

## A Conundrum of Difference without Contradiction

### *Madness and Death in Philosophy*

By Ferit Güven,

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### *Review by Apple Igrek*

Written lucidly throughout, Ferit Güven's *Madness and Death in Philosophy* is an examination of the intellectual appropriation of difference which tends to embrace madness and death on the condition that philosophy is thereby defined as a rational activity. The book is extremely well researched and methodical. Güven's line of inquiry focuses on five major figures: Plato, Hegel, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. The major question which arises in relationship to all of these philosophers is whether we can think through an element of negativity (a term which Güven uses in a number of senses including becoming, temporality, absence, madness and death) without it being absorbed as a dialectical moment of truth. Although I have great admiration and sympathy for Güven's overall project, I will raise two questions toward the end of this review as a provocative engagement with the text.

The opposition between sophistry and philosophy, as detailed in the *Phaedo*, is based upon a certain engagement with death. The sophist avoids this engagement while the philosopher does not. Indeed, the philosopher is a philosopher only insofar as he prepares for another life: a more sublime, supra-sensuous life as compared to the fallible existence of human embodiment. The true essence of life pertains to the soul. The human body derives its strength and vitality from this divine source. The engagement of the philosopher, then, has everything to do with the subordination of the body and its pleasures to a higher, more complete reality. Although it is right to say that this reality is absent from immediate perception, we shouldn't therefore conclude that all means of accessing its truth are doomed to failure. We are transported to a realm of absence—to a realm of *ousia* or being—by means of death. Our responsiveness to being is necessarily connected to our willingness to die, and in this way there is a fundamental convergence in Plato: "To the extent that one is called to respond philosophically to the world around oneself, one is called to respond philosophically to the being of things, and thereby one is transported to a realm of absence" (15). Embracing our higher

selves will imply an experience of transportation which separates the body from its deepest animating principle, which is the immortal soul. Although we typically think of this kind of separation as the final moment of death, the philosopher recognizes truth as a realm of being that exists apart from its historical instantiations. Unity with truth is therefore the meaning of life in its fullest sense. Güven concludes from a careful study of the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus* that Platonic reason is constructed in solid opposition to death and madness. The philosopher engages death in a formidable way, but does so with the aim of discovering truth. Likewise, in the *Phaedrus*, madness is incorporated into the passionate movement of love on the condition that it is separate from bodily desire. In both cases of death and madness, the irrational is explained with reference to an oppositional structure of truth which prioritizes the immortal soul.

The same dialectical hierarchy can be found in Hegel: madness and reason coincide only at the stage in which the former is transformed into an intellectual content of the latter. On its own, madness is a single phase of the subject. Before it is sublimated and united with reason, it is nothing more than pure self-feeling. Its essence is therefore related to its opposition to the phenomenological system: the phase of the subject which is manifested by its pure immediacy—by its pure self-feeling—is opposed to its own overcoming. In this way Hegel confines the possibility of madness, at least in its radical sense of rupture, to the embodied, anthropological subject. The overcoming of madness reduces it to a necessary stage of reason that defines itself against its own past. The problem of the human subject is one of immediacy and corporeality, but this problem is mediated and worked out in the transition from anthropology to logic. At precisely this point Güven objects. He objects that dialectical reason is able to transform the question of madness into one of intellectual content. The very identification of madness as an oppositional element in relationship to reason seems to guarantee its continual haunting of the system:

[I]f truth consists of this intercommunication between reason and madness, it cannot be the place from which madness can be identified. Therefore, the place at which rational consciousness and madness are to be distinguished cannot be rational consciousness, especially if rational consciousness presupposes madness. (40-41)

To the extent that madness is inherently oppositional it cannot be reduced

to an intellectual datum. According to Güven's reading of Hegel, it is defined by negativity, contradiction, and intercommunication. Reason demarcates itself against madness but does so in the very space of contradiction which binds it to its irrational other. Madness as an oppositional term is therefore untenable. Instead of thinking of it as a moment of reason or a single phase of consciousness, we would do much better to see it as a noncognitive, nonoppositional form of difference. It is, in other words, the oppositional character which Hegel attributes to madness which precludes it from being reduced to an element or term of its own oppositional negativity.

Both Plato and Hegel transform the meaning of absence, understood as either death or madness, into that which is dialectically present. Philosophy is therefore an extreme form assimilation whereby truth and madness converge. Güven draws from Heidegger and Foucault in order to rupture this project. It is not, however, the connection between reason and its other which is so bothersome. It is impossible to stand outside of the phenomenological system in order to critique it. What is disturbing is that madness is treated as if it were a cognitive fact. According to Güven, it can only be assimilated this way if we first of all tame its inherent principle of nonoppositional difference. Throughout *Madness and Death in Philosophy*, but especially in the chapter on Hegel, Güven demonstrates that the oppositional, negative nature of dialectical thinking undermines its tendency to reduce itself to a mere stage of consciousness: the opposition of terms presupposes a movement of negativity, a movement of madness and death, which cannot be absorbed by systematic thinking. Heidegger is crucial at this juncture. In his study of being-towards-death, the question of authenticity opens up to a primordial sense of irrecoverable nothingness. Absence pervades the being of Dasein, but it is not for that reason a cognitive event. Much to the contrary, Heidegger articulates an understanding of death which strips away our seemingly firm foundations of familiarity, indifference, and average everydayness:

