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“HOW CAN I DENY THAT THESE HANDS AND THIS BODY ARE MINE?”¹

Judith Butler

I remember a sleepless night last year when I came into my living room and turned on the television set to discover that C-Span was offering a special session on feminist topics, and that the historian, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, was making clear why she thought Women's Studies had continuing relevance, and why she opposed certain radical strains in feminist thinking. Of those positions she most disliked she included the feminist view that no stable distinction between the sexes could be drawn or known, a view that suggests that the difference between the sexes is itself culturally variable or, worse, discursively fabricated, as if it is all a matter of language. Of course, this did not help my project of falling asleep, and I became aware of being, as it were, a sleepless body in the world accused, at least obliquely, with having made the body less rather than more relevant. Indeed, I was not altogether sure that the bad dream from which I had awoken some hours earlier was not in some sense being further played out on the screen. Was I waking or was I dreaming? After all, it was no doubt the persecutory dimension of paranoia that hounded me from the bed. Was it still paranoia to think that she was talking about me, and was there really any way to know? If it was me, then how would I know that I am the one to whom she refers?

I relate this incident not only because it foreshadows the Car-

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tesian dilemmas with which I will be preoccupied in the following paper, and not because I propose to answer the question of whether sexual difference is only produced in language. I will, for the moment, leave the question of sexual difference, to be returned to another time.² The problem I do propose to address emerges every time we try to describe *the kind of action* that language exercised on the body or, indeed, in the production or maintenance of bodies. And we do tend to describe language as actively producing or crafting a body every time we use, implicitly or explicitly, the language of discursive construction.

In the consideration of Descartes' *Meditations* that follows, I propose to ask whether the way in which Descartes posits the irrealty of his own body does not allegorize a more general problem of positing that is to be found in various forms of constructivism and various critical rejoinders to a constructivism that is sometimes less well understood than it ought to be. The name of this paper that I have already begun, but not yet begun, is: "How can I deny that these hands and this body are mine?" These are, of course, Descartes' words, but they could be ours or, indeed, mine, given the dilemmas posed by contemporary constructivism.

The language of discursive construction takes various forms in contemporary scholarship, and sometimes it does seem as if the body is created *ex nihilo* from the resources of discourse. To claim, for instance, that the body is fabricated in discourse is not only to figure discourse as a fabricating kind of activity, but to sidestep the important questions of "in what way" and "to what extent." To say that the line between the sexes, for instance, must be drawn, and must be drawable, is to concede that at some level the stability of the distinction depends upon a line being drawn. But to say that we must be able to draw a line in order to stabilize the distinction between the sexes may simply mean that we must first grasp this distinction in a way that allows us then to draw the line, and the drawing of the line confirms a distinction that is somehow already at hand. But it may mean, conversely, that there are certain conventions that govern how and where the line ought or ought not to be drawn, and that these conventions, as conventions, change through time, and produce a sense of anxiety and of unknowingness precisely at the

moment in which we are compelled to draw a line in reference to the sexes. The line then lets us know what will and will not qualify as “sex”; the line works as a regulatory ideal, in Foucault’s sense, or a normative criterion that permits and controls the appearance and knowability of sex. Then the question, which is not easily settled, becomes: do the conventions that demarcate sexual difference determine in part what we “see” and “comprehend” as sexual difference? It is, you might surmise, not a large leap from this claim to the notion that sexual difference is fabricated in language. But I think that we may need to move more carefully before either championing or reviling this conclusion.

The language of construction risks a certain form of linguisticism, the assumption that what is constructed by language is therefore also language, that the object of linguistic construction is nothing other than language itself. Moreover, the action of this construction is conveyed through verbal expressions that sometimes imply a simple and unilateral creation at work. Language is said to fabricate or to figure the body, to produce or construct it, to constitute or to make it. Thus, language is said to act, which involves a tropological understanding of language as performing and performative. There is, of course, something quite scandalous involved in the strong version of construction that is sometimes at work when, for instance, the doctrine of construction implies that the body is not only made *by* language, but made *of* language, or that the body is somehow reducible to the linguistic coordinates by which it is identified and identifiable, as if there is no non-linguistic stuff at issue. The result is not only an ontological realm understood as so many effects of linguistic monism, but the tropological functioning of language as action becomes strangely literalized in the description of what it does, and how it does what it does. And though de Man often argued that the tropological dimension of discourse works against the performative, it seems here that we see, as I believe we do in de Man’s discussion of Nietzsche, the literalization of the trope of performativity.

