

Derrida somnambule

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Miss you by Zuzana Ridzonova.

stephen thomson

DERRIDA SOMNAMBULE

[...] pour que le réveil ne soit pas une ruse du rêve. C'est-à-dire encore de la raison.¹

“Je rêve. Je somnambule,” says Jacques Derrida as he accepts the Adorno Prize in Frankfurt on 22 September 2001 (*Fichus* 22). It is a striking phrase, this “I am sleepwalking,” but also one that strikes an idiomatically Derridean note. The verb “somnambuler” (a neologism: it does not appear in *Littré*), conjugated in the first-person present tense, entails a “je somnambule” or “sleepwalking I”; an “I” that can, with undecidable lucidity, proclaim

its own sleep, in its sleep. It seems a classic Derridean strategy for troubling the sovereignty of the philosophical “je suis” and the metaphysics of presence; such that, as Mahité Breton writes, “categories of responsibility, intention, will and mastery are destabilised” (207). Indeed, it might be tempting to see the very concept of sleepwalking as incipiently deconstructive; as a topos in which deconstruction is already at work. Thus, Simon Morgan Wortham, having shown how sleepwalking marks an excess in the dialectic of sleep and waking in Kant and Hegel, sums up: “in the very attempt to

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rationalize sleep [...] a certain supplement is unleashed – call it somnambulance, or some other name” (Wortham 38). Somnambulance would thus be a name for a deconstructive quasi-concept, drawing on a spontaneous propensity of the informal philosopheme “somnambulism” to do the work of deconstruction. It may seem, thus, that sleepwalking was always on the side of deconstruction, and that Derrida’s “je somnambule” was something deconstruction had always been ready to utter.

The curious thing, however, is that Derrida’s own deployment of the lexicon of sleepwalking does not bear this out; or at least it does not do so until rather late in the day. Until around 1999, sleepwalking in Derrida was always in the third person: emphatically the sleepwalking of the other, it was an accusation, and even a little polemical. It named the premature certainty and complacency of method; its assurance that nothing unforeseen by the programme is worth seeing. Sleepwalking was, as such, a paradoxical form of vigilance, but nothing like the deconstructive vigilance that, as Peggy Kamuf has argued, tends an ear towards the other, on the lookout for whatever interrupts the standard-issue vigilance that consists of a “deciphering too certain of meaning” (12). Far from it, sleepwalking *was* this complacency in method, this systematic failure to listen to discrepancy. As such, it was other, but not that as-yet undetermined other to which deconstruction must listen carefully for traces of errancy. It was (and this is the polemical twist) positioned as the other *of* deconstruction, to which it could point, and from which it could mark its distinction with unusual clarity.

Curiously, then, Wortham’s and Breton’s reading of “somnambulism” is in many ways more obviously consonant with deconstruction than Derrida’s own. Neither critic notes the oddity of this situation, not least because neither traces the idea of sleepwalking to any Derridean source, or acknowledges that any such source might exist. But then, why should they? After all, sleepwalking is not such an important figure in Derrida’s writing, and it seems evidently a mere embellishment of the language of dream. Breton, indeed, only

discusses the “je somnambule” briefly, in passing, as a variant on the “je rêve” that guides her enquiry. And it is quite possible, and coherent, as the example of Jean-Philippe Deranty shows, to comment lucidly and perceptively on dream and dreaming in *Fichus* without mentioning sleepwalking at all. Why, then, dwell on a tiny rhetorical blip in this important topic?

A first reason would be that it appears Derrida himself came to do so. From *La contre-allée* (1999), there is a subtle, but decisive, change of direction, or involution, that continues through late texts such as *Genèses, généalogies, genres et le génie* (2003), *Fichus* (2001/2002), and the seminars on the beast and the sovereign (December 2001–March 2003). There, sleepwalking remains other, but it is an other that intimately regards deconstruction; is in some manner the responsibility of its I; and may even be assumed in the first person. Although unremarked by any explicit gesture of auto-critique, there is a sort of correction implicit in this turn. And as such it may serve as a reminder of something we all theoretically know: that we ought not to view the œuvre, and the work of deconstruction least of all, as the magisterial unfolding of an essence, *even though* we invoke some such essence whenever we verify the later Derrida against the earlier (Naas 20); or whenever we judge a text worthy or unworthy of deconstruction. Deconstruction ought never to be quite equal to itself. This is, after all, the hope or chance of Derrida’s wager with Geoff Bennington in their collaborative *Jacques Derrida* (1991): that J.D. might wriggle free from reduction to the generative matrix of Djef’s “Derridabase” by saying something discrepant. The drama, and indeed the comedy, of this lies in the apprehension that deconstruction, precisely insofar as it opposes totalisation, must itself struggle to avoid totalising. And it is in the force field of this (comic) anxiety – over deconstruction’s possible subsidence into a set of predictable platitudes *about* the event, errancy, and so forth – that sleepwalking makes its turn in *La contre-allée*, from

incipient gesture of mastery (over method) to problem *for* deconstruction.

A couple of other topics that criss-cross this late writing, and whose links with sleepwalking I will trace, also relate to problems of totalising and mastery. Firstly there is the question of the animal, from “L’animal que donc je suis” (1997) to the seminars on the beast and the sovereign where Derrida is concerned, as never before, to put in question the magisterial gestures of his own seminar, even, and especially, in the act of questioning mastery. Then there is the scene of prize-giving that takes centre stage in *Fichus*, where Derrida must say yes to recognition as a master of the critique of mastery, in the name of another. Here the “je somnambule” modulates Derrida’s effort to evade, without ingratitude, countersigning the countersignature of his mastery that the prize risks being, so as to consign his work to the chance, and the grace, of the other and futurity. It is around these topoi, and the intensification of the struggle with mastery that they constitute – one might say, the masterful effort to avoid mastering or being mastered – that the “new” sleepwalking, the one that announces itself in the first person, crystallises. One might see in this the fruit of an act of reflexivity, in the limited sense that reflexion on a rhetoric has led to a reform thereof. Beyond this, however, it is crucial to note that what is at stake is not a self on which one meditates, but rather resignation of the self to an other that must be owned if it is not to act in one’s place, and the nature of the “I” that can write this. The “je somnambule” takes the risk of owning and placing itself in the most exposed position, on the way towards a “you” that is – as we shall see, in the formula “tu est tu” – “silenced.”