Being-ahead-of-itself is also a structural dimension of Dasein that is other than "rational." Dasein's concern is a noncognitive existence, and the possibility revealed in anxiety is noncommunicable in a radical sense. It undermines the self-communication that is necessary for the constitution of subjectivity. (64)

Everyday language covers over this noncognitive existence which pervades Dasein, but this is an impossible task because anxiety is a more fundamental

disposition of our existence than the rational activity which attempts to sublimate it. There is no autonomous ground of subjectivity. There is no discourse which frees us from the inner stirrings of madness. We cannot overcome negativity by recourse to truth. Anxiety thus reveals that we are always ahead of ourselves, that we are determined by structures of being that are irreducible to facts, entities, or the life of spirit.

Güven's reading of Heidegger informs his approach to the debate between Derrida and Foucault concerning *Histoire de la folie*. The fundamental issue as stated by Güven pertains to the articulation of madness and whether it must be formulated from the perspective of reason. Foucault, like Heidegger before him, seeks an understanding of madness which will open up modern discourse to its primordial otherness. Derrida, on the other hand, is more apt to agree with Hegel that neither madness nor death can be accounted for outside of language. This is not to say that Derrida accepts a dialectical reduction of negativity to absolute knowledge, but what he *does* suggest is that the entire question of madness is perforce a question of reason, truth, and meaning. Negativity can only be affirmed within the constructs of dialectical transformation. For Derrida, this is an eternal feature of language: it absorbs, digests, and appropriates the excluded other. We cannot give voice to the other without dominating its expression. Foucault's attempt to write a history of madness is consequently doomed to failure:

The fate of madness is that it will be inevitably betrayed. Madness is bound to remain the madness of reason, that is, already incorporated into reason, into language. Does this mean that there is only madness in and through such language (or *logos*), and if so does this mean that madness can be reduced to such language? The crucial point of the debate between Foucault and Derrida seems to lie in this question. (134)

The last comment, which Güven states on more than one occasion, is provocative. He does not wish to take sides in this debate, because taking sides would imply the possibility of a sublimated transformation of one's position (135). Nevertheless, it is clear that Güven is much more attracted to Foucault's project than Derrida's. The reason for this attraction stems from what he views to be the central issue of the debate as it concerns the possibility of rupture vis-à-vis language. In his conclusion, Güven writes that the very possibility of ethics depends upon a kind of rationality which

is open to the abandonment of its own standards (158). Otherwise, he continues, the colonial aspect of Western philosophical thinking will continue to assimilate the voices of others who might otherwise pose a challenge to our standardized homogeneity.

Two questions should be raised in response to this line of thinking. The first stems from an argument found in Richard Kearney's *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*. In that book, Kearney asks whether it is wise to approach ineffable, noncognitive forms of singularity without any appeal to narrative. One of his fears is that an uncritical openness to the other cuts off meaningful dialogue. The emergence of a radical, irreducible alterity which can never be communicated between the self and the other poses an ethical challenge to those who would like to build hermeneutic bridges across cultures. Although Güven affirms Heidegger's prioritization of absence over presence (63), he would probably disagree with any characterization of his work which entails a collapse of language into something chaotic or nonrelational. A pure, abstract reversal of the domination of philosophy over its subjugated other plays right back into the system of dialectical appropriation (6). But if the language of poetry is our best alternative to the colonial elements Güven associates with Western knowledge and thinking, then it is difficult to understand how poetry escapes Kearney's objection if it "does not follow a linear rationality" (112). What is perhaps most interesting about the language of poetry, as described in Heidegger's reading of George Trakl, is that it implies a peaceful "down-going or descension" into death (113). This brings us to the second question: is the issue between Derrida and Foucault one of language and exteriority, in terms of their mutual integration, or does it pertain to the kind of language which obviates violence in its affirmation of death and madness? As Güven discusses the stranger in Trakl's poem "Sebastian in Dream," what is significant in this context is how descension implies neither a catastrophe nor a falling, but rather a gentle abandonment of our human nature as metaphysically construed (113-14). This kind of abandonment is in perfect keeping with an incessant movement of nonoppositional difference for it stands neither against nor in favor of its own dissolution. But, the difficulty of imagining desire apart from its attachment to life may compel us to rethink the possibility of nonoppositional thinking. Subjectivity is grounded in a form of groundlessness which perpetually challenges our notions of autonomy, cognitive apprehension, and metaphysical certainty, but this same subjectivity opposes its primordial groundlessness with an attachment to life and

desire. If this is right, then perhaps we can understand Derrida's criticisms as a reflection of a universal tendency of phenomenological beings to resist and rationalize what can never be absolutely resisted or rationalized. It is this tragic constitution of our being which explains how we are viscerally related to the nonrelational, because there is both peace and catastrophe in our descension into non-being. These questions, however, need not be engaged to appreciate the ethical ramifications of Güven's work, and how these ethical ramifications are illuminated by his attentiveness to the paradoxical relation between language and its ineluctable down-going into silence and nothingness.