabric of ‘je suis’, between the verbs être and suivre, being and following; or, as he later glosses it, between the immobility of being, and the ‘breathless hunt’ with which we must trail an animal or a question (L’animal 112). This écart in ‘je suis’ also brings us back to ‘donc’, and reminds us why we are on its trail. For it is precisely ‘donc’, and its haste to conclude, that falls between the two senses of ‘je suis’.

This is also why the key evidence in the arraignment is expressly not one of the famous instances of the Cogito, but a less well-known letter of 1638 on the animal-machine. The letter, Derrida suggests, ‘resonates’ more with this ‘donc’. Well may ‘donc’ resonate, for it does not figure, literally, in the letter. What Derrida’s analyses do, nonetheless, show is that Descartes’s judgement of unthinking animal ‘reaction’ as categorically unequal to human ‘response’, does not rest on the sup-

posed testimony (*témoignage*) of the senses or understanding to which the letter appeals, but rather predetermines that testimony. ‘*Donc*’, thus, ‘resonates’ in the silence of a question begged, or a judgement concluded in advance and never in doubt; a judgement that is ‘*à la fois une proposition judicative et un verdict*’ (‘*L’animal*’ 117-18).

What Descartes is thus guilty of is a sort of summary justice towards animals. The case may seem quite damning. The verdict, however, potentially rebounds on the very process that delivers it. It is not just that the decision to subpoena Descartes is, as I have already suggested, unusually forceful. The ostentatious delay in staging the trial may imply, as much as patient and scrupulous inquiry, a certain assurance that inquiry will get there in the end. We may, indeed, be at the very point, which Derrida evokes in the first volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, where the writing strategies called upon to perform a ‘*déconstruction lente et différenciée*’—one that would avoid precipitate judgement and give itself time to take stock of what happens (*ce qui arrive*) along the way—threaten to collapse into their opposite. For when I say (deploying the full cunning of a verse of La Fontaine) I will show presently that the reason of the stronger is always better, the demonstration is always already made, insofar as ‘*le fait même de différer, de m’autoriser à différer*’ already evinces ‘*la raison du plus fort*’ (*Bête I 20*, 113-17). The theme of judicial violence is thus closely related to a certain professorial vio-

lence. Or, perhaps, a magisterial violence: a mastery to which magister and magistrate alike are prone. It is a violence, what is more, from which deconstruction is not necessarily exempt; least of all when it makes a frontal attack on mastery.

Should we, then, read Derrida's arraignment of Descartes straight, as a show of force? Does the summary justice of the accused justify the summary justice of the process? The ambient view of Descartes might, as I have suggested, allow the problem to pass without notice. But such an exemption would remain an oddly un-Derridean move. In any case, another moment of summary justice in *L'animal* might give us pause. Just before 'donc' is trailed for the first time, Derrida invokes the hoary topos of Descartes as the 'père présumé de la philosophie française' (*L'animal* 81). The mastery at stake here, however, is not so much that of the father as that of the sons. Derrida mischievously aligns Descartes's paternity with that of the mythical primal father whose sacrifice institutes equality amongst brothers. Insofar as Kant, Heidegger, Levinas, and Lacan found their systems on a rejection—implicit or explicit, summary or thorough—of the Cogito, they effect a ritual sacrifice of Descartes. But their fate is to become 're-pères' of 'une topologie générale' that places them in a certain relation to the animal and the world. Their ambition was (presumably) to become landmarks or milestones (repères) in a steadily-unfolding line of philosophical development. But the hyphen in 're-pères' spoils the line, making them repeats of the father, so that even their thoughts 'ap-

paremment les moins cartésiennes' may be in 'la filiation du cogito cartésien'. Summoning the father only to dismiss him is thus a way of preserving his spirit. Derrida suggests that this kinship occurs 'irresistibly', and often in the manner of 'une dénégation symptomatique' (L'animal, 81). What is irresistible and symptomatic may only be the acting-out that is disavowal's self-punishment. But it may also be the urge to disavow in the first place. If the latter is true, it may follow that leaving the vicious circle of 'la filiation du cogito cartésien' is no easy matter; perhaps strictly impossible.

This is scarcely a problem that takes Derrida by surprise in L'animal que donc je suis, for he broaches it in one of his earliest published essays. In 'Cogito et histoire de la folie', Derrida suggests that this movement of disavowal and repetition constitutes nothing less than the historicity of philosophy. The Cogito is exemplary of this, and inescapable, because it not only provides, as a proposition, a site of contestation, but also describes, through the narrative that frames it—the story of descent into hyperbolic negation, followed by ascent towards a new certainty—the process of contestation, as well the cycle of repetition that follows. Or, as Derrida says, the Cogito and all it symbolises 'se disent, se rassurent et décroient, s'oublient nécessairement jusqu'à leur réactivation, leur réveil dans un autre dire de l'excès qui sera aussi plus tard une autre déchéance et une autre crise' ('Cogito', 94). This symbolic dimension is what allows the Cogito to continue to

function as an origin in a way that defies chronology; which emerges, indeed, from the failure of a certain historicism. What the sons seize upon in Descartes-the-father is the chance of trapping an otherwise intractable conceptual circle in a determinate historical moment, so that they can project themselves hopefully into a new line of philosophical development; only to fail; and so to set up the challenge for the next 're-père'.

