CHAPTER 2

Chinese Dogs and French Scapegoats: An Essay in Zoonomastics

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Il paraît que la vérité vient doucement, à pas de colombe.
La force, elle, laisse sur la terre des griffes de sa course.

MICHEL FOUCAULT, "La force de fuir" (1973)

1 LeDogue, Foucault’s Virtually Invisible Dog

I am prepared to swear on Mao Zedong’s head that Michel Foucault did not live with a dog. Had he been living with a canine companion in the 1960s, when he wrote his chapter-length analysis of Velasquez’s 1656 painting Las Meninas, he might have read it less anthropocentrically. ‘Might have’ because many of us, Foucault readers, art lovers and academics, who did not live with a dog in the 1970s and even 1980s, also did not then read much into the presence of a dog in the Velasquez painting. Foucault lists and describes eight characters (personnages), in the foreground and middle ground of the painting. In fact, there are clearly nine, and the ninth is the mastiff who lies in the forefront of all of the others. Today, as the human-animal relationship has come front and centre in academic, as well as mainstream discourse, it is hard to believe that in the numerous threes, trios, triples, triangles and trilogies emerging from Foucault’s analysis of Las Meninas, the dog is totally excluded. Eagle-eyed and expert decoder that he was, Foucault wrote page upon page on the representation of representation, on the visible and the invisible, on the multiple gazes and perspectives in this painting … all without acknowledging the dog’s role.

Laura Hobgood-Oster first noted Foucault’s blindness to the dog.² She quotes the short passage regarding the dog in Foucault’s chapter:

The entire picture is looking out at a scene for which it is itself a scene. A condition of pure reciprocity manifested by the observing and observed mirror, the two stages of which are uncoupled at the lower corners of the picture: on the left canvas with its back to us, by means of which the exterior point is made into pure spectacle; to the right the dog lying on the floor, the only element in the picture that is neither looking at anything nor moving, because it is not intended, with its deep reliefs and the light playing on its silky hair, to be anything but an object to be seen.³

Hobgood-Oster aptly comments that “[t]hough ‘man’ is a recent invention, ‘animals’ must still be the consummate other and always remain object.”⁴ She does not pursue the matter further, except to say that she disagrees with Foucault’s interpretation precisely because the dog is not given a role. Ironically, there are two mistakes in her very brief Foucault passage, which reenacts the virtual invisibility of the dog in Foucault’s own analysis. First, Hobgood-Oster states that the dog “happens to be taking a nap,” but he is sitting upright, therefore more likely awake and looking at something outside the frame; and, secondly, the text reads: “the image would be incomplete with the ‘animal.’” Here a typo seems to have eluded both the critic and her editors; the text should read “without the ‘animal’.”⁵

Furthermore, Hobgood-Oster ignores two admittedly brief mentions of the dog in Foucault’s chapter. He writes that, on the bottom left of the painting, it is the corner of the canvas that forms the tip of the perspectival figure X in the first plane and, on the right, the dwarf, to which he adds parenthetically: “(whose shoe is placed on the dog’s back).”⁶ Today, awakened to the animal in us, one glance at the painting corrects this glaring mistake. It is obvious to us now that the dog, not the dwarf, acts as counterpoint. The second mention of the dog is equally mystifying: Foucault states that the princess is surrounded “by a swirl of courtiers, attendants, animals and buffoons.”⁷ No matter

³ Ibid., 12. Italics are mine.
⁴ Ibid., 13.
⁵ Ibid., 13.
⁷ Ibid. Translation and italics are mine.