I want to suggest another way of approaching this question, which refuses the reduction of linguistic construction to linguistic monism, and which calls into question the figure of language acting

unilaterally and unequivocally on the object of construction. It may be that the very term “construction” no longer makes sense in this context, that the term “deconstruction” is better suited to what I propose to describe, but I confess to not really caring about how or whether these terms are stabilized in relation to one another or, indeed, in relation to me. My concerns are of another order, perhaps in the very tension that emerges as the problem of discursive construction comes into dialogue with deconstruction.

For my purposes, I think it must be possible to claim that the body is not known or identifiable apart from the linguistic coordinates that establish the boundaries of the body — *without* thereby claiming that the body is nothing other than the language by which it is known. This last claim seeks to make the body an ontological effect of the language that governs its knowability. Yet this view fails to note the incommensurability between the two domains, an incommensurability that is not precisely an opposition. Although one might accept the proposition that the body is only knowable through language, that *the body is given through language*, it is never fully given in that way, and to say that it is given partially can only be understood if we also acknowledge that it is given, when it is given, in parts — it is, as it were, given and withheld at the same time, and language might be said to perform both of these operations. Although the body depends on language to be known, the body also exceeds every possible linguistic effort of capture. It would be tempting to conclude that this means that the body exists outside of language, that it has an ontology separable from any linguistic one, and that we might be able to describe this separable ontology.

But this is where I would hesitate, perhaps permanently, for as we begin that description of what is outside of language, the chiasm reappears: we have already contaminated, though not contained, the very body we seek to establish in its ontological purity. The body escapes its linguistic grasp, but so too does it escape the subsequent effort to determine ontologically that very escape. The very description of the extra-linguistic body allegorizes the problem of the chiasmic relation between language and body, and so fails to supply the distinction it seeks to articulate.

To say that the body is figured chiasmically is to say that the

following logical relations hold simultaneously: the body is given through language but is not, for that reason, reducible to language. The language through which the body emerges helps to form and establish that body in its knowability, but the language that forms the body does not fully or exclusively form it. Indeed, the movement of language that appears to create what it names, its operation as a seamless performative of the illocutionary persuasion, covers over or dissimulates the substitution, the trope, by which language appears as a transitive act, that is, by which language is mobilized as a performative that simultaneously does what it says. If language acts on the body in some way — if we want to speak, for instance, of a bodily inscription, as so much cultural theory does — it might be worth considering whether language literally acts on a body, and whether that body is an exterior surface for such action, or whether these are figures that we mobilize when we seek to establish the efficacy of language.

This leads to a converse problem, namely, the case in which language attempts to deny its own implication in the body, in which the case for the radical disembodiment of the soul is made within language. Here, it is a question of the way in which the body emerges in the very language that seeks to deny it, which suggests that no operation of language can fully separate itself from the operation of the body. Language itself cannot proceed without positing the body, and when it tries to proceed as if the body were not essential to its own operation, figures of the body reappear in spectral and partial form within the very language that seeks to perform their denial. Thus, language cannot escape the way in which it is implicated in bodily life, and when it attempts such an escape, the body returns in the form of spectral figures whose semantic implications undermine the explicit claims of disembodiment made within language itself. Thus, just as the effort to determine the body linguistically fails to grasp what it names, so the effort to establish that failure as definitive is undermined by the figural persistence of the body.

This chiasmic relation becomes clear through a reconsideration of the opening *Meditations* of Descartes, wherein he calls the reality of his body into question. Descartes seeks to know whether he can deny the reality of his own body and, in particular, the real-

ity of his limbs.³ For the moment, though, I want to suggest that Descartes' ability to doubt the body appears to prefigure the skeptical stance toward bodily reality that is often associated with contemporary constructionist positions. What happens in the course of Descartes' fabulous trajectory of doubt is that the very language through which he calls the body into question ends by reasserting the body as a condition of his own writing. Thus, the body that comes into question as an "object" that may be doubted surfaces in the text as a figural precondition of his writing.