If striving to leave the circle is only a way back into it, is there any chance of escape? Derrida, indeed, suggests not flight, but a move in quite the opposite direction, further into the Cogito. The problem is that we do not understand Descartes's 'audace folle', his mad daring, because we are too reassured, too well-versed in Descartes: 'trop rassurés, trop rompus à son schéma'. This is partly to do with the passage of time: it was otherwise for Descartes's contemporaries. But what we forget is that Descartes's demonstration takes us back to a point prior to any distinction between madness and reason ('Cogito' 86). This 'hyperbolic point' is not the only part of 'what is known as the Cartesian Cogito'. Descartes has no sooner reached it than he 'seeks to reassure himself' in God. And it is not, in any case, something one could hang on to: just 'reflecting' and 'communicating', and so 'temporalising' it, necessarily involves reason, and so leads onto the 'sure' path of method over 'terre ferme'. This 'temporalisation' is undoubtedly part of what is known as the Cogito. But, Derrida insists, the Cogito is not itself, 'ne vaut lui-

même’, except as the moment of intuition in which thought is attentive to itself (‘Cogito’ 89-90). This moment is not yet anything like a subject that could think about, decide, or effect anything; not even the step that would take it beyond itself. This step into time and onto ground thus requires a leap, underwritten by the assurance of God. Equally, the demonstration requires this leap, without which the Cogito would remain forever stranded, apart from everything. Nevertheless, what constitutes Descartes’s audacity, and what Derrida values, is this hyperbolic point outside time, far from solid ground; an abyss, a place of pure *différance*, a no-place.

The immediate point of this reading, of course, is to refute Foucault’s reading of the Cogito as the grounding for a thoroughly confident, effective, and self-affirming reason that marks an epoch in his history of madness. Eliding the madness of the hyperbolic moment in favour of its sequel, Foucault is too sure of Descartes’s assurance, and the consequence is that his own schema is rather too assured. It is worth remembering at this point what Hassan Melehy calls the ‘Oedipal overtones’ of the essay (Melehy 38); that ‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’ announces itself expressly, albeit with great care and delicacy, as a son’s reckoning not just with the father of French philosophy, but with Derrida’s erstwhile teacher, Foucault, who was moreover present in the audience (‘Cogito’ 51-2). But one should also add that this radical, negative Descartes may serve as a corrective for the as-

assurance of Derrida's 're-pères' more generally. In 'Cogito et histoire de la folie' itself, Husserl is accused of coming to rest more and more securely on the theme of presence, in 'l'assurance profonde du sens en sa certitude' ('Cogito' 93). And in *L'animal*, when Derrida praises the refusal to determine the self as 'man' or even 'reasonable animal' in the second Meditation, as a break with tradition 'dont on ne crédite pas assez souvent Descartes', it is to reprove Heidegger (*L'animal* 101-2). Of course, Heidegger's relation to the animal is ultimately pronounced 'profondément cartésien' (*L'animal* 201). And it may seem that this verdict and the momentary commemoration of an uncredited Descartes are out of step with each other. But there is a sense to this, if one accepts that this negative Descartes—uncredited, forgotten by the sons—stands apart from 'la filiation du cogito cartésien'. One might leave it at that, and simply think of this 'Descartes' as a typically deconstructive invention of Derrida; the tactical deployment of a negative moment that spoils the line. But this would be to overlook another lineage; one, indeed, that I am guilty of passing over at the very start of my analysis; albeit with the slender justification that Derrida himself passes it over. We must, thus, retrace our steps to that first, thunderous 'donc' with which Derrida stages his summons of Descartes in *L'animal que donc je suis*.

