Notes on the Imaginary Dialogue in Session 5

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About one-third of the way into Session 5 of *The Beast and the Sovereign II*, Derrida shifts from Heidegger's "What Is a Thing?" back to *Robinson Crusoe*. Specifically, he shifts from a consideration, developed from the Heidegger essay, of the other as "what always might, one day, do something with me and my remains, a thing, his or her thing, whatever the respect or the pomp, funereal by vocation, with which s/he will treat that singular thing they call my remains" (BS II(E), ms. p. 139). Such a relationship of the other's sovereign power over one's remains can occur ahead of death, he continues, even to the point of being buried alive, exercising sovereignty by placing the self into a living death. The shift occurs on the point of the threat of being buried alive, Crusoe's fear while living on 'his' island. Derrida says, "Suppose now, as hypothesis or fiction, that I say the following. If I say, 'Robinson Crusoe was indeed "buried alive," he was indeed "swallow'd up alive,"' you would not believe me" (ibid., ms. p. 140).[1] It is on Derrida's address to the "you"—his audience or interlocutors or students, and, now, his readers—that I want to focus.

From this point through the next few pages, Derrida engages in an imaginary dialogue with this you, nearly always in the conditional, conditioned both by the "If" as well as the imperative "Suppose": "you would not believe me," "you would ask" (ibid.), "you would object firmly" (ibid.), "I would insist" (ibid., p. 141), "you would say" (ibid.), "I would

[1] "Mettons maintenant, par hypothèse ou par fiction, que je ceci. Si je dis: « Robinson Crusoé a bien été "enterré vivant" (*buried alive*), il a bien été "englouti vivant" (*swallow'd up alive*) », vous ne me croiriez pas" (BS II(F), ms. p. 127).

add" (ibid.), "you would say" (ibid., p. 142), the lone exception to the conditional being "I shall then reply" (ibid., p. 141).[2]

But to or for whom is Derrida speaking here? It would appear that he is exerting his sovereign right, as lecturer, to speak for his listeners or students, to put words in their mouths, or to take the breath from their very mouths. Such a rhetoric of sovereign right could put us in mind of at least two other moments in the history of the Western corpus that Derrida does not reference here: *The Republic*, Book V, and Freud's essay, "Dreams and Telepathy." In Book V, when Socrates is about to introduce the exoteric defense of philosophy, he turns to his interlocutor, Glaucon, and says "You answer for" the nonphilosopher to whom Socrates is making his defense.[3] In "Dreams and Telepathy," Freud immediately and consistently tells his audience that "you will learn nothing" about what he thinks about the reality of telepathy, while also working hard to disprove the examples he has at hand as truly telepathic experiences.[4] In both these moments, we can see an explicit exertion of sovereign mastery over student and/or audience. Socrates tells Glaucon—student of Socrates and brother of Plato who is considered the more serious philosopher between himself and Plato's other brother, Adeimantus—to speak for nonphilosophers while defending philosophy. It is not surprising, then, that Glaucon never once questions Socrates' logic; everything Socrates says is certain and undoubted. The philosopher speaking for the nonphilosopher in a 'dialogue' to defend philosophy to nonphilosophers results in total acquiescence of the argument to the philosopher by the 'nonphilosopher', just as we should expect when attempting to rationally establish the reign

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[2] In French: "demanderiez-vous" (ibid.), "objecteriez-vous fermement" (ibid.), "je répondrais en insistant" (ibid.), "diriez-vous" (ibid., p. 128), "dirais-je encore" (ibid.), "diriez-vous" (ibid.), with the exception of "répliquerai-je alors" (ibid.).

[3] Plato, *The Republic*, tr. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, Inc., 1997), 477e.

[4] Sigmund Freud, "Dreams and Telepathy," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and tr. James Strachey, et al., vol. 18 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 195.

of reason. Freud, meanwhile, dismisses each of his examples of potential telepathic experiences while simultaneously using a rhetorical technique that commands what the audience will hear or not, a technique that touches upon the audience's mind from the distance of the lectern. At each turn, then, Freud tells us he both believes and does not believe in telepathy by dismissing it while also attempting it, but his specific attempt at telepathy is also an act of exerting the sovereign right of the lecturer: He tells the audience what it will learn and not learn, regardless of what it hears. It is an attempt on Freud's part to maintain mastery over a potentially explosive quality to the psyche, on a par with his dismissal of the death drive, as Derrida examines in *The Post Card*.