But what is the status of Cartesian doubt, understood as something which takes place in writing, in a writing that we read and which, in reading, we are compelled to re-perform? Derrida raises the question of whether the Cartesian "I" is compatible with the method of doubt, if that method is understood as transposable, one that anyone might perform. A method must be repeatable or iterable; intuition (or self-inspection) requires the singularity of the mind under inspection. How can a method be made compatible with the requirements of introspection? Although Descartes' meditative method is an introspective one, in which he seeks in an unmediated fashion to know himself, it is also one that is written, and which is apparently performed in the very temporality of writing. Significantly, he does not report in language the various introspective acts that he has performed prior to the writing: the writing appears as contemporaneous with this introspection, implying, contrary to his explicit claims, that meditation is not an unmediated relation at all, but one which must and does take place through language.

As I presume my readership knows, Descartes begins his *Meditations* by seeking to eradicate doubt. Indeed, he begins in an autobiographical mode, asking how long it has been that he sensed that many of his beliefs were false, these beliefs that he held in the past, that appeared to be part of his youth, that were part of his history. He then seeks to "rid himself" (*defaire*) of his former beliefs (26).⁴ First, he claims: "I have delivered my mind from every care," and he is, apparently luckily, "agitated by no passions," free to "address myself to the upheaval (*destruction*) of all my former opinions" (26). His task is the dispassionate destruction of his own opinion, but also of his own past, and so we might understand the onset of the

Meditations to require performing a destruction of one's own past, of memory. Thus, an "I" emerges, narratively, at a distance from its former opinions, shearing off its historicity, and inspecting and adjudicating its beliefs from a care-free position. Whatever the "I" is, it is from the start not the same as the beliefs which it holds and which it scrutinizes; or rather, the "I" appears to be able to maintain itself, at the level of grammar, while it calls such beliefs into question. To call such beliefs into question is apparently not to call the "I" into question. The one, the "I," is manifestly distinct from the beliefs that this "I" has held.

We must then, as readers, in order to follow this text, imagine an "I" who is detachable from the history of its beliefs. And the grammar asks us to do this prior to the official beginning of the method of doubt. Moreover, the very term that is generally translated as "belief" is *opinions* and so implies a kind of groundless knowing from the start, a form of knowing whose groundlessness will be exposed.

Descartes seeks the principles of his former beliefs, finds that relying on the senses produces deception, and argues that nothing that once produced deception ought to be trusted again to furnish anything other than deception in the future. And yet, sometimes the senses furnish a certain indubitability, as when the narrator relays the following famous scene: there is the fact that leads Descartes to say, "I am here, seated by the fire, attired in a dressing gown, having this paper in my hands and other similar matters"(27). Let me call attention to the fact that the "I" is "here," *ici*, because this term in this sentence is a deictic one; it is a shifter, pointing to a "here" which could be any here, but which seems to be the term that helps to anchor the spatial coordinates of the scene and so to ground, at least, the spatial ground of its indubitability. When Descartes writes "here," he appears to refer to the place where he is, but this is a term that could refer to any "here" and so fails to anchor Descartes to his place in the way that we might expect it to. What does the writing of his place do to the indubitable referentiality of that "here"? Clearly, it is not here; the "here" works as an indexical that refers only by remaining indifferent to its occasion. Thus the word, precisely because it can refer promiscuously, introduces an equivocalness and,

indeed, dubitability that makes it quite impossible to say whether or not his being "here" is a fact as he claims that it is. Indeed, the very use of such an equivocal term makes it seem possibly untrue.

What I seek to underscore "here," as it were, is that Descartes' very language exceeds the perspective it seeks to affirm, permitting for a narration of himself and a reflexive referentiality that distances the one who narrates from the "I" by whom it is narrated. The emergence of a narrative "I" in the *Meditations* has consequences for the philosophical argument Descartes seeks to make. The written status of the "I" splits the narrator from the very self he seeks to know and *not* to doubt. The "I" has gotten out of his control by virtue of becoming written. Philosophically, we are asked to accept an "I" who is not the same as the history of its opinions, who can "undo" and "destroy" such opinions and still remain intact. Narratively, we have an "I" that is a textual phenomenon, exceeding the place and time in which it seeks to ground itself, whose very written character depends upon this transposability from context to context.

But things have already become strange, for we were to have started, as Descartes maintains in the Preface, with reasons, ones that persuade, and which give us a clear and distinct idea of what cannot be doubted. We were about to distrust the senses, but instead we are drawn into the certainties that they provide, the fact that I sit here, am clothed, hold the paper that I am holding, by the fire, that is also here.