third-person somnambulism: the security of a rhetoric

But before this, as I have said, sleepwalking in Derrida was always, until quite late in the day, the sleepwalking of the other, in the third person. More than that, it was usually an

accusation – curt, summary, even a little polemical – levelled at method or programme. Thus, when Derrida tells us that *Littré’s* definition of “suppléer” respects “comme un somnambule” the strange logic of the verb it is because the lexicographer’s very fidelity to their material and methods has prevented them from marking the strangeness of the outcome (“Freud et la scène” 314). Something similar applies to the “légèreté somnambulique” of calling Molly Bloom’s monologue a monologue (Derrida, *Ulysse gramophone* 109). Common-sense reason gives the critic winged feet, but only insofar as they follow the path of least resistance, straight past a question, to the patent, reasonable, yet always premature conclusion. The editors of a selection of Nietzsche’s uncollected fragments which includes the enigmatic scribble, “I have forgotten my umbrella,” fare even worse. Their explanatory note is “a monument of hermeneutic somnambulism of which every word covers with the most insouciant tranquillity an antheap of critical questions” (Derrida, *Éperons* 104). Sleepwalking is thus an insensibility to the questions that teem under the question at hand.

Implicit in this usage is something like the old theory according to which the sleepwalker can only see objects insofar as they correspond to the objects in their dream (see, e.g., Maine de Biran). To the extent that a method or programme has determined its objects and path in advance, it has a propensity to plough on regardless, with total confidence in its own steps, but oblivious to problems or questions that are beyond the scope of its plan, yet which may for all that be encountered or engendered in the going. This somnambulism is not, thus, simply, axiomatically the contrary of vigilance. The two may even go hand in hand, as with the “sleepwalking, vigilant and automatic interpreters” of Aristotle conjured in the “Présentation” of Derrida’s *Politiques de l’amitié* (434; i.e., the back sleeve). There may, thus, be an automatic vigilance or vigilant automatism that thrives in the similarly paradoxical mode of busy sleep. Importantly, the lexicographers, critics, editors, and interpreters

accused of sleepwalking are not thereby accused of laxity or carelessness. On the contrary, their very diligence has led them blithely and efficiently past anything the itinerary had not foreseen. The charge of sleepwalking concerns not a simple lapse of attention, but a particular form, or tempo, of vigilance; one whose investment, and assurance in its advance knowledge of the route, is such as to forestall any possibility of indecision; without which, as Derrida has also suggested, *decision* is strictly impossible (*La bête II* 79).

A corollary of this is that we should be wary of any punctual moment that declares itself the moment of vigilance par excellence, as in the old and widespread European topos of crisis as *the* “moment de réveil” (Derrida, *L’Autre* cap 34–35). To awaken, in this sense, would be to realise at one fell swoop, and *today*, the chance or the challenge to decide (*κρίνεν*) that constitutes the *κρίσις*. But if such a decisive moment concentrates wakefulness, it also monopolises it, thereby consigning all ensuing moments to sleep, and unwittingly assuming the impossible responsibility of watching over them in advance. In this lies the problem of the “*responsibility as irresponsibility*, of morality confounded with juridical calculation, of politics organised into techno-science” (71). All methods and programmes are, by their nature, prone to this somnolence that consists of proceeding as if wakefulness had already been taken care of. Even the best-intentioned initiative in the world can do good only on the condition that we do not fall asleep on the job (55; “à la condition que notre attention ne s’y endorme pas”). A further corollary of this is that there is something somnolent about the very moment of decision itself, insofar as it acts as if it could abolish the need, and the possibility, of any future decision. Thus, it would be “court et sommeillant,” curt and dozy, to respond to pressure to pronounce Nietzsche *either* a proto-Nazi, *or* entirely guiltless of any such thing (Derrida, *Otobiographies* 93). The very posture of jumping to attention and deciding, fully and finally, is already implicated in its future sleep. The whole tendency of this form or tempo of vigilance is thus towards sleep.

This characterisation of a whole tradition of (urgent, decisionistic) vigilance as a busy sleep is of no small importance to deconstruction. It is not just something deconstruction sets out to avoid; in a sense, deconstruction *is* its avoidance. This is why deconstruction must be “slow and differentiated” so as to allow us to take stock of “what happens” along the way, to multiply “attention to differences,” and perhaps “refine the analysis in a restructured field” (Derrida, *La bête I* 113–14, 36). In other words, the new things we notice may require us to redraw the map at any moment, and we must be ready to notice this too. This topic has a couple of curious corollaries. Firstly, the departure from the critical tradition of vigilance demands a hyperbolic inflation of vigilance: deconstructive attentiveness must aim to be impossibly prolonged and differentiated. But, equally, it must also watch over itself so as not to fall into a mere *form* of wakefulness; which is to say, method. For the rhetoric of slow and differentiated attention to the discrepant irruption of the other cannot, insofar as it is a rhetoric, be assured that it too will not fall into a “dogmatic slumber” (155). Deconstruction, if it is to be a thing, must avoid the slide into a guaranteed, prescribed set of moves that the practised deconstructionist can invoke in their sleep, and at which other deconstructionists can be counted on to nod reassuringly. And, just because the vigilance to which it aspires is strictly impossible, the performance of deconstruction must always be haunted by the possibility of its own sleep.

In other words, deconstruction can never be *assured* that it is always more vigilant than the vigilance of method; or that method is always something that sits, at a clear and distinct distance, over there. The problem with the accusation of sleepwalking, however, is that this is precisely what it does say. Whoever points the finger to say “they are asleep” says – immediately, implicitly – “I am awake.” And therein lies the danger. For anyone can say this, at any time, and even in their sleep. From this would spring the sort of polemical bidding war that, as Derrida suggests in *D’un ton*

apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie (1983), characterises the cultural prognostications of postmodernism, and into which deconstruction must not slide (53). The accusation of sleepwalking, however, opens onto precisely this abyss, and it is a potential catastrophe for a vigilance that would be alert to its own sleep. Deconstruction, if it is to be deconstruction, must somehow negotiate this abyss, and avoid coming to rest in a moment of specular self-satisfaction. The curt othering of polemic is, in this regard, a danger for deconstruction; a moment of repose in which it is too clear where things stand.

