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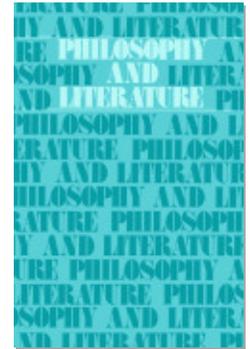
Appendix: Descartes's *Olympica*

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8. It would be less natural, but still not downright odd, if he were interpreting the dream in French, for him to interpret *vent* as *esprit*. I am much indebted to Charles Young and Nancy Hayles for characteristically helpful suggestions here and at other points in this article.

9. At the start of the *Discourse*, Descartes enjoins his reader to regard "this Treatise as a history, or, if you prefer it, a fable" (p. 83). In other words, I shall not lie to you, but do not assume that I shall tell you the whole truth.

10. Since I developed this notion of Descartes as a tentative magician I have read Frances Yates's review of Brian P. Copenhaver's *Symphorien Champier and the Reception of the Occultist Tradition in Renaissance France* in the *New York Review of Books* (Nov. 22, 1979). At the end of her review, and after referring to Newton's concealment of his interest in alchemy, Yates asks, "Does this concealment of part of their outlook also affect other famous figures, for example, Descartes?"

11. This is the version of the choice which the *Discourse* also described him as having faced: he decided, he says, "to be a spectator rather than an actor in all the comedies the world displays" (p. 99).

12. I use this expression, without intending to attribute a specific neurosis to Descartes, in order to draw the reader's attention to interesting parallels between Descartes's personality and some of the clinical cases described by R. D. Laing. See his *The Divided Self* (London: Tavistock, 1959). See also, more generally on the schizoid personality, H. J. S. Guntrip, *Schizoid Phenomena, Object Relations and the Self* (New York: International University Press, 1969); W. Ronald D. Fairbairn, *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 31. I am very grateful to my friend and colleague, Dr. Louis Breger, for calling my own attention to these parallels.

13. See W. T. Jones, *The Sciences and the Humanities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), pp. 273ff.

## APPENDIX

### DESCARTES'S *OLYMPICA*<sup>1</sup>

translated by  
JOHN F. BENTON

He [Descartes] informs us that on November 10, 1619, after going to bed full of inspiration and completely absorbed by the thought of having that very day discovered the foundations of marvelous knowledge,<sup>2</sup> he had in a single night three consecutive dreams, which he believed could only have come from on high. After going to sleep, his imagination was struck by the appearance of some phantoms who appeared to him and who frightened him so much

that, thinking he was walking through the streets, he was forced to turn over on his left side in order to get to the place where he wanted to go, because he felt a great weakness on his right side, on which he could not support himself. Ashamed of proceeding in this fashion, he made an effort to stand up, but he felt a windstorm which, carrying him along in a sort of whirlwind, made him make three or four turns on his left foot. So far this did not frighten him. The difficulty he had in dragging himself along made him expect to fall at each step, until he saw along his route an open college and went into it to find shelter and a remedy for his problem. He tried to reach the college chapel, where he first thought he would go to pray, but realizing that he had passed a man of his acquaintance without greeting him, he wished to retrace his steps to address him properly and was violently hurled back by the wind which blew against the church. At the same time he saw in the middle of the college courtyard someone else, who in a respectful and polite fashion called him by name and said to him that if he was willing to go find Monsieur N., he had something to give him. M. Descartes fancied that it was a melon which had been imported from some foreign country. But what surprised him more was to see that the people who joined this man in gathering around to converse with him were erect and steady on their feet, while he, standing in the same place, remained bent and staggering, and that the wind, which he had thought several times would blow him over, had greatly diminished. With this fancy in mind, he woke up, and at that moment he felt a sharp pain, which made him fear lest this be the working of some evil spirit which wished to captivate him. Immediately he turned on his right side, for he had gone to sleep and had the dream on his left side. He prayed to God to ask protection against the evil spirit of his dream and to be preserved from all the misfortunes which could threaten him as a damnation for his sins, which he realized were serious enough to draw anathema on his head, although until then he had led a life which men found irreproachable.

In this state he went to sleep again, after an interval of nearly two hours of various thoughts on the blessings and evils of this world. Immediately he had a new dream in which he believed he heard a sharp and shattering noise, which he took for a clap of thunder. The fright it gave him woke him directly, and after opening his eyes he perceived many sparkling lights scattered about the room. The same thing had often happened to him at other times and it was not very unusual for him, when he awoke in the middle of the night, to have his eyes clear enough to catch a glimpse of the objects closest to him. On this particular occasion, however, he wished to recur to explanations taken from Philosophy, and he drew from it conclusions satisfactory to his mind, after having observed, by alternately opening and then closing his eyes, the quality of the sensible forms which appeared before him. Thus his fear was dispelled and he fell asleep again with considerable composure.

