Continental Philosophy Review **31:** 387–409, 1998.
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Reading/writing between the lines

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Abstract. This paper critically examines the practices of reading and writing through the differing perspectives offered by Kierkegaard, Sartre, Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida. Although Kierkegaard's and Sartre's respective views on reading and writing do not receive much attention today, I argue that both articulate (albeit in different ways) a notion of *shared responsibility* between reader and writer that is compatible with their respective emphases on absolute responsibility for oneself, for others, and for the situation. An advantage to both Sartre's and Kierkegaard's accounts from a postmodern perspective, is that they affirm the simultaneity of individual and co-responsibility without appealing to a fixed or unitary self.

1. Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* begins with the end of a parable by Hamann:[1] "What Tarquinius Superbus said in the garden by means of the poppies, the son understood but the messenger did not." To discover the context for this epigraph, the reader must go outside Kierkegaard's text; neither he nor the pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio, ever supplies the rest of the parable nor do they attempt to show the relevance of this enigmatic statement to the "dialectical lyric" that follows. It is significant that before entering into the text, the author demands that the reader extend her/his knowledge beyond the text. That is, if we are to grasp the nature of the message understood by the son but not by the messenger, we will need to discover the "missing pieces" of the parable. Only then will we be in a position to determine the relevance of this epigraph to the text that follows.[2]

My own knowledge of the parable comes second-hand. This indirect account has satisfied me, perhaps because it fits so well with Kierkegaard's mode of indirection and because Kierkegaard was himself acquainted with the parable through an essay by G.E. Lessing. In the version that I was told, Tarquinius Superbus was an Emperor fighting a battle with his fellow countrymen far away from his kingdom, leaving his son to rule in his stead. The Emperor discovered while he was away that his ministers were plotting against his son and were planning to take over the kingdom. Since he could not leave his troops to warn his son of the impending danger, he sent a mes-

senger instead. Since he could not be sure that the messenger was trustworthy or that the messenger would not be waylaid by the councillors themselves, he chose an indirect means of letting his son know what was going on. He asked the messenger to find his son, lead him into the palace garden and cut off the heads of the tallest poppies. The son, "reading" the message correctly, promptly authorized the death of the "heads" of state and the kingdom was saved.[3]

Being given the missing pieces of the story, however, does not resolve the questions raised by the parable and by its placement at the gateway to *Fear and Trembling*. How did the father know what message to send? How was the son able to "read" the message? If we are to read this tale as an allegory for Kierkegaard's own method of indirection, then should Kierkegaard himself be understood as the father, the messenger, or even the son? Where does the ostensible author of the work, Johannes de Silentio fit in? And what about Abraham and Isaac, another father and son whose relationship provides the central focus of the pages that follow? Lastly, where do we, as readers of the text, fit into the picture? Are we merely silent witnesses to the unfolding of the work, or are we somehow implicated in it?

These questions are raised between the lines of the text. They arise in that non-space between the epigraph, the missing tale that precedes it, and the multi-faceted text that follows. Undoubtedly, the text itself gives us clues about how to understand the broader relevance of messengers who never "get" the message, senders of messages who can never be sure that their messages will be properly understood, and recipients of messages who must perform the labor of interpreting the message and who may or may not "get it right." Nonetheless, if we seize upon the most "obvious" application of the parable to *Fear and Trembling*, namely, that God is the Father/Emperor, that his messenger is the clergy who Kierkegaard chastised again and again in his writings for passing on a message to which they themselves were not spiritually committed, and that we, the readers/audience are in the position of the son who must decipher the message through the intermediary of a mimetic messenger who knows not the significance of what he is imitating, then we are still left in a quandary as to the role played by the author(s) of the work itself.

For, isn't the author also a messenger, one who relays to the reader a message about messages? But since Johannes de Silentio is merely a pseudonym, perhaps he serves as a (silent) messenger for a messenger, that is for the "real" author, Søren Kierkegaard. What kinds of distortions might arise when messengers don't receive their messages directly? Is it possible for the reader/audience to establish any criteria to distinguish between "false" and "true" messengers? Would a "true" messenger be one who follows her/his instructions

faithfully and does not attempt to enrich the message with her or his own interpretation? Is there room in this account for the messenger to take on the labor of understanding the message?

