

SACRIFICING THE TEXT:

THE PHILOSOPHER/POET AT MOUNT MORIAH

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Thus the journey is like a silent progress through the indeterminate and the contingent, a holding of the breath, a process which has no present, which is inserted, like a blank duration, between what has passed and what lies ahead, and which yet is measured: three days!...

.....Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar".

*But take another Abraham. One who wanted to perform the sacrifice altogether in the right way and had a correct sense in general of the whole affair, but could not believe that he was the one meant, he, an ugly old man, and the dirty youngster that was his child. He is afraid that after starting out as Abraham with his son he would change on his way into Don Quixote... An Abraham who should come unsummoned!*Franz Kafka, "Mount Moriah".

1 The biblical story of Akedah, the binding of Isaac for the burnt offering by his father Abraham, has held a peculiar grip on both literary and philosophical imagination. In this paper, I will follow in the steps of several thinkers who have responded to the irrecusable summons of this narrative. By looking at passages from Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Emmanuel Levinas' "The Trace of the Other," and Jacques Derrida's *Gift of Death*, I will accompany the philosopher on his pilgrimage to the land of Moriah in the hope of uncovering a common imperative behind each of these hermeneutic quests.

2 Perhaps the reason for singling out Genesis 22, from many a blood-curdling biblical episode, lies in the unique nature of Abraham's plight. As Kierkegaard points out in *Fear and Trembling*, human imagination cannot possibly plumb the depths of Abraham's suffering when he had to sacrifice his long-awaited, beloved son, the only comfort of his and Sarah's old age. Both Abraham's love for his son and the pain of the imminent loss are absolutely great, beyond the pale of what an average human can bear. It is the pain that he has to suffer alone, and indeed Abraham is the Bible's most remarkable loner, self-banished from the human community. Abraham's solitude is unredeemable because it results from the terrible secret he harbors in his heart when he sets off on his journey to Mount Moriah. The secret cannot be shared: Abraham's readiness to obey his God and perform the dreadful duty thwarts human comprehension and silences speech. As Kierkegaard confesses in exasperation, "No one was so great as Abraham and who is capable of understanding him?"⁽¹⁾

3 Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio, takes upon himself an onerous task: he will describe the agony of Abraham's trial. This means that by procuring a mimetic repetition of what transpired in Genesis 22 in the form of a book, he will become a witness to the biblical event. The poet who describes a heroic deed immortalizes the hero for posterity and thus renders an invaluable service to mankind. By standing guard to memory and transmuting laudable deeds into universal concepts and comprehensible images, he perpetuates "eternal consciousness" and ensconces man in Absolute Spirit. Alas, Abraham is no hero. Neither Prometheus nor Achilles, he is hardly an exemplar worthy of imitation. Kierkegaard surmises that Abraham would actually prefer to partake of human generality; for example, he would gladly perform the heroic deed and offer his own life to spare Isaac's. Then, his actions would be intelligible to all, and he could enjoy "his home in the universal, his friendly dwelling-house, always ready to re-

ceive him with open arms when he desires to live there." (*FT*,110) Abraham's faith, however, ejects him from a secure abode in the universal.

4 Hence, Kierkegaard alias de Silentio has to tell this story differently; he must himself take a solitary path, outside the well-trodden domain of general concepts and familiar metaphors. He produces several variations on the story of Abraham, in the hope that a sudden leap of imagination will allow him to penetrate the secret of Abraham's obedience. In the first account, both Isaac and Abraham keep their faith but Isaac comes to doubt his father's motives. In the second story, Abraham loses faith, unable to forgive God that he demanded such a dreadful proof of obedience from him. The third narrative has Abraham doubt the righteousness of his sacrificial gesture, and in the last one Isaac loses faith. None of the resulting narratives coincides with the biblical account of the three-day ordeal because with each subsequent approach to Mount Moriah, the storyteller recoils in dread from the passion of "fear and trembling" that must have driven Abraham to the horrible deed.