It would be wrong to suggest that the deployment of sleepwalking in the earlier Derrida simply succumbs to the complacency of polemic, or that there is never anything in the accusation of sleepwalking to unsettle its own assurance. There are also many places that suggest a certain vigilance in sleep, though these do not usually resolve into sleepwalking. In “Force et signification,” Derrida suggests that the “structuralist phenomenon,” as it wanes, “will deserve” to fall into the hands of the historian of ideas, on account of

everything in this phenomenon that is not the question’s transparency for itself, everything that, in the efficacy of a method, is a matter of the infallibility ascribed to sleepwalkers and which was once attributed to the instinct of which it was said that it was all the more sure for being blind. It is not the least dignity of that human science called history to concern by privilege, in human actions and institutions, the immense region of somnambulism, the *almost-everything* that is not pure waking, the sterile and silent acidity of the question itself, the *almost-nothing*. (11)

The polemical moment of the passage is clear enough. The structuralist phenomenon “will deserve” the attentions of history in the sense that it serves it right for sleepwalking. As for the “dignity” of history – what it is worthy of, what *it* deserves – it not only “concerns” but depends upon somnambulism as the shadow-agent of the typical acts that bequeath the

epoch as a congealed structure. This “privilege” over sleepwalking is thus also the precise respect in which history itself is structuralist, and a sleepwalker. So it seems history and structuralism will deserve each other.

But the polemical thrust of such a verdict is a trap, insofar as it acts as if it could *have done* with “structuralism.” For this “having done” is, as Derrida reminds us, the structuralist gesture par excellence, and it is not easily avoided. Indeed, as Derrida also suggests in another essay of the same time, it would be easy to show that “a certain structuralism has always been philosophy’s most spontaneous gesture” (“Genèse et structure” 237). Or, as Derrida goes on to say in “Force et signification,” maybe consciousness just is structuralist consciousness, insofar as it is consciousness of things done, completed (12). So we cannot simply have done with structuralism; nor even with the finite, determinate, historical “structuralist phenomenon.” For in it, Derrida says, we were finally obliged to think structure “in its concept.” And, as we live on its “fecundity,” it is too early to bat away our dream: “il est trop tôt pour fouetter notre rêve.” Rather, we must think, from within the dream and in a manner appropriate to dreams, what it *could* mean: “Il faut songer en lui à ce qu’il *pourrait* signifier” (11). The verb “songer á” serves Derrida well here, spanning a range of senses from musing or daydreaming to more purposeful thinking, and leaving open the question of what sort of thinking we can do *in* the dream (*en lui*). Here, then, Derrida already proposes the hesitation between philosophical rationality and the qualified embrace of dream-thinking for which, as we will see, he would praise Adorno thirty years later.

And yet, crucially, Derrida does not (yet) call this dream-thinking sleepwalking. Rather, that term is still reserved for the merely unthinking devotion to method. At the end of “Force et signification,” Derrida hands on the baton from philosophy to Nietzsche’s *gai saber* (47). But he does not embrace sleepwalking as Nietzsche embraces it in *The Gay Science*, when he awakens into the “consciousness that I am dreaming and that I must go on dreaming lest

I perish – as a somnambulist must go on dreaming lest he fall,” repositioning philosophy as merely a means to “the continuation of the dream” (116). Nor would he ever, any more than he would replace the “abandonment that is today the bad drunkenness of the most nuanced structuralist formalism” with abandonment to the ecstatic lucidity of a putatively *good* drunkenness (46).² Derrida’s “vigilance” would always, until the end, and even when it is implicated in the dream, require us to sober up, to be “dégrisée” (*Fichus* 51). Likewise it would never be a question of replacing one somnambulism – benighted, automatic, mechanical – with another sort that would be inspired, clairvoyant. Indeed, Derrida’s sleepwalking would never cease to be other, even when conjugated in the first person. Only it would radically lose its polemical potential for othering.

Before going on to consider the later turn, it is perhaps worth noting that the polemical potential of the accusation of sleepwalking does not simply wane over time, and is if anything most apparent in its final appearance: that is, in the “légèreté somnambulique” that Derrida attributes to Carl Schmitt in *Politiques de l’amitié* (1994). As Schmitt parlays post-war internment as a Nazi functionary into a specious scene of pseudo-Cartesian meditation,³ and finds salvation in the “Wisdom of the Cell” (1948),⁴ there is absolutely no sense that Derrida finds this anything other than revolting.

Somnambulistic strength and lightness of this progression. Prudence and security [sûreté] of a rhetoric. The prisoner feels his way in the darkness, from one corner of the cell to the other. He risks a step, then another and stops to meditate. (Derrida, *Politiques de l’amitié* 187)

Schmitt, says Derrida, makes as if to face up to his actions, but he never does, and never will. His pantomime of groping in the darkness “risks” nothing because it is choreographed and underwritten by the “security of a rhetoric” as comically and pathetically limited as the scope of the cell. Sleepwalking here is, this one last time, emphatically rejected, expelled

even, as a symptom of bad faith. This is not to say that it will, when it next appears, have changed its face entirely. But the gesture of expulsion will have been, so to speak, expelled, for constituting in itself, so it would appear, “the security of a rhetoric.”

“moi sauf moi”: travelling with ... somnambulism

We can trace this turn to *La contre-allée* (1999).⁵ In the first of his postcards to Catherine Malabou (dated Istanbul, 10 May 1997), worrying over the “Travelling with ...” rubric of the series in which the book will appear, Derrida asks: am I sure I have ever even “travelled with” *me*? With me “alive or awake,” or “anything else but sleepwalking”?

To wake up it is not enough to open one’s eyes. Sleepwalking, moreover, draws me this morning as a seductive figure, she [*elle*], to designate my experience of the trance or transition called “travel.” I see passing, very fast, the silhouette of the sleepwalker [masculine], at the behest of a single dream: to awaken at last, and that [*cela*] will be, perhaps, perhaps not, hence the quaking of my journeys, a nightmare. How can one explain otherwise, otherwise than by that apprehension of “perhaps,” the anguish of a double desire, contradictory and simultaneous: to go back “home” as fast as possible, *but* to put off indefinitely the return? I transport, on my travels, this sole obsession: I can’t wait for it to end, alas! The question, then, and this is what I wanted to get to, will never have been that of “travel” but of “travelling-with.” (Malabou and Derrida 13)