Yet Derrida's imaginary dialogue cannot be classified under the same category as these two moments of sovereignty for at least three reasons: (1) the interruption of his citation of a similar moment in Heidegger's lecture course, *The Fundamental Concept of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, the main text Derrida has put into dialogue with *Robinson Crusoe*; (2) his reminder of the tyrannical power of the crowd, and its implicit reference to the *Apology*, when gearing up to respond to the you's protestations of Derrida's "'false,'" yet conditioned, claim of Crusoe's being buried alive (ibid., 140); (3) the very use of the conditional tense in his 'sovereign' exertion of power over his other(s) and what he says about various verb tenses over the course of the imaginary dialogue.

First, in his interruption of Heidegger's lecture, Derrida notes that Heidegger's "passage to the 'we' is interesting," noting that Heidegger has just said to his students, "if we who philosophize" (ibid., p. 107; note that the we is not affected by the conditioning "if" in Heidegger's case). In using the first-person plural, Heidegger "includes himself in this supposed community" (ibid.). Heidegger will insert himself into the community of his students, drag them into the community of philosophers, demand and command what

Derrida calls "a community of questioning" (ibid.) whose constitutive act is the act of philosophy. As Derrida puts it—taking on Heidegger's voice, speaking for him, the dead man, caring for his remaining words by burying them under his own, but burying Heidegger's words under his own by burying Derrida's words, here, in the middle of a block quote—"we can say 'we' only to the extent that we are philosophizing in a philosophizing, in a philosophical progress which gathers us and justifies this 'we' that *I am saying*" (ibid.). This assertive quality of Heidegger's demand for a community, one where he places himself into the community of his students or drags them into the community of philosophers, as is the professor's prerogative, is different from Derrida's imaginary dialogue with his audience, and it is not merely a difference in tone. To be sure, some of the difference can be attributed to Heidegger's position in a traditional university setting and the rhetorical gestures open to and, in some cases, expected of a professor, as against Derrida's situation of public lectures given to an audience constituted by a broad range of people. But this would not be sufficient, in the end, to explain how Derrida can say what he says about Heidegger's "we" and, one week later, engage in a similar procedure. The difference is that Derrida recognizes a difference between himself and his audience, perhaps even asserts it. Such an assertion and recognition would be in line with Derrida's ambivalence about the very word "community," but, given that Derrida notes that Heidegger's we is constituted on the terms of philosophizing that Heidegger himself creates, he implies that Heidegger's we is no we at all, but *Heidegger's*. The serious students of philosophy, good Glaucons that they should be, if they want to continue on the path of philosophizing, must unquestioningly accept the sovereign right of the master at the lectern to determine the limits and direction of the community and its questioning path. This assertion of mastery is not quite the situation of

Derrida's 'dialogue' with his audience members ("*you* would say," "*I* would say"), even if he does speak for them.

Second, even if he does speak for them, the audience, the *vous* whom he addresses, is distinct from him, and remains plural, remains a crowd. It is a crowd that would speak, he claims, with one condemnatory voice at the patent absurdity of claiming that "'Robinson Crusoe was indeed "buried alive."'" The two sets of objections are, at first, exclamatory ("'it's false! What he's telling us is false!'" [ibid., p. 140]), then they become firm ("'this is not what the story tells, that's not the narrative we read, that's not what millions of people have read and will read in all languages, that's not the published narrative…'" [ibid.]). To such exclamatory and firm objections, voiced in one voice (specifically, Derrida's) at the absurd lying philosopher, Derrida prefaces his insistent reply by saying he would reply "without letting myself be intimidated by this consensus, standing up to you, if you haven't killed me already" (ibid., p. 141). A consensus has been reached by a group of others who speak as one. Even if it is technically speaking in Derrida's voice, it is a group speaking as one, and this is the fundamental danger of community as the erasure of difference. The crowd cannot bear to be told what it knows to be false, but what it knows to be false concerns a fiction—"'this is not what the *story* tells…. *In fact, as we know*, he came back from his island alive and well'" (ibid., p. 140; my emphases)—even if it is a fiction that tells and sells itself as an adventurous, true narrative. The crowd cannot bear to be told what it has not been told, even if Derrida would defend himself by explaining that "'that really is the story, the story itself, not what it tells, no doubt'" (ibid., p. 141). And from this we, which Derrida would address as a *vous*, he feels the threat, imaginary though it may be, from an offended consensus and therefore must defend himself without being intimidated. This is not the situation of a master organizing a community. This is the situation of an outsider threatened