5 The story of Abraham thus stands as the epitome of the inexpressible, yet at the same time it demands to be re-told: "and speak one must, from respect for greatness." (*FT*, 109). Kierkegaard notes that the epistemological tools of systematic philosophy such as Hegelianism prove inadequate to the task of penetrating Abraham's secret: "Personally, I have devoted a considerable amount of time to the study of Hegelian philosophy, and I believe I understand it fairly well.... On the other hand, whenever I try to think about Abraham, I am as it were annihilated." (*FT*, 39) The mystery of Akedah has dwarfed the Absolute Spirit itself! What Abraham believes in must remain an impossibility in the world of sovereign reason; it "utterly astounds me and my brain twists and turns in its skull." (*FT* 68)

6 By writing about Abraham, Kierkegaard can perform a pantomime of walking along the patriarch's path, but he will remain incapable of the leap of faith that was necessary to accomplish the sacrifice. The poet can attain to the movement of infinite resignation, performed by tragic heroes such as Agamemnon who sacrificed his daughter to placate the gods, but this gesture will forever remain only a surrogate of Abraham's absolute faith. Abraham believed by virtue of the absurd, whereby the impossible will happen and all human calculation is abandoned. The commentator strains to approximate the knight's gesture of the absurd, yet lacking faith, he is forbidden to effectuate the transcendent leap. In his necessary reliance on the mediation of concepts to tell the story, the exegete cannot aspire to the uniqueness of Abraham's condition. Versions two and four of Kierkegaard's account state explicitly that, in contradistinction to the biblical model, the imagined Abraham returns home. The patriarch from the Book of Genesis does not even glimpse back towards home but moves on to live in a foreign land. When he settles in Beersheba and buys a burial plot there, he avows: "I am a stranger and a sojourner with you". (Genesis 23.4) He renounces all of his possessions, his family and neighbours, and, sustained by faith, he never mourns his loss. As Kierkegaard remarks, were he merely human, he would weep and long for what he had left behind.

7 It becomes apparent that faith requires exile from the domicile; it is the prerequisite of Abraham's chosenness, while all of his "merely human" imitators have to turn around and seek solace at home. Kierkegaard intimates that faith is, in a mysterious way, related to exile, although he never elucidates this necessary connection. No wonder: the imperative that impels Abraham to give up his world remains inscrutable for the philosopher/poet. Moreover, were Abraham to understand the nature of his absolute obligation to perform the sacrifice, he would have returned home, like his imagined counterparts. Kierkegaard speculates: "how different it would have been! For then his retreat would have been a flight, his salvation an accident, his reward a dishonour, his future perhaps a disaster!" (*FT*, 24) Like the imperfect clones in his biblical fictions, Kierkegaard cannot undertake the journey of no return: he is also home-bound, destined to dwell within the four walls of systemic knowledge. Since he is incapable of the leap of faith, his

creative flights must abide by the dictates of reason, within the limits of his ken. Kierkegaard recognizes the paradoxical nature of his own attempt to give an account of Abraham's journey. He must rely on language to imitate the patriarch's movements; yet, since the poet is excluded from the covenant of faith, he can only travel the familiar path of universally shareable concepts and therefore fail to render Abraham's unique belief. This, again, stands in stark contrast to the poetic rendition of heroic deeds because the tragic hero himself is never silent. For example, Agamemnon has to reveal her fate to Iphigenia and although she laments her fate, she comprehends her father's noble motives. For the tragic hero, speech is a consolation and remuneration for his loss because it translates him into the universal. Kierkegaard is well aware that language has to pass through the medium of general concepts, and "as soon as I speak, I express the universal, and when I remain silent, no one can understand me." (*FT*, 85)

8 Abraham believes truly because he accepts the absurd and relinquishes the need to comprehend the condition to which he has been summoned. His offering of what is most precious to him to God is absolute because he obeys God prior to the knowledge of why it has been asked of him; he respects the mystery and carries the burden of the dreadful secret obligingly. Therefore, unlike his eloquent imitator, Abraham cannot speak. Because his relation to God is private, Abraham bears the agony of the absolute impossibility of speech. Were he to produce a torrent of words, he would not be understood; the terror of the paradox of faith lies in this silence. However, Kierkegaard recognizes that within the bounds of human ethics, which is the function of eternal consciousness, his silence, towards Isaac in particular, is unjustified. Abraham is condemned by ethics; not only did he default on his family obligations required from him by a universal moral code, but he did not comply with the injunction that all secrets be divulged for the sake of the universal. The universal relies on the manifestation of the particular and excludes all hiddenness; therefore, it cannot accommodate Abraham's singular, inexpressible secret. As a result, if Kierkegaard turns to the universalism of the Hegelian system in order to sublimate the paradox of faith into a story, he must fail to describe Abraham's ordeal accurately.