Sleepwalking here starts in the third person, as a spectacle, but one that is becoming the phantasm of an other that is *mine*, that haunts my desire to travel; a dream that may only awaken into a nightmare. Later in this first missive, in the midst of a reminiscence of meeting a sephardic community in Turkey, Derrida casts himself as the “immobile voyeur” who watches himself travelling, as if to figure out the enigma of himself in

the movement [or trip, or displacement: *déplacement*] always “incognito” of a secret that I transport without knowing it. Even when I speak in front of crowds. I feel that I transport (like an infant in the belly, I hear his heart) but I don’t understand it at all, this secret. Abroad perhaps someone will tell me: revelation, bedazzlement, conversion, I fall backwards, I am born, I die in the moment of meeting, at the end of an unknown alleyway, the messiah who will come out of me where he has hidden for so long. (Malabou and Derrida 21)

Travelling, then, as if in the hope that others, strangers, will tell me who I am, what I am for, becomes an ambivalent hunt, in which I am hunter and hunted; as if there were someone I wanted to help to escape from me (*se sauver de moi*) by saving it in me (*en le sauvant en moi*). Indeed, the “most economic formula” for travelling-with would be “Moi sauf moi”: me safe me, or me except for me (23).

The ontological high drama of this is, however, almost systematically – and comically, in the manner of the postcard – undercut by the “perhaps” of the earlier passage, and the comedy of contingency. Hence the confession, embarrassing for a quasi-messianic thinker, that, before every journey, he is terrified something will happen:

I give the impression [*J’ai l’air*] of being for the event, and of elaborating, as they say, a thought of the event, of arrivance, of the *singular* exposure to what is coming. You know the refrain. (Malabou and Derrida 23)

But the joke is not just that the ardent proponent of the event is terrified something will happen. Worse even than the revenge of contingency on the concept is the prescribed platitude of “as they say” and “you know the refrain.” The discourse of the event is already humiliated in itself when it can become just another tune on the conceptual karaoke. And this points to another ambivalence, another counter-alley, that threads its way through the text, linking Derrida’s memories of his father’s travails as a travelling salesman under a paternalistic, patriarchal merchant house –

tasked or stained with the name “Tachet père et fils” – with the pathos of being an internationally renowned philosopher, hawking his wares round the conference circuit, mortified by the adulation as much as the opprobrium. He has, in short, a “mauvaise image” of the whole *business* of his travels, including

the speeches through which one must convince or seduce, this whole “academic culture market” with which I have always got along so poorly [*fait si mauvais ménage*]. (Malabou and Derrida 39–40)

The scare quotes that distance Derrida from the phrase “academic culture market” also implicate him in it. For while they say, as Derrida goes on to say, I am giving in a bit to a code, I don’t entirely believe in what I’m saying (“je cède un peu à un code, je ne crois pas tout à fait à ce que je dis”), what is this giving-in-to-a-code if not a surrender to the market? The point becomes even clearer when he says, rather sarcastically, “la ‘déconstruction,’ en un mot, ce serait une certaine expérience du voyage, n’est-ce pas” (40). It would be hard to render exactly the conditional “serait,” and a “n’est-ce pas” so deadpan it is not even a question (or at least does not rate a question mark). But the force of the phrase is: you all know the one about “deconstruction” being a certain experience of travel, don’t you. It anticipates, in other words, a chummy connivance in the very rhetoric that would announce the experience of the event as exposure to the absolutely other, the absolutely unanticipated. We would, of course, be foolish to think that deconstruction, any more than anything that can be reproduced as a rhetoric, is proof against commodification. But here, at any rate, Derrida tragicomically stages “deconstruction” as a brand that follows him around, and that goes out before him; that haunts him with a “mauvaise image,” and *prevents* everything that deconstruction would be.

This, then, would be deconstruction’s own sleepwalking. This is not to say that it is some *other* sleepwalking: it is still the becoming-complacent of a programme or method, but now this problem emphatically regards

deconstruction. It would certainly not be right to say that Derrida had never before engaged with deconstruction's entanglement with method.⁶ But the accusation of sleepwalking had simplified this entanglement, functioning rhetorically in such a way as to other method and stabilise the relationship. Now, as all the anti-sleepwalking gestures are themselves expressly opened up to the suspicion of sleepwalking, sleepwalking figures deconstruction's own other. Derrida casts himself as the host of a sleepwalker, as the immobile observer of an other not quite in his control who parades the world in his place. Now, rather than making the gesture of expulsion, he inoculates himself with the sleepwalker.

It is also in this ambivalent guise that the sleepwalker returns in the final postcard of *La contre-allée* (Jérusalem, Tel-Aviv, Ramallah, le 11 janvier 1998), regarding the question "am I at Jerusalem?" first posed in a paper delivered in Jerusalem in 1986.⁷ It is through a "sleepwalking spectre" that *both* "millennia of amnesiac love for each stone, each dead person of Jerusalem," and Derrida's political differences with the state of Israel, can cohabit his "body" and rend the "I" of the question (Malabou and Derrida 259). Sleepwalking is thus the ambivalent mode of "geopolitical engagements" that might as well be "alibis, ways of being elsewhere," confounding the ethic of errance "sans certitude et sans assurance" with "la ponctualité du faux bond" (259–61), which is to say unerringly letting (someone) down, or standing them up. It is thus in the name of a sort of clandestination/destinerrance of political action that Derrida takes on the mantle of the sleepwalker here.

So why, we might ask, does this turn come in 1999? Derrida dates his anxieties over travel to his brush with prison in Prague in late 1981 (Malabou and Derrida 40). And he also tells us in a footnote that Blanchot and Genet had long been asking him why he had to make such an exhibition of himself (25). Could it be that the experience of being published by high-end luggage-maker Louis Vuitton brought the matter to a head? Perhaps. But we might add that *La contre-allée* stands on a

sort of threshold with Derrida's turn to the animal, and to the questions of domination that would dominate his final work. Indeed, the second postcard of *La contre-allée* is dated Cerisy-la-Salle 15 July 1997, the day Derrida presented "L'animal que donc je suis," the paper in which he remarks that asserting a total continuity between man and beast "serait plus que somnambulique, [...] simplement trop bête" (*L'animal* 52). This is, to some degree, a final fling for the "old" somnambulism, insofar as it warns against a sort of precipitation towards a thesis (total continuity) that Derrida will not finally underwrite. And yet the "bête" (the "beast" that is by no means merely "stupid") with which it is conjoined initiates a stealthy countermove, refusing to secure the border of the human, and to underwrite the entire dignity or sovereignty of its "I," or the "auto-biographic or auto-deictic relation to self as 'I'" (Derrida, *L'animal* 57). Somnambulism here is already starting its countermove, in the direction of *La contre-allée*, and onto the ground on which beast and sovereign are intricately entangled.