From this scene, in which indubitability is asserted and withdrawn at once, emerges the question of the body. Descartes asks, "how could I deny that these hands and this body here belong to me?" (27). Consider the very way in which he poses the question, the way in which the question becomes posable within language. The question takes, I believe, a strange grammar, one that affirms the separability of what it seeks to establish as necessarily joined. If one can pose the question whether one's hands and one's body are not one's own, then what has happened such that the question has become posable? In other words, how is it that my hands and my body became something other than me, or at least appeared to be other than me, such that the question could even be posed whether or not they belong to me? What is the status of the question, such

that it can postulate a distinction between the “I” who asks and the bodily “me” that it interrogates, and so performs grammatically precisely what it seeks to show *cannot* be performed?

Indeed, Descartes begins to ask a set of questions that perform what they claim cannot be performed: “how can I deny that these hands and this body are mine ... ” is one of them, and it is a strange, paraliptical question because he gives us the graphic contours of such a doubt, and so shows that such a doubt is possible. This is, of course, not to say that the doubt is finally sustainable, or that no indubitability emerges to put an end to such doubt. For Descartes to claim that the body is the basis of indubitability, as he does, is a strange consequence, if only because it appears to appeal to an empiricism that sustains an uneasy compatibility with the theological project at hand. These examples also seem to relate to the problem of clothing, knowing that one is clothed, for he claims to be sure that he was clothed in his nightgown next to the fire.

The surety of this claim is followed by a series of speculations, however, ones that he imagines that others might make, but which, in his imagining, he himself makes: indeed, the writing becomes the occasion to posit and adopt narrative perspectives on himself which he claims not to be his own, but which, in adopting, are his own in the very mode of their projection and displacement. The other who appears is thus the “I” who, in paranoia, is circuited and deflected through alterity: what of those who think they are clothed in purple, but are really without covering, those others who are like me who think they are clothed, but whose thinking turns out to be an ungrounded imagining? Descartes, after all, is the one who is actively imagining others as nude, implying but not pursuing the implication that they might well think of him as nude as well. But why? Of course, he wants to get beneath the layers that cover the body, but this very occasion of radical exposure toward which the *Meditations* move is precisely what threatens him with an hallucinatory loss of self-certainty.

Indeed, it appears that the certainty he seeks of the body leads him into a proliferation of doubts. He is sure that he sits there clothed: his perspective, as sense-perception and not pure intellection, is in that sense clothed or cloaked, thus this certainty depends on a cer-

tain dissimulation. The nudity he attributes to the hallucinatory certainty of others constantly threatens to return to him, to become his own hallucinatory certainty. Indeed, precisely as a sign of radical certainty, that nudity undermines his certainty. If he is clothed, he is certain of what is true, but if he is not, then the truth has been exposed, the body without dissimulation, which leads to the paradoxical conclusion that only if he is deluded about being clothed can his own utterances be taken as indubitable, in which case hallucination and certainty are no longer radically distinguishable from one another.

This is not any nude body, but one that belongs to someone who is deluded about his own nudity, one whom others see in his nudity and his delusion. And this is not simply any "one" with some characterological singularity, but a "one" who is produced precisely by the heuristic of doubt. This is one who calls the reality of his body into question only to suffer the hallucinatory spectrality of his act. When he sees others in such a state, nude and thinking themselves clothed, he knows them to be deluded, and so if others were to see him in such a state, they would know him to be deluded as well; thus, the exposure of his body would be the occasion for a loss of self-certainty. Thus, the insistence on the exposed body as an ultimate and indubitable fact in turn exposes the hallucinations of the one who is nude, nude and hallucinating that he or she is fully clothed. This figure of the indubitable body, one that only the mad might doubt, is made to represent the limit case of the *res extensa*, a body that cannot be doubted but which, comprised of the senses, will be held to be detachable from the soul and its quest for certainty.

If one were to imagine the body instead as an earthenware head or made of glass, as Descartes puts it, one would be doubting what is true. But notice that here the very act of doubting seems bound up with the possibility of figural substitutions, ones in which the living body is made synonymous with its artifactual simulation or, indeed, with glass, a figure for transparency itself. If the body is certain as *res extensa*, what is to distinguish the human body as *res extensa* from other such instances of substance? If it must, by definition, be separable from the soul, what is to guarantee its humanity?