9 Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham is contested by Emmanuel Levinas in two essays from the volume *Proper Names*.⁽²⁾ Ethics constitutes the foundation of Levinas' philosophical enquiry; however, the French thinker abandons the universalizing definitions of ethics in favor of the phenomenology of the Other, which regards a relation of obligation to the Other as the condition of possibility of any moral system.⁽³⁾ This ethics of the absolute renunciation of self for the sake of the Other puts in question both Kant's categorical imperative which decrees respect for the practical law and Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* whereby individual responsibility is reconciled with the demands of the community. According to Levinasian ethics, the I answers to the Other in his or her particularity as a human being, rather than to itself or before any collectivity such as family or state. The I is born into the ethical relation with the Other, always already responsible for his or her suffering; yet, the I egotistically tensed on itself may choose to look the other way and act irresponsibly.

10 Similarly to Kierkegaard, Levinas argument proceeds from a critique of Hegelianism, the system which leaves no room for the absolute alterity of the other.⁽⁴⁾ Since speculative thought can only conceive of the other within the I's epistemological horizon, it always reduces alterity to the measure of the same. In "Kierkegaard: Existence and Ethics," Levinas acknowledges that Kierkegaard's account of Abraham's suffering opens up the absolute dimension of subjectivity beyond Hegelian "speculative totalitarianism." This breach in the system's unity and self-coincidence allows the subject to stand absolutely separated in his or her proper being, unsublatable under the system's totalizing concepts. According to Kierkegaard, belief, which is linked to suffering and the lack of comprehension, remains in excess of the triumphant truth of absolute reason, unresolved in synthesis "like an open wound in a state of endless bleeding." (*PN*, 69-70) Further, Levi-

nas commends Kierkegaard for noting that all discourse dissolves the I's uniqueness in the generality of concepts and betrays the secret of its private relation to the Other. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's account pivots on the knight of faith's incomparable anguish, which is no more than a function of the I's egological orientation. In Levinas' view, Kierkegaard tells a story of extreme egotism and solitude which preclude cohabiting with others. Kierkegaard's achievement lies in the recognition of such egotism, and his superb portrayal of the I distressed over itself is a proper diagnosis of the human condition. Yet, the I preoccupied with its own suffering is incapable of acknowledging the separate existence of the Other. Were Kierkegaard's subject to relax its egotism, it would only collapse into the universal and renege on faith. For Levinas, however, the surrender of individuality to generality is not the only option for relieving the spasm of interiority: one can also act upon one's ethical obligation and turn away from oneself in the direction of the Other. Not only does such an ethical relation with other not bring the I back under the authority of the universal system, but also, as Levinas argues extensively in *Totality and Infinity*,⁽⁵⁾ it harbours the potential of shattering that oppressive totality. The suffering that excludes the Other is irresponsible, while Levinas postulates the relation of non-indifference to the Other. The subject preoccupied with its own condition loses its primacy when it becomes receptive to the distress of the Other. Thus, in Kierkegaard's version, Abraham's secret through which he maintains a private relation to the divine only intensifies the subject's egoism and further obliterates the need to act responsibly. In the perspective of absolute ethics, Abraham's love for Isaac is egotistical, and so is Abraham's devotion to God as a condition of his own chosenness.

11 It is interesting to note that, in a different context, Levinas himself evokes the figure of Abraham. The French philosopher uses the symbolism of the patriarch's non-comprehending, immediate response to God's command to convey the sense of the subject's readiness to come to the Other's rescue prior to the calculation of loss and gain.⁽⁶⁾ Unlike Kierkegaard, Levinas focuses on the first moment of Abraham's drama, when he is called by name to perform the sacrifice. While Kierkegaard, as well as other commentators on Genesis 22 such as Erich Auerbach or Franz Kafka, are mostly interested in what might have occurred during the three agonizing days of the journey to Mount Moriah, Levinas passes in silence this hermeneutically promising passage. Instead, in order to execute God's command, Abraham becomes the ear for hearing God's voice. This ability to listen to the Other's voice is the mark of the ethical, as opposed to absorbing the Other in the egotism of the gaze. Such responsible turning of the ear in the direction of the Other does not leave the I the option of returning to itself by means of sweeping the Other into its system of knowledge.