This last question parallels, in interesting ways, the question of the role of the "midwife" that Plato so often identifies with Socrates in his dialogues. What is the nature of the "assistance" that the midwife gives to the laborer? Isn't the work of the midwife itself a certain kind of labor, one whose significance all too often recedes into invisibility as the "product" of that labor (i.e. the child) becomes the universal focus of attention?[4]

2. The freedom (not) to send messages: on poetry and prose

By inquiring about the crucial, facilitating role played by the anonymous messenger, perhaps I am deflecting attention away from the message itself. This may be so. Certainly, if we accept the allegorical reading I offered above and view the messenger as analogous to the clergy that Kierkegaard was so critical of during his lifetime, Kierkegaard's own view seems to be that messengers of God, at least, may be better dispensed with altogether since they seem to dilute and even distort God's message through their translations. But the messenger in the parable cited by Hamann and recited by Kierkegaard through Johannes de Silentio, seems to be a more faithful messenger insofar as he dutifully repeats the very gestures the Emperor shows him to the Emperor's son. And yet, to characterize this messenger as faithful is also problematic, since the messenger by all accounts, does not seem to exhibit any particular kind of passion for the message itself, a commitment that is essential for Kierkegaard, if his actions are to be identified with faith.

These complications make it difficult to make sense of the role played by the messenger in communicating the message. They are added to when we step back from this allegorical reading and raise the issue of whether we can do justice to the complex processes of writing and reading if we characterize them in terms of messages sent and received. That is, if we view writers as senders of messages and readers as recipients of those messages, recipients who may interpret the message correctly or incorrectly, does this framework capture the "essence" of these processes and how they are co-implicated in one another?

A danger in characterizing the processes of writing and reading a text in terms of messages sent (by the writer) and received (by the reader) via the text (which seems to play the role of both message *and* messenger), is that we may lose more than we gain by reducing the significance of the processes of writing and reading to messages sent and hopefully received. What happens to style, for instance, on such a model? Given Kierkegaard's own idiosyn-

cratic style, a style that maintains its strange consistency across the numerous pseudonymous authors he identified with his early works, questions of style do not seem easily separable from questions regarding the content of the work itself. The Emperor's mimetic messenger, by contrast, appears to have no style, or, at the very least, his style is invisible to us and in no way interferes with his straightforward communication of his peculiar message.

Pondering these conundrums leads me once again outside the text, both Kierkegaard's text as well as this text, to engage the assistance of one of Kierkegaard's own philosophical "offspring," Jean-Paul Sartre, a "son" who was certainly not as loyal to his "father" as the Emperor's son, but one to whom Kierkegaard's honorific title, "father" of existentialism, was indeed passed on. Indeed, many newcomers to existentialism view it as originating with Sartre himself, and therefore unwittingly contribute to the replacement of the "father" by his "son."[5]

In his famous essays on writing, "What is Writing?" "Why Write?" and "For Whom Does One Write?" Sartre also employs the language of messages to describe the communication that takes place between writer and reader. While he concedes that style "makes the value of the prose," Sartre also argues that "it should pass unnoticed. Since words are transparent and since the gaze looks through them, it would be absurd to slip in among them some panes of rough glass." (1988: 39) Style, on this account, plays both a necessary and very important role in communicating the writer's message, but it has no intrinsic significance:

> The harmony of words, their beauty, the balance of the phrases, *dispose* the passions of the reader without his being aware and order them like the Mass, like music, like the dance. If he happens to consider them by themselves, he loses the meaning; there remains only a boring seesaw of phrases. (1988: 39)

Although Sartre believes that the writer's "message" takes precedence over all else, he also makes a distinction between those writers who are responsible for conveying messages to their readers, messages that should reflect and communicate the writer's own political commitments, and those who are absolved of this responsibility. More specifically, both Kierkegaard and Sartre distinguish the "labor" of the poet, that individual who, as Kierkegaard claims, lyrically sings the praises of others, from the prose writer whose labor is supposed to reflect a moral commitment, a commitment that is performatively enacted in his or her words.[6] Unlike the poet, Sartre claims, whose words "name nothing at all," and who therefore cannot be understood as a messenger, the prose writer

> knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change. He has given up the impossible dream of giving an impartial picture of Society and the human condition. (1988: 37)

For Sartre, the task of the prose writer is to disclose an aspect of the world in order to change it, but this change cannot be accomplished by the (words of the) writer alone. Issuing from the freedom of the writer, Sartre claims that the writing addresses the reader in her own freedom in the form of a question that demands a response. Without an audience, Sartre suggests, there can be no writing for there can be no questions if there is not someone or something that is questioned, or, to use Heidegger's language, placed in question by the question. (1977: 93) And, what writing places in question is not simply the complacency of a being who is content to live in the world without shouldering responsibility for his or her existence, but human being as such, a radical contingency that continually transforms its existence through its own questioning. "The function of the writer," Sartre tells us