Apparently, nothing can or does.

After all, Descartes not only reports that others perform such hallucinations, the report constitutes the textualization of the hallucination: his writings perform them for us, through an alienation of perspective that is and is not exclusively his own. Thus, he conjures such possibilities precisely at the moment in which he also renounces such possibilities as mad, raising the question whether there is a difference between the kind of conjuring that is a constitutive part of the meditative method and those hallucinations that the method is supposed to refute. He remarks: "I should not be any the less insane were I to follow examples so extravagant [*si je me reglais sur leurs exemples*]." But what if he has already just ruled himself on these examples, followed these examples, asked us to follow them, in the sense that to write them is to follow them, and we are clearly following them as well in reading him as we do. The doubt he wants to overcome can only be reenacted within the treatise, which produces the textual occasion for an identification with those from whom he seeks to differentiate himself. These are his hands, no? But where are the hands that write the text itself, and is it not the case that they never actually show themselves as we read the marks that they leave? Can the text ever furnish a certain sense of the hands that write the text, or does the writing eclipse the hands that make it possible, such that the marks on the page erase the bodily origins from which they apparently emerge, to emerge as tattered and ontologically suspended remains? Is this not the predicament of all writing in relation to its bodily origins? There is no writing without the body, but no body fully appears along with the writing that it produces. Where is the trace of Descartes' body in the text? Does it not resurface precisely as the figure of its own dubitability, a writing which must, as it were, make the body strange if not hallucinatory, whose condition is an alienation of bodily perspective in a textual circuitry from which it cannot be delivered or returned? After all, the text quite literally leaves the authorial body behind, and yet there one is, on the page, strange to oneself.

At the end of *Meditation I*, he resolves to suppose that God is not good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius and that external things are illusions and dreams. Accordingly, he writes, "I

shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things." It would seem, then, that the task of the *Meditation* is to overcome this doubt in his own body, but it is that doubt that he also seeks to radicalize. After all, it is Descartes' ultimate project to understand himself as a soul, as a *res cogitans* and not as a body; in this way, he seeks to establish the ultimate dubitability of the body and so to ally himself with those who dream and hallucinate when they take the body to be the basis of certain knowledge. Thus, his effort to establish radical self-certainty as a rational being leads within the text to an identification with the irrational. Indeed, such dreams and hallucinations must be illimitable if he is to understand that certainty of himself as a thinking being will never be furnished by the body.

He writes that "the knowledge of myself does not depend on things not yet known to me." And it does not depend on "things that are *feigned* or *imagined* by my imagination [*celles qui sont feintes et inventées par l'imagination*]" (42).⁵ The Latin term — *effingo* — can mean, ambiguously, "to form an image," but also, "to make a fact," and this means that the knowledge of himself does not depend on forming an image or making a fact. Inadvertently, Descartes introduces an equivocation between an imagining of what is not a fact, and an imagining or making of what is a fact. Has the same imagining wandered across the divide between delusion and reality, such that it is at once what Descartes must exclude as the basis of self-knowledge and what he also must accommodate?

If knowledge does *not* depend on things that are feigned or imagined or facts that are made, then on what does it depend? And does his dismissal of imagining, invention, and factual making not undermine the very procedure of doubt that he uses to gauge the falsifiability of his theses? Indeed, at another moment in the text, he insists that imagination, even invention, serves a cognitive function, and that it can be used as the basis for making inferences about the indubitability of substance itself: "I would invent, in effect, when I am imagining something, since imagining is nothing other than contemplating the figure or image of a corporeal thing."⁶

The imagination is nothing other than the contemplation of the figure or image of a corporeal thing. The proposition foreshad-

ows the claims that Husserl will make about the intentionality of the act of imagining, suggesting that objects appear to the imagination in some specific modality of their essence. If this is so, then the imagination does not merely invent bodies, but its inventiveness is also a form of referentiality, that is, of contemplating the figure or image of bodies in their essential possibility. The sense in which the imagination is inventive is not that it produces bodies where there were none. Just as referential suggestion of the term *effingo* complicates the problem, tying imagining to fact-making, so Descartes' notion of the image as relaying the object in some specific way ties imagining to objects of perception, but in both cases the link is made, not conceptually, but through a semantic equivocation. Indeed, if the method of doubt involves supposing or positing a set of conditions as true which he then seeks to doubt, it involves conjecturing what is counter-intuitive, and so centrally engages the imagination.