A Second Hearing

Just before the summons, Derrida fleetingly suggests that the ‘donc’ of his title could have commemorated ‘l’Igitur de Mallarmé’ (L’animal 107). It seems, then, that ‘donc’ may differ, depending on which Latin synonym it translates; and that this ‘igitur’ would have been the more pleasant option, passed over with some regret in favour of the more urgent matter of prosecuting Descartes’s ‘ergo’. We may, therefore, conclude that commemorating Mallarmé would have been a very different matter from arraigning Descartes. And a first glance at ‘La double séance’ may seem to confirm this, insofar as Descartes is listed, along with Plato and Hegel, as a way-station in the tradition with which Mallarmé’s writing finally breaks. Mallarmé, Derrida suggests, was first to produce an idealism whose ‘idea’ was not determined as ‘présence de l’étant’, the presence of an existent thing (‘La double séance’ 221).¹⁰ Derrida underlines this difference throughout the essay by distinguishing Mallarmé’s writing from the Platonic-Hegelian, or from what passes from Plato to Hegel, or what remains in ‘l’orbite de Platon ou de Hegel’ (‘La double séance’ 235, 261, 280, 317). After the first mention, Descartes does not appear by name, but we may readily infer that his name is understood, subsumed into the itinerary.

But is it possible that Descartes’s name has not so much disappeared as disseminated? One sign of this might be the apparition of a certain gratuitous ‘donc’.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, ‘La double séance’, in *La dissémination*, 199-317, p.221.

After a disseminative fantasia woven out of fragments of Mallarmé, Derrida invites us to hear an infinite phrase, suspended ‘entre SI, OR, DONC, renversant aussi bien son ordre d’Igitur à Un coup de dés’ (‘La double séance’ 297). In the passages cited, ‘SI’ and ‘OR’ are not only visible, but sonorous in the manner of dissemination, as ‘son ordre’ sounds ‘sonore’. By comparison, we have to strain to hear ‘DONC’ in the weak sonorities of ‘conjoncture’, or ‘conjonction’, or ‘conclure’. In point of meaning also, next to the iridescent disseminative mobility of ‘si’ and ‘or’, ‘donc’ is a mere monotone conjunction with a flat-footed inclination to conclude. Indeed, it seems thoroughly counter-disseminative, serving only to class, order, and immobilise. This is certainly the role it plays in some of the passages Derrida cites from Jean-Pierre Richard earlier in the essay (‘La double séance’ 263, 278). Why, then, place ‘donc’ so prominently in the sequence ‘SI, OR, DONC’? And what is the meaning of the reversal of this sequence in Mallarmé’s later work?

The short answer is that ‘donc’ encrypts Igitur. The eponymous protagonist of Mallarmé’s early, unfinished prose fable descends with candle and grimoire into the tombs of his ancestors, mocked by mirrors and echoes, to carry out an obscure ritual, involving the rolling of dice at midnight, seemingly hoping by the chance conjuncture of score and hour to precipitate a moment of decision—a moment in which I might conclude ‘igitur’. One might say, then, that Igitur aims at a conclusion, albeit one that is mocked by the role of chance, and the laughter of tradition;

and ultimately, perhaps, by its failure to conclude itself. The late poem 'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard' is, as Derrida implies, conventionally read as belonging along the same itinerary, and possibly as bringing to completion, after a fashion, the unfinished work. The poem emits two propositions: in its title (itself strung out across the length of the poem), 'a roll of the dice never will never abolish chance'; and in its formal conclusion, 'every thought emits a roll of the dice'. The drama that passes between involves a figure identified as the 'Master', in a shipwreck, poised to throw the dice. A number of traits thus reprise *Igitur*. But the theme of chance has by this time been elaborated into the play of dissemination. That is, Mallarmé has wrought to a fine pitch the syllabic play of OR ('gold', but also the weak disjunction that dictionaries often give as 'but', although in English the 'now' that marks a pause or turn in argument would often be closer to the mark), and SI (conditional 'if', fictional 'as if', intensifying 'so', emphatic affirmation, 'but yes!'; also, the seventh note of the musical scale). And at every point in the drama, and not just at the end of each bathetic arc of shipwreck at the bottom of a page, the pursuit of mastery, of necessity, springs disseminative leaks, and fritters itself away in all directions. DONC can be heard at most twice, and only following the weak sonority noted above: masterfully, in 'cette conjonction suprême avec la probabilité'; and, bathetically, in 'inférieur clapotis quelconque comme pour disperser l'acte vide'. In this fall of 'donc', perhaps, we can see the reversal of which

Derrida speaks, as certainty evaporates into the surrender to chance. In *Un coup de dés*, anything like an affirmative ‘si’ is infused with a conditional, as mysterious and uncertain as the chance according to which ‘NOTHING...WILL TAKE PLACE...BUT THE PLACE / EXCEPT...PERHAPS...A CONSTELLATION’.

One might say, then, that Derrida’s reading of ‘SI, OR, DONC’ serves to mark a progressive chastening and attenuation of the conclusive pretensions of ‘donc’. And yet, even making this argument requires us to strain our ears to hear its echo throughout Mallarmé’s writing. And this very insistence on ‘donc’ works to erode any conclusive difference between it and ‘igitur’; and maybe even to keep in play the ghost of a Cogito. It is tempting, then, to hear in the footnote which concludes ‘La double séance’ with a virtuosos cadenza on the letter ‘i’, the echo of an ‘ergo’.