A moment later he had a third dream, which unlike the first two contained nothing frightening. In this last dream he found a book on his table, without knowing who had put it there. He opened it, and seeing that it was an encyclopedia [*Dictionnaire*], he was delighted, hoping that it could be of great use to him. At the same instant he felt under his hand another book, equally

new to him, without knowing where it had come from. He found that it was an anthology of poems by different authors called the *Corpus Poetarum*.<sup>3</sup> He was drawn by the desire to read something in it and on opening the book, he fell on the verse

*Quod vitae sectabor iter?* etc. [What path of life shall I pursue?]<sup>4</sup>

At the same moment he became aware of a man he did not know, who handed him a piece of poetry, beginning with *Est & Non*,<sup>5</sup> and who praised it to him as an excellent composition. M. Descartes told him that he knew what it was, and that this poem was one of the Idylls of Ausonius contained in the big anthology of poetry on his table. He wanted to show it to the man and began to leaf through the book, whose order and arrangement he prided himself on knowing thoroughly. While he was looking for the place, the man asked him where he had gotten the book, and M. Descartes replied that he could not say how he had it, but that a moment before he had been handling another book, which had just disappeared, without knowing who had brought it to him nor who had removed it. He had not finished before he saw the book reappear at the other end of the table. But he found that the encyclopedia was no longer complete as it had appeared the first time. Meanwhile he went on to the poems of Ausonius, in the anthology of poetry through which he was leafing, and being unable to find the poem which begins *Est & Non*, he said to the man that he knew another by the same poet which was even more beautiful than this one, and that it began *Quod vitae sectabor iter?* The man asked him to show it to him, and M. Descartes set about to look for it, when he came upon several copperplate engravings [*gravez en taille douce*] of small portraits. This led him to say that the book was quite handsome, but that it was not the same edition as that with which he was familiar.<sup>6</sup> He was just at that point when the books and the man disappeared and faded away from his imagination, without, however, waking him. The remarkable thing to note here is that, while wondering if what he had just seen was a dream or a vision, he not only decided in his sleep that it was a dream, but he had interpreted it before he awoke. He decided that the encyclopedia meant nothing other than all the branches of learning brought together, and that the anthology of poems, called the *Corpus Poetarum*, indicated in particular and in a most precise fashion Philosophy and Wisdom joined together. Indeed, he did not believe that one should be so very astonished to see that the poets, even those who write nothing but twaddle, were full of sayings more serious, more sensible, and better expressed than those found in the writings of the philosophers. He attributed this marvel to the divinity of Inspiration and to the power of Imagination, which produce the seeds of wisdom (which are found in the spirit of all men, like sparks of fire in pieces of flint) with much greater ease and even much greater brilliance than Reason can produce in philosophers.<sup>7</sup> M. Descartes continued to interpret his dream in his sleep, judging that the poem on the uncertainty of the type of life one should choose, which

begins by *Quod vitae sectabor iter?*, indicated the good advice of a wise person, or even Moral Theology.

At this moment, wondering if he was dreaming or thinking, he woke up unperturbed, and with his eyes open continued the interpretation of his dream along the same line. By the poets collected in the anthology he understood the Revelation and the Inspiration by which he did not despair of seeing himself favored. By the poem *Est & Non*, which is the *Yes* and the *No* of Pythagoras [marginal note (*sic*): *ναυ και ου*], he understood Truth and Falsity in human understanding and profane learning. Seeing that the application of all these things succeeded in suiting him so satisfactorily, he was bold enough to conclude that the Spirit of Truth had chosen to use this dream to reveal the treasures of all the disciplines of learning to him. All that remained for him to explain were the little engraved portraits which he had found in the second book, and he no longer sought their explanation after an Italian painter paid him a visit no later than the next day.<sup>8</sup>

This last dream, which contained nothing but the most pleasant and agreeable things, seemed to him to indicate the future, and it was limited to those things which should happen to him in the remainder of his life. But he took the two earlier dreams as warnings concerning his past life, which might not have been as innocent in the eyes of God as it was to men. And he believed that this was the reason for the terror and fright which accompanied these two dreams. The melon which someone wanted to give him in the first dream, he said, signified the delights of solitude, though presented by purely human appeals. The wind which blew him toward the college chapel, when his right side was hurting him, was nothing other than the evil Spirit which tried to throw him forcefully into a place where he had planned to go of his own free will. [A marginal note by Descartes read, "A malo Spiritu ad Templum propellebar"—I was driven to the Church by the Devil.]