12 In the essay "The Trace of the Other," Levinas draws an analogy between the adventure of Western philosophy, the philosophy of immanence that always equates thought and being, and the journey of Ulysses who "through all of his peregrinations is only on the way to his native island."⁽⁷⁾ This story, in which the Other emerges only as the transmutation of the same, is foiled by the Abrahamic journey, in which the promised destination is unknown. In the light of his own appropriation of Abraham's story, it is curious that Levinas overlooks the necessary connection between faith and exile established in Kierkegaard's account. If, as Levinas insists, Kierkegaard's Abraham was motivated by supreme egotism, why should he relinquish his domicile, his *oikos*, as readily as he has given up Isaac, whom he also "owns" through paternal law?

13 As a consequence of his efforts to understand Abraham, Kierkegaard ponders whether ethics must be suspended if Abraham is to obey God's voice. Kierkegaard defines ethics as the individual expression of what is valid for all: "it rests immanent in itself, having nothing outside of itself which is its telos, being itself the telos of everything outside itself." (*FT*, 34) In order to stand in an unmediated relation with God, Abraham has to situate himself above the universal. Therefore, in terms of ethics, which among others commands love for one's kin, Abraham's action is a double transgression: an intention to commit murder and a failure to perform the father's duty. Yet, the unmediated nature of

Abraham's engagement to God indicates a relationship with otherness that cannot be recuperated by immanence, and it points to a constitution of subjectivity that, even in its prime moment of tensing up upon oneself in anguish and suffering, has always already obeyed the Other's voice. Kierkegaard notes that, while a hero becomes one by his own strength, he can "never, by his own strength, become a knight of faith." (*FT*, 34) Faith is not an appurtenance of volitional consciousness because the act of self-transcendence is heteronomous with respect to an exterior entity.

14 Despite Levinas' insistence on Abraham's paramount egotism in Kierkegaard's account, it is Kierkegaard who first recognized the unique passion that lifts an individual over and above "eternal consciousness." This passion, which in Abraham's case is called faith, presupposes the moment of turning away from oneself and toward the Other, anterior to the hope for remuneration: "for he who loves God without faith reflects upon himself, but he who loves God with faith reflects upon God." (*FT*, 45) Kierkegaard, guided by the paradigm of the autonomous and self-reliant subject, is unable to come to terms with this non-reflective moment in the encounter with the Other. However, the fact that he isolates the moment that does not figure in the economy of the subject brings him closer to Levinas' own thinking than the French philosopher would like to admit. Moreover, in Levinas' definition of ethics, my obligation to the other is never complete since I have never done enough. Likewise, the knight of faith, unlike the tragic hero, can never rest: his actions do not come to a dialectical resolution; his strife is never over and his journey continues as does his infinite obligation: "the leap of faith is never complete." (*FT*, 115) This is also why the story of Abraham is so oppressive for the commentator: it confers upon him or her the horror that cannot be alleviated through catharsis as in the case of the tragic hero. Kierkegaard's distrust of the universalizing tendency of language and a deep sense of its inadequacy to account for what cannot be absorbed by the system of knowledge, already lays the foundation for the 20th-century critique of representation, especially Levinas's own denouncement of Western representational practices as the betrayal of the Other.

15 In *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida stages an encounter between Kierkegaard and Levinas.⁽⁸⁾ Derrida, whose thought has been increasingly influenced by Levinas' heterology, proposes that ethics is a question of the secret. The secret ensures that my relation to the Other does not recapture the Other for the same; however, only because there is a secret, the Other is for the I. The Other persists as a secret harboured by the same, the secret of secret, since it is unbeknown to the bearer. In this sense, Abraham's predicament would be emblematic of the ethical relation: he must not know what the deity's reasons are, or we would not be faced with the Other as God or God as the Other. (*GD*, 57) The secretive, hidden deity demanded the most inexplicable gesture from Abraham who, therefore, had to keep it secret from Isaac. As Derrida points out, Kierkegaard also yields to a double necessity of the secret, and despite his repeated attempts, he cannot talk in truth about the mystery of Abraham's faith although he envelops it in words. In a gesture of imitation, Kierkegaard signs his book as Johannes de Silentio - he who has kept the secret. Moreover, his text hides another secret - a clandestine, unfulfilled love for Regina Olsen. Following Abraham's itinerary via Kierkegaard, Derrida concludes: "It is a strange contact - both paradoxical and terrifying - that binds infinite responsibility to silence and secrecy." (*GD*, 60) If I am in secret, I alone bear the responsibility of making a decision to act on an ethical obligation. I cannot disburden myself in the medium of the universal since no one can perform my duty in my place. By translating this decision into speech, however, the absolute singularity of my act is suspended and hence my capacity as a moral agent to make a decision. Yet, for ethics, if I do not speak, I cannot account for my actions before others or be taken to task for my decisions. The aporia of responsibility lies in the paradox that ethics also calls for irresponsibility: "one always risks not managing to accede to the concept of responsibility in the process of forming it." (*GD*, 61) The contradiction between responsibility in general and absolute responsi-