Enfin le I majuscule, n’est-ce pas le Je anglais, l’ego (l’écho et glace de soi)? Les Mots Anglais: “I, je, Lat. ego; ice, glace;...” (p.925). Hors-texte d’Igitur: ‘écho—ego—plus-je, etc.’ (‘La double séance’ 317)

This short but dense passage draws together three brief sequences—the first, Derrida’s own gloss; the second, the entry for ‘I’ from Mallarmé’s curious English primer, *Les Mots Anglais* (1877); and the third, a manuscript doodle cited earlier, and framed with Jean-Pierre Richard’s suggestion that we might read it as an ‘hors-texte’ of Igitur’ (‘La double séance’ 307). We may draw these sequences into a sort of array, thus:

l'ego (l'écho et glace de soi)

I, je, Lat. ego; ice, glace;...

écho—ego—plus-je, etc.

Disposed thus, each line gestures towards the form of definition, and the whole towards something like a syllogism. But, in the sheer excess of equivalence—with all these echoes and mirrors of echoes and mirrors—the machinery of equation gets, so to speak, carried away with itself. So the 'glace' of the primer—whose ostensible function is to translate the English 'ice', itself ostensibly only there to echo the pronunciation of 'I'—not only echoes the 'glace de soi' of Derrida's gloss, but mirrors its function, standing opposite 'I'. The whole line might (with the exception of 'Lat.' for Latin) read 'I, I, I, I, I'; with the sole stricture that each affirmation would already be the simulacrum of itself, and the whole emptied of the transformational possibility of exchange (i.e. definition) by the flatness of tautology. (Or, as the first line of the following paragraph says: 'Le I (majuscule) dissémine d'avance l'unité de sens'.) Similarly, the 'echo' at the centre of Derrida's gloss echoes the 'ego' at the centre of the two latter sequences, pointing to the oddity and vulnerability of that position which, in an equation, belongs not to the thing itself, nor even to its simulacrum, but to the sign of equivalence; i.e. '='. Or, in a syllogism, 'ergo'. Particularly in the case of an 'hors-texte'—strictly, an unnumbered supplementary illustration intercalated in an already-bound text—of 'igitur',

might we not, then, hear in ‘ego’ an echo of ‘ergo’? Illustrating, thus, Igitur, the ego is an echo, therefore plus-I.

Does this decryption of a strange—tautologous, supplementary—Cogito in Igitur seem a step too far? There are circumstantial reasons for thinking it is nothing of the sort. As Derrida must know, though he does not say, *Le Discours de la méthode* was of profound importance for Mallarmé in his emergence from a lengthy crisis, or ‘absence cataléptique’, of which Igitur was the most notable fruit. Numerous letters from the late 1860s attest to this, and to the work that immediately sprang from it: ‘Retrouvant en face d’un livre toute ma pensée, je m’étais initié à des études (de linguistique), mon refuge au cas échéant’.¹¹ The remains of these linguistic studies, published in *Divagations* under the title ‘Notes sur le langage’, elaborate on a concept of ‘fiction’ mentioned elsewhere in the letters, and expressly derived from his reading of the *Discours*:

Le langage lui [i.e. to Descartes] est apparu l’instrument de la fiction: il suivra la méthode du Langage. (la déterminer) Le langage se réfléchissant.

Enfin la fiction lui semble être le procédé même de l’esprit humain—c’est elle qui met en jeu toute méthode, et l’homme est réduit à la volonté.¹²

This Descartes—one who embraces the reflexive return of language on itself, this fiction which brings into question (met en jeu) even as it stakes (met en jeu) any

¹¹ A Henri Cazalis, 31 December 1869, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p.749; see also pp.739-40.

¹² Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Notes sur le langage’, in *Igitur-Divagations-Un coup de dés* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), pp.66-67.

method—is doubtless heterodox. But for Mallarmé the fault lies with tradition: ‘Nous n’avons pas compris Descartes’ (‘Notes’ 67).

Derrida must, at the very least, have read the ‘Notes’, because he rips an aphoristic citation from them for ‘La double séance’: ‘Toute méthode est une fiction’. Ostensibly this phrase serves to underscore dissemination’s difference from method: ‘Pas de méthode pour elle: aucun chemin ne revient en cercle vers un premier pas’ (‘La double séance’ 303).¹³ Dissemination, in other words, does not share method’s assurance in a true and sure path that would pre-exist and lie outside a discrete, whole subject; that would not be its fiction and echo. But, as Derrida says, ‘cela n’exclut pas une certaine marche à suivre’. This is no more than a literal reading of the preceding proposition, for a ‘pas de méthode’ is also a ‘step of method’. Doubtless this step does not share Descartes’s confidence that he will find what he calls ‘le sentier [...] pour aller plus droit’, or learn to ‘voir clair en mes actions, et marcher avec assurance en cette vie’.¹⁴ It may, on the other hand, resemble the more faltering steps Descartes is obliged to take in the meantime, as he advances slowly and with circumspection, ‘comme un homme qui marche seul et dans les ténèbres’ (Discours 92). Derrida invites us, then, to see dissemination not as the opposite of method, but more equivocally as a sort of not-method; one that,

¹³ On the circularity of method see also Jacques Derrida, ‘Hors livre’, in *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 9-67, p.42-45.