It is impossible to do justice to the intricacy of the topology of the beast seminars. But one has to start somewhere. At a certain point in the sixth session of the second volume, after an excursus on the faithful infidelity of Celan's "Die Welt ist fort / Ich muss dich tragen" – an "I" that promises to carry "you" in the absence of world – Derrida pulls up.

All this awakens us to a question that has not stopped somnambulating [*qui n'a pas cessé de somnambuler*] in our proceeding today. The question: what is a phantasm? (Derrida, *La bête II* 244)

The surprise here may be that the question of the phantasm has ever been asleep. The word "fantasme" has been active throughout this seminar, and indeed preceding seminars. Nor has it gone quite without definition. It has been determined as a zone in which the impossible may be named and apprehended. This seminar has begun by invoking the "courage" it takes to think "ça" (215) which, as well as evoking the "Es" or "Id" of Freudian

metapsychology, could stand for any “that,” any object of thought. The “object” that Derrida proceeds to explore, the possibility of “the living-dead,” is profoundly phantasmatic, dealing with something that cannot be localised, that cannot “avoir lieu,” or is in a place without place; like the phantasm (according to Freud), that belongs at once “qualitatively” to the system perception-consciousness, and “factually” to the unconscious (218–20). As the seminar goes on to explore the impossibility of localising the dead person through the choice between burial and cremation, the entire field of the question comes to be invested by the phantasm, derealising every “object” even unto the “I” that would pose the question, and pose as the subject of the question.

The seminar has promised it will end with the question of the image and the imagination (Derrida, *La bête II* 219). But when it does end with the “*bilden*,” or capacity of image-making, that, from Kant to Heidegger, defines the *Dasein*, and the human exception (244–46), the path that has led us here may seem rather oblique and enigmatic. It supposes a long tradition, stretching back to Aristotle, for which the imagination or phantasia was corporeal, and possibly the part of intelligence we share with the beasts,⁸ as well as the instance governing sleepwalking (see, e.g., Maine de Biran, already cited). And it runs counter to important twentieth-century efforts to hierarchise (Husserl), or even to have done with (Sartre) the imagination. Refusing to assert the sovereignty of (human) reason over (beastly) phantasia, Derrida not only tracks the phantasm, but flags the necessarily phantasmatic aspect of the hunt. Hence his inquiry sleepwalks.

This is not, however, the only reason for the somnambulism of the enquiry. When, at the outset of the sixth seminar, Derrida determines the phantasm as a name for the “impossible,” he does so expressly “for methodological reasons, that is to delimit the field that we are going to explore” (*La bête II* 217). He performs, thus, the very gesture of methodological foreclosure of the question that he points to in Heidegger’s seminars (151–52). Such a gesture is also precisely what had always been accused

of sleepwalking. Only now it is countersigned by Derrida’s text as something it cannot quite avoid, or at least chooses not to avoid: the premature settling of the question “what is?” even though, and precisely because, it is a question that – spectacularly in the case of the phantasm – cannot be answered in a way that would satisfy “the logic of common sense that organises our lives” (220). Our relation to the question of the phantasm must remain phantasmatic *because* any claim to resolve the double bind would entail a definition, which is to say a phantasm of method. But equally, disavowing method by placing somnambulism *over there* would only be another way of falling into the trap, reaffirming a secure relation of subject to object at the very moment in which it is said to tremble.

The seminars on the beast and the sovereign are repeatedly, and from the start, concerned not to swear off but to dramatise their own mastery; the moment of mastery that is implicit in even their most radical and destabilising strategies. It is not just that the long, looping arcs of exegesis are inevitably masterful insofar as their ellipses and oblique strategies are *compelling*. The alternative to methodological definition – setting terms loose on us without saying, or allowing us to ask, what they mean, and leaving them to act without question – entails its own methodological mastery. Derrida stages this in the very first seminar by invoking the opening of La Fontaine’s “Le loup et l’agneau,” which makes a promise *now* that it will show *presently* that might is always right: “La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure: / Nous l’allons montrer toute à l’heure” (*La bête I* 20 and *passim*). The cunning of the verse, as Derrida later explains, is to perform the right of the stronger just by ostentatiously deferring its explanation. But, just because he does explain this *later*, Derrida’s exposition of La Fontaine has also performed this deferral, advancing in the meantime *à pas de loup*, and so participating, however playfully, in its preemptory violence. Derrida also explains *this*, citing his “accredited position as a professor/teacher authorised to speak *ex cathedra* for hours,” or

weeks, or even years (*La bête I* 117). Such a confession is as sheepish as it is wolfish; and vice versa. That is, all the cunning or all the simplicity it could muster could never undo the mastery implicit in such a gesture; and even the loose, looping, recursive structure of the seminars, which try so hard to deny any sense of a placidly unfolding logic, are also, in their way, irreducibly allied to method and mastery. Derrida may oppose, at a given moment, a “slow and differentiated” deconstruction to the “*ex cathedra*” pronouncements that lay down the law of a seminar (*La bête I* 113–14). But the one does not go without the other.

It is in this way also that, in the seventh session of the second volume of the beast seminars, Derrida’s effort to swear off “l’assurance requise de la certitude indubitable” associated with method and the Cogito appeals to the somnambulatory.

As always, always, when I speak or when I write, or doing the one *and* the other, when I teach, as always, always, with each step, with each word I sense or I fore-sense, in the future anterior, the ungraspably spectral figure of an event that could after the fact, lending itself to reinterpretation, re-stage, a stage still invisible and unforeseeable for anyone at all, re-stage, thus, from top to bottom, everything that will have been – dictated, whispered to me, I mean more or less consciously, or telepathically, or somnambulatorily, intimated from inside me or enjoined from very far outside. (Derrida, *La bête I* 248)

More than a turning away from method, this is an agonising extension of the terror and uncertainty of its negative moment, its epoché, so that every step is like the first step that has not yet reached, and will never reach, the placidity and platitude of “je pense.”⁹ And this is why any attempt at “je pense” disintegrates into the convolutions of having the feeling that I don’t yet feel, concluding, “Comme si j’étais prévenu de ce que je ne vois pas venir.” That is, roughly (sacrificing the echo of “venir” in “prévenir”): “As if I were forewarned of that which I don’t see coming.” For

all the indeterminacy (“as if”) of all these feelings of feelings, the most courageous submission to errancy does not go without the hope of a certain surefootedness, or the promise of a path, that is not entirely or surely distinguishable from the “infallibility” (or *assurance* or *Sicherheit*) conventionally attributed, as Derrida says in “Force et signification,” to the sleepwalker.

prizes, mastery, sovereign violence

Before turning back to *Fichus*, there is one other topic we need to broach; that of the award of prizes. Its links with mastery and sovereignty may not be immediately apparent, but they come to the fore in an unusually polemical moment of the beast seminars, where Derrida evinces a pronounced distaste for Agamben’s sovereign rage to award himself the prize for being the first to award the prize.