lity to and for the Other cannot be overcome by appealing to a higher tribunal. In that case, can there be an instance of responsibility that resists sublation into the generality of the concept of responsibility? Even if I formulate it as responsibility before and for the Other, I have said too much and ruined the absolute singularity of an ethical decision by pronouncing a sentence that belongs to the class of ethical imperatives.

16 If absolute responsibility cannot be derived from the concept of ethics, then it must remain unthinkable or persist as the very secret of thought. It cannot present itself, account for itself, be known in any manner, not even as a secret kept in the closet. It does not appear in the court of law or before the tribunal of individual conscience. Derrida agrees with Kierkegaard that secrecy is intolerable for general ethics; consequently, the story of Abraham harbors the secret that will undermine the integrity of any totalizing ethical system. For instance, if Abraham were to act out of duty in the Kantian sense, his wish to sacrifice Isaac would be incompatible with his double function of the author and the addressee of the categorical imperative. The sacrifice to the Other interrupts the economy of the autonomous, self-legislating subject. In this sense, the absolute duty "implies a sort of gift or sacrifice that functions beyond debt and duty, beyond duty as a form of debt." (*GD*, 63)

17 Abraham sacrifices Isaac in absolute contradiction to his feelings. The 'now' of the decision to perform the sacrifice belongs to the secret: it is not reflected in the temporal continuum where rational choices in the purview of general ethics are being weighed. Since the instant of the ethical decision never appears in consciousness; it requires a different notion of time, which does not constitute a present. This skip in temporality, incommensurable with presence, cannot be grasped or apprehended, meditated upon or conceived. It cannot be reclaimed by dialectics, i.e., put to work by the travail of the negative. In the moment of decision, the two duties, of the general and the absolute ethics must contradict each other: Abraham sacrifices ethics by responding to the call of absolute duty, but the general ethics has to be maintained in order for there to be sacrifice. For Levinas this means that ethics in general presupposes general ethics. Derrida argues, however, that this is true only insofar as there is general ethics; otherwise we would not have been able to sacrifice our world to the Other or it would not be a sacrifice: "the order of human duty must continue to insist on its rights." (*GD*, 67) Although absolute duty calls for a betrayal of everything that manifests itself in the realm of the universal, I am asked to do the impossible and heed my duties "at home" while responding to the call of the Other.

18 Thus, Derrida points to the obvious: the paradox of Abraham, the impossible contradiction which he lives through is indeed the most common and everyday experience of responsibility. Insofar as I am placed in the ethical relation to the Other, I am always ready to perform my duty toward the Other, to sacrifice the comfort of my home for the sake of the Other in the absolute singularity of my responsibility. Yet, I cannot respond to the Other's plea for help without at the same time sacrificing or failing to respond to the plea from another Other. Before the generality of others, I always fail to perform my duty: "day and night, at every instant, on all the Mount Moriahs of this world, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love, over those to whom I owe absolute fidelity, incommensurably." (*GD*, 69) At every moment I am failing in my duty to numerous others - I will never do enough for them. Every decision I make on behalf of the Other means that at the same time I fail in my duty: "every one being sacrificed to every one else in this land of Moriah that is our habitat every second of every day." (*GD*, 69) If I respond to the call of the Other, I choose to be deaf to the call of all the others, and I can never justify that sacrifice. What binds me to a particular other will then remain ultimately unjustifiable since there is no higher instance that would legitimate my decision.