¹⁴ René Descartes, *Œuvres complètes Vol.III, Discours de la méthode et essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), pp.91, 87.

accepting its radical exposure to ‘la mise en jeu’—as something that, far from befalling the subject, constitutes it—must renounce the promise of assurance.

Curiously enough, however, it seems that even ‘assurance’ persists; albeit, as a fiction, less assured. Following Mallarmé, Derrida says, literature is ‘à la fois assurée et menacée de ne reposer que sur elle-même, en l’air, toute seule, à l’écart de l’être “et, si l’on veut, seule, à l’exception de tout”’.¹⁵ In this unplaceable place that is suspended in mid-air, alone and beside itself (‘à l’écart de l’être’), assurance and risk are part of the same package. The next sentence, which is also the start of a new paragraph, temporalises this topic into a rhythm of fall and return: ‘Rythme, cadence inclinée, déclinaison, décadence, chute et retour.’ If this sounds like the Cogito and its sequel in ‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’, it is because that is precisely what it is. Only it seems Mallarmé has incorporated the whole drama into his writing, without the alibi of a stunt double to take the fall for him. To be ‘à l’écart de l’être’ is to be elsewhere in the internal displacements of writing, which are only ever elsewhere, but lack the assurance of an elsewhere. In the gap between Derrida’s paragraphs—between the lonely, immobile, but self-displacing place of difference, and the step into time and sequential movement—an invisible ‘donc’ thunders in silence. Or perhaps it does not quite thunder. For this is a ‘donc’ stripped of all its confidence, reduced to the purely formal necessity of decision whenever

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, ‘La double séance’, in *La dissémination*, 199-317, p.312.

anything is put into play; whenever the dice are rolled. This is what it means to be ‘réduit à la volonté’.

Des écarts

By now, the importance of Mallarmé’s notions of ‘référence écartée, être à l’écart, ou hymen’ (‘La double séance’ 273) for Derrida’s writing should be apparent. Wherever it is a question of remaining apart, being in two places at once, swerving the circle of metaphysics, or avoiding either simply affirming or rejecting method, we find des écarts, and a writing that wagers on swerves, dodges, and gaps. I return then, to the question I raised at the outset: might we not hear the name Descartes disseminated in all these ‘écarts’? The word recurs in Derrida’s essay on Mallarmé’s disciple, Paul Valéry. The essay, ‘qual quelle: les sources de Valéry’ is concerned with ‘des écarts et des tours’, with the dodges and swerves, and the tricks and turns through which Valéry has an undivided origin—pure consciousness ‘impuissante à se mettre en scène’—give rise to itself.¹⁶ The idea of a thinking thing unable to utter or communicate itself, yet rescued by a trick, may once more make us think of the drama of the Cogito in the essay ‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’. But this torment (Qual) of the source (Quelle)—one that is close to the concerns of ‘La double séance’—segues into another, seemingly more mundane one: namely Valé-

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, “qual quelle: les sources de Valéry”, in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp.325-63, p.337-8.

ry's 'aversions', those writers from whom, feeling a 'proximité, peut-être trop grande', he turned away. Or, whom he somehow kept at a distance or set aside, as he did Freud and 'l'autre source écartée', Nietzsche (362-3; emphasis mine). To 'écarter' a source, in this context, means neither casual omission nor explicit rejection; nor even exactly repression.¹⁷ Perhaps we might think of Freud and Nietzsche as discarded, as playing cards are écartées; set aside but still in the game somewhere.

We can glean one manner of doing this from Freud's belated justification—in the 1925 essay 'Selbstdarstellung'—for his avoidance of reading Nietzsche, which Derrida cites in the peroration of his essay: 'je tenais ainsi moins à la priorité qu'à rester libre de toute prévention'; or, in the German, which Derrida quotes in full, 'an der Priorität lag mir ja weniger als an der Erhaltung meiner Unbefangenheit'. In English we might render this: so, getting there first mattered less to me than getting there on my own terms, unprejudiced and un beholden. Derrida invites us to admire 'le tour malin d'un certain igitur (ja)' which, he remarks, suffices to make psychoanalysis probable from the fact of its own self-presentation (Selbstdarstellung). The 'cunning twist' of this unassuming little word 'ja' (so, thus, donc etc.) thus lies in its casual insinuation of reasonableness in what might otherwise seem an outrageous claim, a self-serving tautology. The trick of this igi-

¹⁷ In passing, reference to 'un crépuscule des demi-dieux' ('Une vue de Descartes' 782), and 'Nietzsche', in person, as a signpost for philosophy's new career as a literary genre (Cartesius redivivus 50) are enough to question how thoroughly Valéry set aside this source.

tur is to pass off force as reason.