by the community he addresses. Although, as this is an imaginary dialogue and therefore a crowd issuing an imaginary threat, and it is imagined by Derrida, it is also clear that Derrida does not take the position of sheer *xenos* to *hoi polloi*, either. The threat from the others, from the crowd, originates in the self here. The others who may have "killed me already" speak through the threatened speaker. Thus, even if Derrida does speak for his audience here, it is not to demand unquestioning loyalty (Socrates and Glaucon), command what they will or will not learn (Freud), or to establish the limits of the community being established (Heidegger). Rather, it is more to take note of the danger of unquestioning obedience to the established order, and thus, in some sense, to break the community, which may be an act that can only be done in the form of a sovereign gesture. Yet, because it does not establish any new community, the sovereignty is, at best, questionable, or perhaps just conditioned.

Third, it is conditioned not only by the vertiginous relationship between audience, speaker, and dialogue partners, but also by the use of the conditional tense. To recap, Derrida begins the imaginary dialogue with the conditioned claim that "'Robinson Crusoe was indeed "buried alive"'"; the you responds with exclamatory cries that such a claim is false; and Derrida replies insistently, insisting that his interlocutors "'read carefully,"' that he is not discussing specifically what the story tells, but its truth because Crusoe "'sees himself in advance (that's why he talks about it at such length), he sees the moment coming, he sees himself already buried alive or swallowed up alive"' (ibid.).[5] Here, then, the you insists that what Derrida is referring to "'is not a future indicative but a conditional, he *might* well be buried or swallowed up alive, he trembles at the thought…. So that his fantasy, if that's what

[5] In French: "lisez bien" and "il voit venir le moment, il se voit d'avance enterré vivant ou avalé vivant" (BS II(F), ms. p. 127).

you want to call it, remain a fantasy and not become a reality"' (ibid.).[6] For the you, the conditional indicates a fantasy that thereby remains a fantasy. It is the work of "hypothesis or fiction," as Derrida himself initially conditions this conditioned, imaginary, fantasmatic dialogue that remains in the conditional tense. Derrida's reply to the you at this point is, notably, not in the conditional, but in the future indicative: "I shall then reply." This reply, introduced in the tense that the you considers closer to reality, introduces some doubt or exceptionality to the firm objection and claim of the you by saying

> "unless the difference between the conditional and the indicative, the difference between the conditional, the future, and the present or past indicative are merely temporal modalities, modalizations at the surface of conscious phenomenality or representation that count for little in view of the fantasmatic content that, for its part, really did happen, to Robinson." (ibid.)

Such a claim could be seen as the reintroduction of a sovereignty that would relegate differences between tenses to superficial differences in consciousness, demanding that the you accept that there is, in the end, no difference between fantasy and reality. And yet, three things must be noted: first, that Derrida is here 'speaking' as 'Jacques Derrida', hypothetical or fictional interlocutor in an imaginary dialogue with a you that speaks, collectively, in 'Derrida's' voice; second, that this sentence that would sovereignly eradicate the importance of different temporal modalities in conjugation in favor of fantasmatic content is introduced through a change in tone in the imaginary dialogue from the conditional to the future indicative; and, third, that this change in tone is immediately followed by a return to the conditional: "I would add." The imaginary dialogue, already doubly conditioned as both fictional and potential, between a fictional Derrida and a tyrannical you takes on a tone of imperial judgment on the part of the lecturer only at the moment of making a change, an

[6] In French: "n'est pas un futur indicatif mais un conditionnel, in *pourrait* bien être enterré ou avalé tout vif, il en tremble…. Pour que son fantasme, si vous voulez appeler ça comme ça, reste un fantasme et ne se réalize pas" (ibid., p. 128).

exceptional change, in the temporal modality being used to condition the imaginary conversation from the conditional tense to the indicative—a change in tone recognized by the fictional, tyrannical you as a change from fantasy to reality—and then returns to the conditional. Such a change, from conditional to indicative and back in this context, considering what is said in the moment of the change, should perhaps indicate to the reader, audience, and so on, that the conditional here undercuts multiple forms of sovereign power here: that of the lecturer, the many, the professor, the narrator, the audience, and so on.