Before this prizegiving for top of the class, prizes for excellence and accessits, ceremony [where] the priest always starts and finishes, in a princely or sovereign fashion, by writing himself into the top of the page [...]
(Derrida, *La bête I* 138–39)

One may wonder how Derrida arrived at such uncharacteristic exasperation. One could postulate a sort of subterranean tussle, between *Force de loi* (1994), *Foi et savoir* (1996), and the first *Homo sacer* (1995), over the reading of “bare life” and the violent institution of sovereignty, although, if there must be a question of priority, it would be hard to determine with any certainty the order of the exchange. An Agambenian might point to the reference, in *La comunità che viene* (1990), to our culture’s “hypocritical dogma of the sacredness of bare life” (68). But one might equally retort that the paper “Force de loi” was first pronounced in 1989, and “Prénom de Benjamin” in April 1990; and “Foi et savoir,” with its reference to the “biozoologic (sacrificable),” in 1994 (Derrida, *Foi et savoir* 78). If one is to ask, on the other hand, where this exchange takes an expressly polemical turn, one might plausibly

look to Agamben's swipe, in the fourth chapter of *Homo sacer*, at deconstruction as "an infinite negotiation" with the gatekeeper of Kafka's "Before the Law" that risks leaving it (deconstruction) in the role of gatekeeper (*Homo sacer* 63). It is far from clear that Agamben sees this very intervention as itself an act of gatekeeping. But why, in any case, fall into the abyss of ascribing priority, whether in praise or in blame? Agamben's penchant for ascribing priorities is, once pointed out, hard to unsee. And it is enough to make the critic of power want to take no part whatsoever in any scene of prize-giving. In any case, even if Agamben does fall into self-congratulation in a particularly crass way, the condition of possibility for this fall is a mess of potential narcissism in which it is hard to see a safe position.

What role sleepwalking might play in negotiating this abyss is perhaps even less apparent. In *Genèses, généalogies, genres et le génie* (2003), it is a question of the "genius of language," though not as we usually think of it (as a treasury of words and forms); but, rather, a "quite other genius" that serves the first by opening its eyes to "what turned up in it, I mean the French language, as in sleep or sleepwalking in the infinite dream of its unconscious, finding and meeting itself there, without ever having found itself there" (31–32). Here, in Derrida's tribute to the dream archive of Hélène Cixous, the problem of awarding prizes is more acute than ever. How should one acknowledge the thanks owed to another without falling into the gift economy of the ego; without, that is, the award of a prize immediately coming back to the self? For one does sometimes feel thanks without debt, guilt, or resentment, as Derrida says he feels "every time that I find that she has found before me what I believed I was the first to have found" (77). But such "grace" is like the dream that may be more awake than waking, yet can only be written on awakening and by having another speak in its place, whereby "Il est tu" (51). That is, "he/it is silenced," but also "he/it is you." Either way, the "I" is circumvented. For such consciousness as is involved, call it "the literary consciousness,"

is radically not an affair of the "I" (54). Indeed, the genius that is "tu" can be received only on condition that one does not know one receives it; and it is "more inappropriate than anything of it that one can represent in the consciousness" (88).

What is "tu" is thus like that "quite other genius" of language that finds itself sleepwalking in the dreaming storehouse of language. As such, sleepwalking is an agent of the "geniality" that is, as Derrida says towards the end, "neither a subject, nor an imaginary subject, nor a subject of the law or of the symbolic, [or] a possible subject, but what happens [*ce qui arrive*]" (*Genèses* 91). It is also the condition of this geniality that it "never appears and is never said in the present," as expressed in the phrase "Tu est tu." Our greatest thanks is thus owed to a gift of sleepwalking that cannot be appropriated by the "I," and that is best honoured in silence. Which is to say, consigned "to the future," and "to others" (100).

Before Derrida got to this "tu" – with its displacement of the "I," its equivocal presence, and its quasi-silence – he routed another tribute, this time to Adorno, through another equivocal pronoun: a "je somnambule." The phrase is doubtless a "conventional banality, a politeness suitable to addressing the audience on prize day," to quote Derrida's quotation of Paul Celan's acceptance speech for the 1960 Buchner Prize (*La bête I* 304). Pinch me, I must be dreaming, says the modest winner, with winning modesty. But, like Celan's phrase "in your presence" [*in Ihrer Gegenwart*], it is also linked to some of the most pressing concerns of Derrida's speech; most obviously, the question of how philosophy should respond to sleep and dreams. Can one, he asks, speak of the dream without interrupting or "betraying" sleep? What Derrida admires in Adorno is a double response that hesitates between the curt "no" of philosophy, and a "yes, perhaps, sometimes" that takes the part of literature and the arts (*Fichus* 12–14). This is Adorno's "plus bel héritage," to have arraigned (*fait comparaître*) philosophy before these, its "others" (16), and so to have broached the "possibility of the impossible,"

which can only be “dreamt,” and which dreams of a thought that would be “sans souveraineté indivisible” (19–21). Since a respect for dreams, against the presumptive wakefulness of the philosophical “I” and its claims to totalising self-presence and sovereignty, is at the heart of Derrida’s thanks to Adorno, maybe it is only right that a “je somnambule” should turn up, on the next page, to acknowledge the debt.

Or rather to continue, rather sheepishly, to prepare an acknowledgement that “I” have not yet started. The sleepwalker’s first appearance, eleven pages earlier, already articulated a derealising modesty; an embarrassment whose excessive presence produces spectrality.