Je supposerai — I suppose, I will suppose, I would suppose — this is the strange way that Descartes renders his doubt in language, where the term *supposer* carries the referential ambiguity that plagues his discussion. After all, *supposer* means to take for granted, to accept as a premise, but also to postulate or posit, to make or to produce. If the "I" is not a corporeal thing, then it cannot be imagined.

When he writes "I suppose," he offers appositions that suggest its interchangeability with the following formulations: I persuade myself, I posit, I think, I believe. The object of that supposing and thinking takes the form of a different fiction than the one he has just performed: what he supposes or believes is that "body, figure, extension ... are nothing but fictions of my own spirit." Here there appears to be going on a doubling of the fictional, for he is supposing that the body, among other things, is a fiction of his own mind. But is that supposing not itself a fictionalizing of sorts? If so, is he then producing a fiction in which his body is the creation of a fiction? Does the method not allegorize the very problem of fictive making that he seeks to understand and dispute, and can he understand this fictive making if he continues to ask the question within the terms of the fiction from which he also seeks to escape?

Supposing, self-persuasion, thinking, believing, work by way of positing or, indeed, fabulating — but what is it that is fabulated?

If the body is a fiction of one's own spirit, then this suggests that it is made or composed of one's own spirit. Thus, to posit is not merely to conjecture a false world or to make one up, but to invent and refer at the same moment, thus confounding the possibility of a strict distinction between the two. In this way, "the fictions of the spirit" for Descartes are not in opposition to the acts of thinking or persuasion, but are the very means by which they operate. "Positing" is a fiction of the spirit that is not for that reason false or without referentiality. To deny the fictive aspect of positing or supposing is to posit the denial, and in that sense to reiterate the way that the fictive is implicated in the very act of positing. The very means by which Descartes seeks to falsify false belief involves a positing or fictionalizing that, homeopathically, recontracts the very illness it seeks to cure. If the falsification of the untrue must take place through a counter-factual positing, which is itself a form of fiction, then falsification reintroduces fiction at the very moment in which it seeks to refute it. Of course, if we could establish that what is fictional in supposing is not the same as what is fictional in what is being supposed, then we would avoid this contradiction, but Descartes' text does not offer us any way of doing precisely that.

I hope that I have begun to show that in imagining the body, Descartes is at once referring to the body through an image or figure — his words — and also conjuring or inventing that body at the same time, and that the terms he uses to describe this act of supposing or imagining carry that important double-meaning. Hence, for Descartes, the language in which the body is conjectured does not quite imply that the body is nothing other than an effect of language; it means that conjecturing and supposing have to be understood as fictional exercises that are nevertheless not devoid of referentiality.

When we consider Descartes' efforts to think the mind apart from the body, we see that he cannot help but use certain bodily figures in describing that mind. The effort to excise the body fails because the body returns, spectrally, as a figural dimension of the text. For instance, Descartes refers to God as one who inscribes or engraves on his soul, when he writes, for instance, that he will never forget to refrain from judgment of what he does not clearly and

distinctly understand, “simply by [God’s] engraving deeply in my memory the resolution never to form a judgment on” such matters. Descartes’ mind is here figured as a slate or a blank page of sorts, and God is figured as an engraver. “God deeply engrave(s) [*gravé*] a resolution in memory not to judge.”

Similarly, Descartes appears to imprint a thought on his memory in the same way that God engraves a resolution on the will: he refers to his own human and frail capacity to “forcibly impress [*imprimer*]” a thought on his memory, and so help in the process of building up a new memory where the old one had been destroyed.⁷ Meditation now appears as a particular kind of action, one which, he claims, must be repeated, and which has as its goal the forcible imprinting (*imprimer*) of this same thought on memory, an imprinting that is as apparently forceful as God’s engraving is profound: indeed, both convey a certain formative violence, a rupture of surface, as the effect of writing.