But Derrida's 'igitur' performs a similar trick, encrypting 'donec' and holding in reserve, or 'écartée', another 'source of Valéry'. This is not to say that Valéry's lifelong engagement with Descartes is occluded or denied throughout 'qual quelle'. In fact Derrida expressly acknowledges it, and quotes Valéry musing what will become of philosophers once they realise that they are menaced on two fronts, by physics and linguistics: 'Que devient: Je pense, et que devient: Je suis?' ('qual quelle', 349).¹⁸ This line of attack may seem hostile to Descartes, reducing the Cogito to an empty phrase. But, as Derrida goes on to underline, for Valéry the Cogito was an empty phrase from the point of view of truth or meaning, but of enormous value as 'un coup de force', providing a 'mise en scène' powerful enough to do without truth. The role of truth in this theatre, Derrida goes on, is as a trap for epigones: 'comme un piège où des générations de fétichistes serviles viendront se laisser prendre à reconnaître du même coup la loi du maître, du moi René Descartes' ('qual quelle' 351). Can we, Derrida asks, conclude that Descartes thus succeeds—through what is 'inimitable' in his text, 'timbre and style'—in reinstating a sure source that had been only adventitiously 'écartée par le jeu de la signification'? Not at all: such is 'le risque de la mise en jeu' ('qual quelle' 351-52).

Of course, this passage specifically concerns Valéry's reading of Descartes;

¹⁸ Paul Valéry, 'Léonard et les philosophes' (1929), in *Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957; repr. 1986), p.125. Valéry's reference to 'l'usure de leur premiers sens' in the discussion that follows is intriguing.

which, Derrida says, would seem at least uneven (*inégale*) to a historian of philosophy. So it would be possible to wonder in what sense we are dealing with ‘Descartes’. Derrida affects not to care—‘Nous nous en inquièterons peu’ (‘qual quelle’ 350).¹⁹ And so he holds Descartes ‘à l’écart’, at a distance it is perhaps not easy to determine. But this Valerian Descartes, like the Mallarmean one, bears a family resemblance to Derrida’s Descartes more generally. It may, for one thing explain why Derrida glosses ‘donc’, in the two passages of *L’animal* already discussed, as ‘telle conjonction à valeur plus ou moins syllogistique ou explétive’ (82, 107; emphasis mine) before, at the moment of the arraignment, dropping ‘syllogistic’ to leave only ‘expletive’ (108). In the speech of 1937 published as ‘Descartes’, Valéry says trenchantly, there is no syllogism in the Cogito, just before he affirms that there is a ‘coup de force’.²⁰ The notebooks assembled around the same time, and published in 1986 as *Cartesius redivivus*, expand on this. Valéry first posits the Cogito as a syllogism (23), but goes on to declare it as empty as one could wish (25); and then to demonstrate this emptiness qua tautology: ‘je rend suis inutile’ (26). As for ‘donc’, perhaps ‘the most mysterious of the 4 words’, it ‘designates not a consequence, but a sort of equivalence [égalité]’ (28). In the ‘systematic treatment’ of the Cogito that follows, the triple bar that stands between all Valéry’s

¹⁹ The standard English translation of this as ‘We will concern ourselves with this for a while’ seems to me to entirely misconstrue ‘peu’. See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* trans. by Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p.294.

²⁰ Paul Valéry, *Variété III, IV et V* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002; repr. 2010), p.503.

permutations on ‘je pense’ and ‘je suis’, stresses the commutative nature of each equivalence. This is the essence of the tautology; that any term can substitute any other, in any direction, indifferently. The mystery of ‘donc’ is thus a little like the mystery of money or the Holy Ghost: it hovers over the whole game as the medium of tautology. As the otiose sign of a generalised redundancy, this ‘donc’ is thus precisely what, in French grammar, one would call ‘expletive’.