This is why God did not permit him to go further and let him be carried, even to a holy place, by a Spirit which He had not sent, although he was convinced that it had been the Spirit of God which had made him make his first steps toward this church. The fear which struck him in the second dream indicated, in his opinion, his *synteresis*, that is, the prick of conscience concerning the sins which he could have committed up to that point in his life. The thunder which he heard was the signal of the Spirit of Truth which descended on him to take possession of him.

This last imaginative interpretation surely smacks of Inspiration, and it would easily lead us to believe that M. Descartes might have been drinking the evening before he went to bed. It was, indeed, the eve of Martinmas, an evening when it was customary in the place where he was, as in France, to devote oneself to revelry.<sup>9</sup> But he assures us that he had passed the whole day and the evening in complete sobriety, and that it had been three months since he had last drunk wine. He adds that the Spirit which excited in him the inspiration which he had felt affecting his brain for several days had predicted these dreams before he retired to bed, and that his human spirit had no part in it.

1. This text renders into English a seventeenth-century French paraphrase and translation by Adrien Baillet of Descartes's Latin record of three dreams he had on the night of November 10/11, 1619, when he was twenty-three years old. Only a few fragments of the first-person Latin record survive, though there is enough to show that Baillet's paraphrase was reasonably accurate; it can be found in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1897-1913), vol. X, pp. 179-86.
2. The Latin text of the opening sentence was transcribed, "X. Novembris 1619, cum plenus forem Enthousiasmo, et mirabilis scientiae fundamenta reperirem." A marginal note at the beginning of the work read, "XI. Novembris, coepi intelligere fundamentum inventi mirabilis"—"11 November I began to understand the basis of the marvelous discovery." This is the form given in the inventory of Descartes's papers published in the *Oeuvres de Descartes*, vol. X, p. 7. The sentence quoted in Baillet's *Vie*, as printed in *Oeuvres*, vol. X, p. 179, adds the year 1620. Is this an error, or did Descartes take a year to begin his understanding?
3. A marginal note read: Divided in five books, printed at Lyon and Geneva, etc. This information helps to identify the work as the *Corpus omnium veterum poetarum latinorum*, edited by Pierre de Brosses, which appeared in two editions before 1619, the first at Lyon in 1603, the second at Geneva in 1611. The *Corpus* was "big," being composed of two volumes in quarto, the first of 1426 pages and the second of 888 pages (895 in the 1611 edition).
4. The poem, entitled *Ex Graeco Pythagoricum, de ambiguitate eligendae vitae*, *Edyllium XV*, was printed in vol. II of the *Corpus*, p. 655 (first edition), or p. 658 (second edition). It is printed with an English translation as Eclogue 2 in *Ausonius*, ed. H. G. E. White, Loeb Library (2 vols., London, 1919), vol. I, pp. 162-69. On Ausonius's Eclogue and the crossroads of Pythagoras, see S. K. Heninger, Jr., *Touches of Sweet Harmony* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1974), pp. 269-71.
5. The poem *Est et Non* is the fourth Eclogue of Ausonius, ed. White, *ibid.*, pp. 170-73. The poem vigorously attacks empty dialectic debate. According to Norman K. Smith, *New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes* (London: Russell & Russell, 1952), p. 35, the two poems of Ausonius appear on the same page of the 1603 edition of the *Corpus poetarum*, the edition which Descartes surely used at the Jesuit College of La Flèche, and on facing pages of the edition of 1611.
6. Neither of the editions of the *Corpus* printed before 1619 contained copperplate engravings.
7. This passage is very close to the Latin of the *Cogitationes privatae*, printed in *Oeuvres*, vol. X, p. 217: "Mirum videri possit, quare graves sententiae in scriptis poetarum, magis quam philosophorum. Ratio est quod poetae per entusiasmum et vim imaginationis scripsere: sunt in nobis semina scientiae, ut in silice, quae per rationem a philosophis educuntur per imaginationem a poetis excutiuntur magisque elucet."
8. This passage is the only indication that Descartes considered a detail of the dream predictive.
9. Descartes was with the imperial army at Neuberg on the Danube when he had this dream. Three months before (when he had last drunk wine), he attended the coronation of the Emperor Ferdinand II at Frankfurt.