On the return to the conditional, Derrida (or 'Derrida', as the interlocutor of the imaginary dialogue) explains that being buried alive is the nucleus of the Crusoe's self-forbidden fantasy, a fantasy that nonetheless "'he wanted,'" a fantasy that pushes all grammatical and empirical questions to the periphery (ibid., p. 142). But, even as the fantasy pushes the question of the empirical to the periphery, it simultaneously re-emphasizes that question because "'taking another step in provocation, I dare to claim, *in the indicative this time*, that it *really* did happen to him'" (ibid.; my emphases) because

> "when I say '*Robinson Crusoe*,' I am naming the narrative…(there is no Robinson Crusoe outside the book)…, this title which is twice over a proper name…, for every title is a proper name and when a title has the form of a proper name it is twice a proper name […] but all are named by the same name 'Robinson Crusoe,' and as such they are all living dead, regularly buried, and swallowed up alive." (ibid.)

And, though "'dying a living death can only be a fantasmatic virtuality, a fiction,…this…in no way diminishes the real almightiness of what thus presents itself to fantasy…. The power of almightiness belongs to a beyond of the opposition between being or not being, life and death, reality and fiction or fantasmatic virtuality'" (ibid., p. 143).[7] The absolute power of the fantasy beyond reality and fantasy as found in the double proper name of Robinson Crusoe,

[7] We should be aware that this last citation is the close of a paragraph that opens with quotes to continue the imaginary dialogue, but that closing quote-marks never appear in the rest of the session (see BS II(E), ms. p. 142n154).

a name that buries both its incarnations under the proper name, is both living and dead, is and is not, in that it survives "Defoe, and the character called Robinson Crusoe" because it is read, reread, filmed, and so on (ibid.). The machinations of the publishing and entertainment industries keep the trace of Crusoe alive so that "The book lives its beautiful death," which Derrida also calls a "finitude" as an "alliance of the dead and the living," a finitude that he will call "*survivance*" (ibid.). Survivance is precisely not sovereign in that it is not above life or death, but it is the condition from which life and death spring in opposition to each other, the conditioning of mortal, finite life that can only be what it is insofar as death is always already life's shadow. The book as product makes this relation explicit because it is "a thing buried in a library, a bookstore, in cellars, urns, drowned in the worldwide waves of a Web {Eng.}, etc., but a dead thing that resuscitates each time a breath of living reading, each time the breath of the other" (ibid., p. 144). It is the relation of author to reader to dedicatee to self to life to death found in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18."[8]

Crusoe, Defoe, *Crusoe*, and so on are all resuscitated and taken responsibility for at each reading, as occurs in every reading of every work. Every breath of every reading breathes life anew into every dead thing in a library or archive. It is at this point that we can turn back to the reading of "What Is a Thing?" from which Derrida broke off in order to begin his imaginary dialogue with the you. The sovereignty of the other over the dead body is in fact no sovereignty, no pure burial through which one 'moves on', but the survivance that resuscitates the dead and through which we "prepare ourselves as one says prepare a corpse" (ibid., p. 146).

[8] "Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade / When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st. / So long as men can breathe and eyes can see, / So long lives this and this gives life to thee" (William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 18," in *The Sonnets*, ed. Douglas Bush and Alfred Harbage [New York: Penguin Books, 1970], ll. 11-14).

If survivance is the quasi-transcendental, non-sovereign condition for life-death in general, rediscovered and resuscitated with each breath of each reader, then Derrida or 'Derrida' has here been resuscitated, as with each reading of each of his books and lectures. What is more, I would assert he assists us in performing this resuscitation (he does not do it for us, teacher that he is to and beyond the end) in the very use of the conditional tense when engaging in a rhetorical form of lecturing that would and has, in other voices more assured of their sovereign right and power, become the voice of authorial, professorial, 'lectural', philosophical sovereignty. He assists his audience in objectifying and resuscitating himself (reading this text 'gives life to he', as it were), without sovereign assertion and by drawing attention to the conditional conditions for sovereign assertions over others as well as for others' authority over the dead thing that survives.