And if this reading seems ‘*inégal*’—whether this means irregular in itself, or unequal to the picture painted by ‘historians of philosophy’—Valéry did more than ‘interpret this in advance’ (‘*qual quelle*’ 350). Indeed, in ‘*Fragment d’un Descartes*’ (1925), Valéry says quite simply that Descartes was not a philosopher.²¹ Or, as he says in ‘*Une vue de Descartes*’ (1941) is perhaps a little more nuanced. Descartes has his system, but the system is not Descartes himself, ‘*n’est Descartes même*’. A system can only ‘*vieillir comme vieillit une carte géographique*’; age as a geographical map ages. But what matters to Valéry, and what makes the *Discours* ‘*le texte fondamental*’, is his manner of expressing experiences, ambitions, and practical reservations in the same voice, ‘*indistinctement*’; without distinction.²² Or, as he says in *Cartesius redivivus*, it is the ‘*roman des aventures*’ that excites us (*Cartesius redivivus* 43). This is why Descartes is the hero of *Cartesius redivivus*,

²¹ Paul Valéry, ‘*Fragment d’un Descartes*’, in *Variété I et II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p.148. First published in *NRF* 1 April 1925, 825-40.

²² Paul Valéry, ‘*Une vue de Descartes*’, in *Variété III, IV et V* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002; repr. 2010), pp.750-51. First published in *Les pages immortelles de Descartes, choisies et expliquées par Paul Valéry* (Paris: Corrêa, 1941).

the vehicle or inspiration for its project; that philosophy must stop trying to follow science—stop being its ancilla, or maidservant—and realise itself in a ‘new career’, as a ‘poetic genre’ (Cartesius 50, 45). Descartes matters because, once the map of philosophical system has perished, a novel or romance remains.

Romans des cartes

Then again, maybe it is not quite a matter of discarding the map. Insofar as it was always a ‘manifestation of his essential ambition and of his way of satisfying it’ (‘Une vue’ 750), we still have to read through the map of system, and perhaps what we find is not so much a remainder of romance as a certain roman des cartes. This, at any rate, is what Derrida seems to suggest in his paper of 1984, ‘Les romans de Descartes ou l’économie des mots’.²³ In a letter to Mersenne, Descartes rejects a project for a universal language, proposed by a certain Hardy, as fit to be proposed only in ‘le pays des romans’ (Les romans’ 324). After a winding analysis—setting Descartes’s advice, that we should read the *Principes* a first time cursorily, as we would read a romance, alongside his seemingly contradictory dismissal of the ‘extravagances des paladins de nos romans’ (Discours 85)—Derrida arrives back at ‘le pays des romans’, quoted in full under the rubric ‘Conclusion, donc:’. The conclusion that Derrida draws is that the land of romance has become the land of good

²³ Jacques Derrida, *Du droit à la philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990), 311-41.

science: ‘La carte de ce pays romanesque aurait quelque analogie, si même elle ne se confondait pas avec la carte de la rationalité méthodologique, celle de l’ordre et du chemin devenu méthode’ (‘Les romans’ 339-40). Derrida then sets to work on the two possible modes of universal language posited by Descartes: one absolutely natural, the other absolutely artificial. What these have in common is that they would alike render method redundant. It is thus between the two, in the failure of each, that method becomes an imperative, or a task: ‘Entre les deux, il y a la méthode à construire et il y a l’histoire’ (‘Les romans’ 341). It is, one might conclude, not only for Descartes that there is method thus negatively, in the sense of something that it remains to construct; that only dreams that it follows the map of a road already ‘devenu méthode’; and that follows thus the chart of a romantic projection.

I do not have the space here, in this essay, to trace all the windings of the ‘carte’ (as of the trace and the écart) in the seminars on *The Beast and the Sovereign*, through ‘l’angoisse du chemin et de la cartographie à frayer’, in this world which is an island ‘dont nous ne connaissons pas la carte’ (*Bête II* 95, 101).²⁴ Suffice it to say that Heidegger’s desire to escape the circle of metaphysics by proceeding ‘pas comme Descartes’—posing the question of the way or road, but not as ‘procédé calculable’ (*Bête II* 64-65)—leads him in Descartes’s footsteps. This

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *La Bête et le souverain II* (Paris: Gelilée,), p.64.

may be because he is ‘a philosopher of wandering who does not want to wander’ (Bête II 67-8). But, more fundamentally, it is because there is no way out (issue) of this ‘paysage robinsonnien’ (Bête II 71). Robinson Crusoe seems to function throughout this seminar as a sort of alternative to the Cartesian; he is the exemplum of one who is constantly having to decide on the best road because ‘il n’a pas de carte’ (Bête II, p.81). But as their names, adjectives and functions mingle promiscuously (Bête II 64, 89), one might as well say their difference marks an écart in a singular topos, making it impossible to decide which is really the simulacrum of the other. And this game of masks is one way of tracing how Derrida marks his own difference; which cannot, for reasons we have already discussed, simply amount to discarding Descartes as Heidegger does.