Indeed, “the engraving” is thus the means by which God’s will is transferred to Descartes, a peculiar form of transitivity that the trope of writing helps to effect. His memory becomes the object in which God engraves a resolution, as if Descartes’ memory were a page, a surface, an extended substance. But this is clearly a problem, since the mind is supposed to be, as we know, *res cogitans* rather than *res extensa*, whereas it is figured here precisely as an extended surface and substance. Hence, the memory in some ways becomes figured as a kind of body, extended substance and surface, and we might well read here the resurfacing of the lost and repudiated body within the text of Descartes, one on which God now so profoundly engraves a resolution; indeed, the metaphorical stage is now set for Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony.”

Indeed, it makes sense to ask whether the writing of the *Meditations* is precisely what guarantees this soldering of the memory to the will. The extended writing of the *Meditations* acts to imprint a new knowledge on his memory. To the extent that the page substitutes for memory, or becomes the figure through which memory is understood, does that figure then have philosophical consequences, namely, that introspection as method succeeds only to the extent that it is performed in writing on the page? Is writing not precisely

the effort to solder a new memory to the will, and if so, does it not require then the very material surface and, indeed, the materiality of language itself that are hardly compatible with what Descartes seeks to separate from the introspective act of the mind? And does this writing not implicitly require the hand of the one who engraves and the body as surface on which to write, dispersing bodily figures throughout the explanation of the soul?

If it seems that Descartes' text cannot but figure the body, that does not reduce the body to its figuration, and if that figuration turns out to be referential, that does not mean that the referent can somehow be extracted from its figuration. The act by which the body is supposed is precisely the act that posits and suspends the ontological status of the body, an act that does not create or form that body unilaterally (and thereby not an act in the service of linguisticism or linguistic monism), but one which posits and figures, one for whom positing and figuring are not finally distinguishable.

If there is no act of positing that does not become implicated in figuration, then it follows that the heuristic of doubt not only entails figuration, but works fundamentally through the figures that compromise its own epistemological aspirations. But this conclusion is immediately impaired by another, namely, that the figuration of the body meets its necessary limit in a materiality that cannot finally be captured by the figure. Here is where proceeding by way of both grammar and figuration falters, though it is a telling faltering. If the body is not reducible to its figuration or, indeed, its conceptualization, and it cannot be said to be a mere effect of discourse, then what finally is it? The question stands, but just because there is a grammar of the question in which the ontological status of the body is posed does not mean that the answer, if there is one, can be accommodated within the grammatical terms that await that answer. In this case, the possibility of the question does not imply its answerability within the terms in which it is posed. The body escapes the terms of the question by which it is approached. And even to make such a formulaic claim, relying on the "the body" as the subject-noun of the sentence, domesticates precisely what it seeks to unleash. Indeed, the grammar itself exposes the limits of its own mimetic conceit, asserting a reality that is of necessity distorted

through the terms of the assertion, a reality that can only appear, as it were, through distortion.⁸

Descartes makes this point perhaps unwittingly as he proceeds to dismember his own body in the course of his written meditation. We might rush in to say that this “dismemberment” is merely figural, but perhaps, as Paul de Man suggests in another context, it marks the very limits of figuration — its uncanny limits.⁹ In reference to Kant, de Man points out that the body in pieces is neither figurative nor literal, but material, thus suggesting that materiality sets the limits to cognition. It follows from his view that the only way to convey that materiality is precisely through catachresis — which is what de Man actually does — and so through a figure.

So is this body figurable or not? It depends, I would suggest, on how one approaches the question of figurality. If Descartes’ body is not literally dismembered, though the language figures that as its effect, in what sense is it still dismembered? And if dismemberment is but a sign of a pre-figural materiality, then that materiality has been converted into a trope through the very example that is said to illustrate that non-convertibility. The body does not, then, imply the destruction of figurality if only because a figure can function as a substitution for that which is fundamentally irrecoverable within or by the figure itself.¹⁰ Such a figure is, however, no less a figure than a mimetic one, and a figure need not be mimetic to sustain its status as figural.

Clearly, though, the final question here must be to consider this strange separation of the limbs from the body, this repeated scene of castration, the one that Descartes enacts through the grammar that conditions the question he poses of his body; in which he is already separated from that which he calls into question, a separation at the level of grammar that prepares the philosophical question itself; in which the hand that writes the doubt and the hand that is doubted — is it mine? — is at once the hand that is left behind as the writing emerges in, we might say, its dismembering effect.¹¹

There is no doubt that a hand writes Descartes’ text, a hand figured within that text as appearing at a distance from the one who looks upon it and asks after its reality. The hand is reflexively spectralized in the course of the writing it performs. It undoes its reality precisely at the moment in which it acts or, rather, becomes

undone precisely by the traces of the act of writing it performs. If the body is what inaugurates the process of its own spectralization through writing, then it is and is not determined by the discourse it produces. If there is a materiality of the body that escapes from the figures it conditions and by which it is corroded and haunted, then this body is neither a surface nor a substance, but the linguistic occasion of the body's separation from itself, one that eludes its capture by the figure it compels.