19 Derrida recognizes that this antinomy of ethical duty cannot be reconciled in any medium that would justify or comprehend the absolute sacrifice, because it is the sacrifice of the most imperative duty, which binds me to a particular other, in favor of another

absolutely imperative duty obligating me to every other Other. Because every other is every concrete Other, in the instant of ethical decision, "every one else asks us at every moment to behave like knights of faith." (*GD*, 79) The apparent tautology of the phrase '*tout autre est tout autre*' (every other [one] is every [bit] other) is at the same time a radical heterology.

20 As ethical beings, we 'share' a secret, yet not in the sense of being privy to hidden knowledge and thus privileged as knowers but as the bearers of the irreducible mystery of 'not knowing'. This secret is mine at every instant of incomprehension, and I struggle with it, always anew, whenever I make a decision to act. Yet, because I do not know it, it does not belong to me, and I will never experience it, reflect upon it, or be able to pass it on. The closest to my heart and hearth, it is also at the farthest remove, and I experience it as *unheimlich*.

21 The encounter between Kierkegaard and Levinas orchestrated by Derrida allows us to recognize a confluence between Kierkegaard's and Levinas' thought that the latter would be reluctant to admit. Derrida recognizes that Levinas' own reformulation of ethics cannot be articulated without resorting to the symbolism of the Jewish absent God. Since he cannot distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and the infinite alterity of every human, Levinas' own ethics is already a religious one. (*GD*, 84) In this context, the border between the ethical and the religious becomes problematic, as do the borders with other adjacent discourses. This points to the instability of the concept of responsibility: it is not only fluid but actually nowhere to be found. It functions as 'a secret' of every totalizing system of discourse; however, due to its non-ontological nature, it allows for the distribution of meanings within the respective domains of these disciplines. In this context, Kierkegaard anticipates Levinas' project of questioning ethics: although, on one hand he is an advocate of a suspension of ethics in the name of supreme individualism, he also interrogates self-reflective subjectivity in view of something that stands in relation of absolute alterity to it: the passion of fear and trembling which lifts an individual from the universal. Therefore, he paves the way for Levinas to question the self-closure and egotism of traditional ethics. Kierkegaard noted himself that his apology on behalf of the knight of faith does not call for the abolition of ethics, but it is a search for "an entirely different expression" of ethics. (*FT*, 100)

22 Derrida emphasizes that the ethical decision remains in a paradoxical relation to knowledge. Insofar as it breaches knowledge, it cannot appear in discourse or be submitted to an expert judgement about its successful completion. On the other hand, if it were to be decided on the basis of knowledge, it would be merely the implementation of knowledge rather than an ethical act. This irresolvable contradiction inherent in the 'concept; of responsibility as it relates to the possibility of knowledge leads me back to my initial question: What is at stake for the philosopher/poet in his passion for the story of Abraham? Why is it important that faith, sacrifice, and finally ethics are related to the condition of not having a home? What does the journey of no return mean to thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Levinas, and Derrida? As I have demonstrated on the example of Kierkegaard's text, Abraham's plight becomes a paradigmatic exile from the *episteme*. The incomprehensible has always taunted thought as that which necessarily slips out of its conceptual grasp. The thought recommences its ordeal from the moment of "not knowing," the secret that it will never seize in its speculative grid. Kierkegaard seems to be astutely aware and infinitely perplexed by these murky origins of writing. The dreadful paradox of Abraham's deed arouses in him an uncanny feeling: "this thought terrifies me, it arouses something strange within me, and so I refuse to think it." (*FT*, 35) What the self refuses to think, however, reiterates as a powerful sensation of the *unheimlich*, of not being quite at home (*Heim*) within its own cognitive structures and compels it to recommence the task of thinking.

23 This intuitive insight that thought perpetuates itself as thought because it stems from the "outside of thought" which is at the same time its deepest, mysterious "interi-

or," traverses the entire project of modernity. It is worth recalling that the acclaimed father of this tradition, René Descartes, wrote, in *The Passions of the Soul*: "When the first encounter with some object surprises us, and we judge it to be new or very different from what we formerly knew, or from what we supposed that it ought to be, that causes us to wonder and be surprised; and because that may happen before we in any way knew whether this object is agreeable to us or is not so, it appears to me that wonder is the first of all passions."⁹ This passionate "wonder" is inseparable from the essential human need to continue thinking, and it precedes the distinction between the active cognizing agent and the object of its insatiable epistemological pursuit. The story of Abraham marks a textual site where philosophical commentary stands in fear and trembling, and, as it did for Kierkegaard who resented the complacency of thought in what he called a self-reflective age, it calls itself a non-philosophy so it can persevere in its task of thinking.