Le Maître hors d’anciens calculs

Derrida’s own career may be read as one long attempt to place himself, as one might say in French, ‘hors de ses repères’. But none of his strategies for losing himself ever go without ‘re-pères’. From the very start, it seems. Tantalisingly, one of Derrida’s earliest recorded errances concerns his treatment of Descartes in his agrégation examination of 1955. In a letter reproduced by Benoît Peeters, Maurice Gandillac relays the view of his colleagues, that Derrida ‘seemed to get Des-

cartes completely wrong'.²⁵ In what precise manner, one wonders, did the young Derrida's Descartes err? At any rate, the programmatic imperative to err, and to err ever better, whose itinerary and stages are retrospectively set out in 'Ponctuations: le temps de la thèse', sometimes takes on Cartesian tonalities. Thus Derrida records his reply to Jean Hyppolite's remonstrance, in 1966, that he did not see where he was going: 'Si je voyais clairement, et d'avance, où je vais, je crois bien que je ne ferais pas un pas de plus pour m'y rendre'.²⁶ This desire to not see 'clearly and in advance' is Descartes minus the assurance of method as the one true path; but not minus all assurance. As he sets out to leave the common highway (s'écarter du chemin commun), Derrida may not hope, as Descartes says he does, to find 'le sentier qu'il faut prendre pour aller plus droit'; but neither, surely, does he hope to be one of those who remain 'égarés toute leur vie' (Discours 91). This latter fate must, to be sure, be part of the mise en jeu, and herein lies the 'angoisse [...] de la cartographie à frayer'. But he surely does not set out without a certain step. This may not be quite the same step as 'le cavalier Descartes "qui partit d'un si bon pas"' (Du droit 294).²⁷ Then again, is there not already something a little cavalier in the claim to be able to lose oneself in the first place; to be able to dispense with setting out 'la carte, le parcours et les étapes' in advance (Bête II 151-52)? Maybe this is why Derrida, in the Beast and the Sovereign, makes such a point of setting out 'the

²⁵ Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography* trans. by Andrew Brown (London: Polity, 2013)

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, 'Ponctuations: le temps de la thèse', in *Du droit à la philosophie*, p.442.

²⁷ The quotation, unattributed, is from Charles Péguy.

map, the route and the stages' of his seminars, and even invoking the methodological reasons and precautions (Bête II 217, 231) which ensure that the phantasm 'sleepwalks' in his approach (Bête II 244).²⁸

What is at stake here is not just the mastery claimed by method and its stupidity, but also the mastery entailed by the claim or aspiration to escape or undo mastery. Perhaps the most tense moments of the seminars on *The Beast* and the *Sovereign* lie in those brief but incandescent pages denouncing Giorgio Agamben's mania for declaring himself the first to reveal who first thought such and such (Bête I 134-39), and his reliance on a *zoê/bios* opposition that was never 'sincère et assuré' as he claims (Bête I 420). These moments are, as I say, tense because, no matter how compelling one finds them—and I, for my part, am entirely convinced—they evince a polemical and legislative force that amounts in itself to a rather unguarded act of mastery. It is hard, indeed, not to see Derrida's intervention as an act of gatekeeping, or even gamekeeping, guarding the animots of deconstruction. Indeed, it would be hard to determine whether this is a just retort to Agamben's insinuation, in *Homo sacer*, that deconstruction risks degenerating into a gatekeeper, or an instance of the danger.²⁹ Whatever the case may be, the risk of the posture of mastery is, it seems, greatest where mastery itself is frontally at-

²⁸ Sleepwalking, from 'Force et signification' through *Eperons*, is the very mark of the unthinking unfolding of a programme. But in the late seminars, and indeed in *Fichus*, Derrida starts to assume the charge in the first person: 'Je somnambule'.

²⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995/2005), p.63.

tacked.

This brings us back to the servile fetishists of the ‘maître [...] moi René Descartes’. What is at stake here is a certain inscrutability. To Valéry’s idea that philosophy is only written when it parts from the truth that speaks to say ‘me’ as close as possible to the source, Derrida remarks: ‘De ce propos comme de son simulacre, Descartes ici est exemplaire’ (‘qual quelle’ 350; emphasis mine). Where Descartes is concerned it is not a question of distinguishing between fully serious proposition and simulacrum; the hesitation is what is operative. For the same reason, it does not serve to know whether Descartes was the dupe or the master of his own ruse, or whether the traditional reading of the Cogito was his own: ‘sait-on jamais’, says Derrida in *L’animal* (*L’animal* 188). You never know; and that is how it should be. This is the *écart* in ‘Descartes’, and we discard it at our peril, whether by proclaiming or denouncing the Cogito and its assurance. Either way the only prize is a humourless and always premature pose of mastery. Astonishingly, it seems that, more even than all the other writers Sarah Kofman calls Derrida’s ‘*incontournables*’—those he said he could not simply get around (*Écarts* 153)—Descartes may yet prove the most obstinate.

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