In this very moment, addressing myself to you, upright, eyes open, getting ready to thank you from the bottom of my heart, with the *unheimlich* or spectral gestures of a sleepwalker, or even of a highwayman coming to lay hands on a prize that was not meant for him, everything would thus happen *as if* I were in the middle of dreaming. (Derrida, *Fichus* 11)

This dreaming I is, indeed, seemingly almost incapable of giving thanks. It is only “getting ready” to do so, and will continue to do so throughout the speech. Later we learn that this getting-ready has been going on for decades; decades in which voices from within and from without asked: is it not finally time to acknowledge, clearly and publicly, your debt to Adorno (43)? And even then, when it seems the moment has finally come, and Derrida thanks his hosts for the opportunity to give his thanks, he is still not fully ready.

I am happy today, thanks to you [*grâce à vous*], to be able and to be obliged to say “yes” to my debt towards Adorno, and on more than one head, even if I am not yet capable of responding to it, and of taking responsibility for it [*d’y répondre et d’en répondre*]. (44).

Beyond this bare “yes,” full-throated thanks here and now, such as would allow him to “decently measure my gratitude,” remains a remote, past conditional: it is what “il

m’aurait fallu” so as to avoid “un double échec”; a double failure of narcissistic indulgence on the one hand, and over-valuation or overinterpretation of the event on the other (44–45). What Derrida offers in the meantime is the prospectus, at once grandiose and summary, for “a book of which I dream to interpret the history, the possibility and the grace [*grâce*] of this prize.” The scope of the seven chapter outlines that follow seems vast (45–57). But since the writing of the book is framed in the conditional, and identified as a dream, this very scale only contributes to the sense that it will never be written. Except, that is, for the bits that had already been written. For the seventh and final “chapter” – on man’s mastery (*Herrschaft*) over animals, and its implication in the “most powerful and idealist tradition of philosophy” – largely reprises material presented in the 1997 paper “L’animal que donc je suis” that would later also be included in the book of the same name (Derrida, *L’animal* 139–43). It is a topic that had, at the time of the Frankfurt address, a tremendous and immediate future in the beast seminars. But there, in the seminars, there is not a word on Adorno. So it seems Derrida may already have said all he had to say on this topic, despite the fact that he deems it the “most decisive for readings of Adorno to come.” Or perhaps for that very reason. For, as he also says, these readings “are already being written, I am sure of it” (Derrida, *Fichus* 54–56). Such then is “grace,” consigned to futurity and to others.

For all its modesty, however, this grace may also risk appearing graceless or ungrateful. When Derrida listens to his voices and says “yes,” it is in spite of the “tormented” landscape of kinship and influence (*Fichus* 44). And this may remind us of the torment (*Qual*) of the source (*Quelle*) of which he had written thirty years earlier in “Qual Quelle: les sources de Valéry,” and make us wonder if Adorno is not one of Derrida’s “aversions”; an alien sovereignty from which he must steer clear so as to avoid being engulfed. After all, a prize for work “in the spirit of the Frankfurt School” may seem to effect a sort of retroactive

matriculation into that school (8). And if, as Derrida suggests in *Genèses*, the geniality that is “tu” remains “Without child, name, and heritage, without school” (91), this is surely a question that concerns ascendance as much as descendance. Might acceptance of a prize in the name of the master seem a sort of adoption? And could the “je somnambule” that virtually absents itself from this scene be, in part, a strategy for defending his own geniality from this takeover by a programme?

This ambivalence might explain Derrida’s marked (and potentially graceless) preference for speaking of Walter Benjamin, and perhaps even *for* him, as if taking his part against Adorno. The speech, after all, takes its title and a text from a dream Benjamin recounts in a letter to Gretel Adorno from a detention camp in France in 1939, in which he says to himself, in French, “Il s’agissait de changer en fichu une poésie” (Derrida, *Fichus* 10–11); that is, it was a matter of changing a poetry or a poem into a “head-scarf.” Moreover, this word “fichu,” taken colloquially and as an adjective, veils Benjamin’s knowledge, a year before his death, helpless and in the manner of dreams – “le sachant sans le savoir,” knowing without knowing it – that he was “done for” (*Fichus* 36, 40–41). And this sense of Benjamin’s helpless exposure to his own vulnerability marks a slender but decisive difference between him and Adorno that punctuates Derrida’s speech. Thus, while we cannot be sure that Adorno ever got over (*soit ... revenu*) his exile, Benjamin was the one who simply never came back (*revint*) (21). Absolutely done for, and no comebacks. Similarly, Adorno may well have been, as Habermas says, “without defence” – like a child, easy to talk down, a stranger in the institutions he inhabited – but he was still “less so” than Benjamin (30). Benjamin wins, as it were, the prize for defencelessness: an absolute defencelessness, but equally an impossible prize, insofar as the “winner” could never come back to receive it.

This radical helplessness is not simply Derrida’s invention. In his essay “Charakteristik Walter Benjamins,” Adorno suggests that the

“anti-subjectivism” that made Benjamin a “supreme instrument of knowledge” also entailed an unexampled openness to the play of forces, terribly close to a sort of naivety or vulnerability. Derrida does not cite this essay, but one might see in it a belated instance of what he calls Adorno’s “quasi-systematic” desire “to shield” (*soustraire ... à*) everything “without defence” against violence, even the violence of “traditional interpretation” (*Fichus* 29). One might also see in it a certain paternalism at which Derrida hints. For this desire to remove from or take out of (*soustraire ... à*) harm’s way also involves, insofar as it operates as if already at a remove, a sort of paternal fantasy, albeit one that is strangely grounded in what Adorno calls the *Abgrund* or “abyss” of his own childhood; specifically, in the tremendous sadness and impotence he feels when he surprises himself one evening in uttering a solecism drawn from the dialect of his childhood (Derrida, *Fichus* 28). The solecism, Derrida suggests, appears as such in the context of Adorno’s advocacy of German – a proper German, one that would be rooted in the earliest childhood – as the elective language of philosophy. His self-mortification is thus ultimately symptomatic of the same “Jewish-German psyche” (*Fichus* 26) that, in *Force de loi* (1994), Derrida had linked with Benjamin, and the notion that *Zur Kritik Der Gewalt* (1921), his strange critique of violence, was haunted in advance by the final solution (*Force de loi* 67, 72–73). What distinguishes Adorno’s impulse to defend from Benjamin’s helplessly principled self-exposure to the forces that would destroy him – what keeps it at a remove – is thus a certain paternal violence against the child of his own childhood, recuperating a wound quasi-systematically imposed on it by assuming the role of chastiser. This “quasi-systematic” defence and the minor violence of rebuke are thus intimately entangled.