24 As the story of Abraham reappears in the texts of various thinkers, it also raises the question of whether a philosophical commentary itself can heed the ethical imperative with regard to the Other or if it inevitably breaks off in the encounter with the Other and cancels itself out as a genre, including Levinas' own writings. For Levinas, the mediating, representational character of language transforms every written text into an accomplice of appropriative totality. However, as Derrida points out, breaking into inscription is an inevitable betrayal of the Other, also due to the aporetic nature of the phrase '*tout autre est tout autre*.' Even a text conceived to ponder the nature of the ethical relation, or to argue on the Other's behalf, is dragged into the abstraction of the appellation 'the Other'. If, in writing, I render my responsibility to a concrete Other, I have chosen to forget what I owe to another Other. Thus, the ethical thrust of Levinas' own writings is beheaded at its very inception.

25 I would postulate that the poet/philosopher's fascination with the Abrahamic adventure is symptomatic of a desire to write a philosophical commentary that makes a soaring exit from the generality of the word. Commentary, grounded in speculative thought, sets off to travel beyond itself, towards the outside of thought, which, paradoxically, coincides with the deepest, unfathomable interiority of Abraham's untellable secret. The commentary begins with a discomfort, a moment of epistemological impasse in face of a situation I cannot think myself into. It sets off to probe a paradox which, as Kierkegaard remarked, "no thought can encompass because faith begins where thought leaves off." (*FT*, 74) The interpretive imperative operates in the silences, springing from the well of the secret which it grazes yet can never accommodate. Derrida writes, in his essay on Edmond Jabès, "Between the fragments of the broken Tablets the poem grows and the right to speech takes root... The necessity of commentary, like poetic necessity, is the very form of *exiled* speech." [emphasis mine] [The condition of exile, self-banishment from home, a certain nomadism which leaves everything behind, is such commentary's condition of possibility. Yet, does it necessarily have to be a solitary, egotistic passion, which precludes being attentive to the Other's needs? Is it possible to release the voice from the text so it gestures to the other side and incessantly shatters its own mirrors? In another remarkable passage, strangely overlooked by Levinas who is preoccupied with exactly this question, Kierkegaard relates Abraham's unconditional obedience to God's voice to the possibility of ethical reading: "and God did tempt Abraham and said unto him, Abraham, Abraham, where art thou? And he said, Behold, here I am.' And you, to whom I address my words, did you do likewise?" \(*FT*, 22\)](#)

NOTES.

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, (Oxford U.P., London 1939), p. 117. Further references to this text will be marked parenthetically as *FT*.
2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, tr. Michael B. Smith, Stanford U.P., Stanford, 1996. Further references to this text will be marked parenthetically as *PN*.
3. In his essay "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," Jacques Derrida refers to Levinas' philosophical enterprise as an "ethics of ethics". See: *Writing and Difference*, (U. Of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1978), pp.79-153.
4. Levinas extends this critique of egotism to phenomenology: Husserl's transcendental subjectivity is incapable of truly accounting for the Other. Likewise, Heidegger's ontological conceptualization of Dasein, an entity that has its Being as an issue, excludes the Other in his or her radical difference.
5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Duquesne U.P., Pittsburgh, 1961.
6. In *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, Levinas speaks of this absolute obedience, anterior to comprehension and calculation of reward, as the fundamental tenet of Judaism: "The incomparable character of the event such as the giving of the Torah [is that] one accepts it before knowing it... The doing in question is not simply the praxis as opposed to theory, but a way of actualizing without beginning with the possible... They act before they harken!" (quoted. in Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, [U. of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis, 1983], p.111.)
7. Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other", in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark Taylor (U. Of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986), p.348.
8. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, tr. David Wills, U. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995. Further references to this text will be marked parenthetically as *GD*.
9. *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, tr. Haldane and Ross, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 1931; Dover ed. 1955.
10. Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book" (*Writing and Difference*. U. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1978), p.77.