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- 1 This essay was first presented as an invited lecture at the American Philosophical Association Meetings in December, 1997, in Philadelphia. It was represented in revised version for the "Culture and Materiality" conference at UC Davis in April, 1998, and has subsequently been revised for publication in *Qui Parle*.
 - 2 Excellent work reconsidering the relationship of language and materiality in sexual difference is currently being done by Charles Shephardson, Debra Keates, and Katherine Rudolph.
 - 3 Interestingly, and not without reason, suspended and inscrutable limbs reemerge in de Man's essay on "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" in ways that suggest a metonymic relation to the problem that Descartes poses. For de Man, the body

within the *Third Critique* is understood, if we can use that word, as prior to figuration and cognition. In Descartes, it emerges as a particular kind of figure, one that suspends the ontological status of the term, and thus raises the question of any absolute separability between materiality and figuration, a distinction that de Man on some occasions tries to make as absolutely as possible.

- 4 “Il me fallait entreprendre serieusement une fois en ma vie de me defaire de toutes les opinions que j’avais reçues ... me defaire de toutes les opinions.” The text was originally published in Latin in 1641 in France, although Descartes was living in Holland at the time. Descartes apparently had reasons to fear the Dutch ministers reading the text, and so he had a friend of his oversee its publication in France. It did, however, appear the following year, 1642, in Amsterdam, and the second edition includes the objections and replies. This second edition is usually referred to as the Adam and Tannery version, and it was the basis for the French translations. One of those took place that same year by the Duc de Luynes, and Descartes approved the translation, which is to say, that he subjected it to various corrections and revisions. It appeared in revised form in 1647. Hence, we can to some degree think of the French text as one that Descartes approved, and in some instances, wrote, but nevertheless one to which he was willing to attach a signature. Almost every English version of Descartes will be a translation of the second version of the *Meditations*. There were two French translations offered to Descartes for approval, one by the Duc de Luynes and another by Clerselier; he chose the one by the Duc de Luynes for the *Meditations* themselves, and the “objections and replies” translation by Clerselier.

In 1661, Clerselier republished his translation, making corrections, and abandoning the translation by the Duc de Luynes that Descartes had approved. Many scholarly editions take this to be a more exact and literal translation and have used it as the primary text. Some of them complained that the Duc de Luynes’ version was too liberal of a translation, lacking Descartes’ exactitude. And they have made excuses for why Descartes might have accepted the translation — politesse, politics, and the like.

The French that I follow here is that provided by the Duc de Luynes. The English is *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Haldane and Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

- 5 In the French, he refers to what is “*feintes et inventée par l’imagination*,” and this notion of ‘invented’ is translated from the Latin: *effingo*. Knowledge of oneself does not depend on what is feigned or invented, but the Latin term Descartes uses for the later, *effingo*, casts doubt on the very denial that he performs.
- 6 “Je feindrais en effet, si j’imaginai être quelque chose, puisque imaginer n’est autre chose que contempler la figure ou l’image d’une chose corporelle.”
- 7 Descartes writes, “he has at least left within my power this resolution . . . for although I notice a certain weakness in my nature in that I cannot continually concentrate my mind on one single thought [*je ne puis pas attacher continuellement mon esprit à une même pensée*], I cannot continually attach my spirit to the same thought, I can yet, by attentive and frequent meditation, impress [*imprimer*] it so forcibly on my memory that I shall never fail to recollect it whenever I have need of it, and thus acquire the habit of never going astray” (178).
- 8 This view corresponds to Lacan’s view of the mirror stage as that which permits a specular version of the body on the condition of distortion.

- 9 For a discussion of dismemberment and the limits of figuration, see Paul de Man, "Materiality and Phenomenality in Kant" in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
- 10 One might usefully consult Walter Benjamin on the status of allegory for precisely such an approach to the figure.
- 11 See Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).