In *Fichus*, this fatal involvement and dependency of defence and violence is played out through a phantasmatic family in which Benjamin would be, although the elder in years, the son. Why, Derrida asks, does Benjamin address his dream letter to Gretel and not to

derrida somnambule

“Teddie”? And why was it also to Gretel that he wrote, four years earlier, in response to Teddie’s rather “authoritarian and paternal criticisms” on, as it happens, the topic of dreams? Derrida ostensibly leaves these questions hanging; or, as he says, asleep [*en sommeil*] (*Fichus* 37–38). Doubtless, then, he is talking in his sleep when, ten pages later, in parenthesis, he imagines a “confidential” letter *he* would write to Gretel, on the subject of relations between Teddie and Detlef (Benjamin’s pet name in this family), asking why there is no prize in Benjamin’s honour, and sharing with her his “hypotheses on this subject” (46–47). Whatever these hypotheses may be, Derrida leaves them in the parenthesis of sleep. The tenor of his dream is nevertheless apparent: in the mere gesture of writing this letter, he writes himself into this phantasmatic family, and *takes the part of* Benjamin. That is to say, (of course, evidently) he will speak on behalf of Benjamin; but also (phantasmatically) he will assume the role of, or speak from the place of the *benjamin*, or youngest son. He can only, of course, take this place phantasmatically, but he must do so if the defence of the son is not to be a scene of adoption or kidnapping; a contest between fathers over the right to dominate.

The place awarded to Benjamin in *Fichus* – as a silent witness to an absolute defencelessness that cannot speak for itself – is itself at once impossible and necessary. There must be this grace that moves outwith the narcissistic economy of the ego. Yet to name it is already to award a prize, and so to betray it by drawing it into the orbit of that very economy. One manner of awarding this prize would be that of Hannah Arendt’s famous profile, in which Benjamin was like “a sleepwalker [...] invariably guided [...] to the very centre of a misfortune” (Arendt 13). Arendt invokes here an unhappy version of the *somnambule Sicherheit* that, in her native German, traditionally keeps the sleepwalker safe. Unhappy, that is, for Benjamin. For his misfortune is our great good fortune. As Arendt’s sleepwalker, he is helplessly ethical; that is, without defence against even his own ethos. It is a condition

no one could, by definition, wish upon themselves, and that nobody would want, but that everyone concerned with justice wants a piece of. In its most placidly commonsensical instances, the discourse of justice entails this impossibility. One way round this is the pathos of Arendt’s sleepwalker: maintaining, at a safe distance, as a spectacle to be admired and pitied, an exemplary figure that is absolutely debarred from regarding itself, and that cannot decide its path (consciously, in the form of a decision) precisely because it is (systematically, in the totality of its being) determined towards a certain step. Derrida’s justice always wagered on rhetorics – of errancy, path-breaking, attentiveness to the irruption of the quite other, the to-come, and the monstrous – that implied a high level of risk, such that they could not, for the life of them, stand at a distance spectating. This nevertheless seemed to place them at a distance from another phantasm, that of the *somnambule Sicherheit* of the already-beaten path of method. But then, at a certain point, it seems there is a risk for the very rhetoric of risk that it may, precisely by avoiding this risk of sleepwalking, subside into platitude. The risk of *this* sleepwalking would be not just that it is not assured by either the absolute assurance and justice of an idiomatic step, or the absolute assurance and justice of a preordained path, but that it is not assured of falling into either. Indeed, deconstruction had always been the hope, without assurance, and only without assurance, of a step that would be adjusted to a certain path. Setting out, as disarmed as possible, with every fibre attuned to what is to come, hoping that none of this is merely “the security of a rhetoric,” but painfully conscious that there can be no assurance that it is not, “je somnambule.”



disclosure statement

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notes

- 1 “De l'économie restreinte” 369–70.
- 2 Derrida nods here to the notion, usually attributed to Saint Ambrose (of Milan), of a *bona ebrietas* that exalts the soul with joy, but without the attendant confusion and tottering.
- 3 Derrida's relationship with the epoché of Descartes's withdrawal into his *poêle* is, to say the least, complicated. See, e.g., his comments on the “courage” it takes to think “ça” (*La bête II* 215), to which I will turn presently. But also note how, in what follows, Freud's “abyssal daring” and courageous advance into contradiction conjugate with the feint of “splendid isolation” (*La bête II* 220, 224, 230); and compare with Derrida's account of his own period of retreat from 1963 to 1968 in “Ponctuations: le temps de la thèse.”
- 4 Schmitt's essay “Weisheit der Zelle” was first published in 1948 in *Ex Captivitate Salus*.
- 5 It is important to note in passing, because there is not space to go into it in detail, that this book, like the collaboration with Geoff Bennington already cited, takes the form of a double wager, according to which Catherine Malabou tracks the “écart” or “catastrophe” between “arriver et dériver” since “Derrida est passé” (11), and Derrida must attempt to wriggle free in the mode of the postcard.
- 6 I explore this in my article, “Jeux d'écarts: Derrida's Descartes.”
- 7 This refers back to Malabou's citation (122) from “Comment ne pas parler,” in *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987).
- 8 Montaigne's efforts, in his “Apologie de Raimond Sebond,” to demote human reason and elevate animal intelligence, stress the imagination. For Gassendi too, the beasts manifestly have some sort of intelligence, albeit one that works through the Phantasia – “sufficiat videri satis manifestum, esse speciem quandam rationis in Brutis, ac ipsorum Phantasiam suo quodam modo ratiocinari” (413) – but he draws the line at the faculty of attention (419).
- 9 With regard to the production of heterodox Cogitos, I explore the importance of Paul Valéry as one of Derrida's “re-pères” in my article “Jeux d'écarts: Derrida's Descartes,” cited above. Another re-père in this regard would be Blanchot.

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In addition to numerous references to Blanchot in the beast seminars – including the notion, cited from *L'écriture du désastre*, of the unconscious as “la veille dans sa vigilance non éveillée” (Derrida, *La bête II* 258) – see the motto “Je rêve, donc cela s'écrit” in Blanchot's extraordinarily suggestive 1962 essay “Rêver, écrire,” in *L'Amitié* 165.

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