> is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it's all about. And since he has once committed himself in the universe of language, he can never again pretend that he cannot speak. Once you enter the universe of meanings, there is nothing you can do to get out of it. (1988: 38)

Writer and reader are inextricably related within and through this "universe of meaning" for each serves as the condition for the possibility of the other. Here, freedom addresses freedom and, as Thomas Busch has pointed out, Sartre offers us in "What is Writing?" a much more satisfying picture of the rich possibilities for a genuine intersubjective dialogue/relationship than we get in *Being and Nothingness*.[7] For Sartre, the goal of the writer is to call the reader to responsibility for the situation that has been disclosed through the (reading of the) writing and the goal of the reader is to respond responsibly to the writer by freely participating in the world that the writer has disclosed and thereby altered. In short, the reader must assume responsibility for the writing and the writer must assume responsibility for the reading – a genuine co-responsibility that extends across both time and space.[8]

What are we to make of Sartre's and Kierkegaard's respective claims that the poet does not share this responsibility for his or her writing? In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard tells us that the "poet is ordinarily an exception," an exception who marks the transition to but is not one of the "religious exceptions" (1983:

228). In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard hints at what is exceptional about the poet's status as an exception, "for with his little secret that he cannot divulge the poet buys this power of the word to tell everybody else's dark secrets. A poet is not an apostle; he drives out devils only by the power of the devil." (1983: 61). The "word-dance" of the poet, for Kierkegaard, closely mirrors the heavily encumbered yet light-footed step of the tragic hero whose travails it is the poet's task to describe. What is this "little secret" the poet possesses that buys the "power of the word" and what kind of magical power does this turn out to be? And, to return to the musings with which I began, what is the status of the poetic parable that begins *Fear and Trembling*, a work which is itself characterized by its silent/secretive author(s) as a "dialectical lyric?"

Sartre is much clearer on the difference between the prose-writer and the poet than is Kierkegaard. For Sartre, the poet's words themselves become "things" with all of the opacity and resistance that characterizes the world of the in-itself. The prose writer's words, by contrast, should transparently indicate the things they are disclosing and, as we have seen, even style should "pass unnoticed" in order to allow the writer's message (which expresses his or her political commitment) to "shine through." According to Sartre, "poets are men who refuse to *utilize* language. "Moreover, he adds,

> since the quest for truth takes place in and by language conceived as a certain kind of instrument, it is unnecessary to imagine that they aim to discern or expound the true. Nor do they dream of *naming* the world, and, this being the case, they name nothing at all, for naming implies a perpetual sacrifice of the name to the object named, or, as Hegel would say, the name is revealed as the inessential in the face of the thing which is essential. They do not speak, neither do they keep silent; it is something different. (1988: 29)

Sartre elaborates this difference by stating that words are in the "wild state" for the poet, whereas they are "domesticated" for the prose writer. Notice, however, that this account itself is delivered through a prosaic writing. That is, what we have here is prose giving an account of itself and its difference with poetry *in* prose. Would a "poetic" perspective offer another account of the differences between poetry and prose? That is, to what extent does the medium in which the "message" is delivered affect the type of message that is sent?

While Sartre in this essay radically distances (with a poetic flourish here and there) his own prosaic, political writing from the apolitical work of the poet, sculptor, painter, and musician, Kierkegaard has a much more ambiva-

lent relationship with poetry and with prose. This ambivalence, I would argue, reflects Kierkegaard's awareness that poetry's indirect methods are potentially more powerful for delivering certain kinds of messages than the direct methods associated with prose. The "power of the devil" commanded by the poet is, I believe, none other than the power of language itself, a seductive power that goes all the way back to the snake's tempting words to Eve in the Garden of Eden.

It is no coincidence that Faust himself haunts the text of *Fear and Trembling*; his "spiritual" pact with the devil is performatively enacted through language, quite poetic language at that. If, as Sartre suggests, prose writing is "transparent," turning the reader's attention to what the writing is about rather than to the writing itself, then perhaps poetry, which makes words into things which we can explore in their own right, and which collapses in the process hard and fast distinctions between form and content, is the more suitable medium for conveying the message of faith. For faith, on Kierkegaard's view, is not something we should use as a stepping stone to something else, but is simultaneously method and goal, means and end.

If we are unable to distinguish, at least for certain kinds of messages, what is said from how it is said, the potential for "misreadings," including missing the message altogether, or just plain getting it wrong, seems to multiply infinitely. To use Sartre's analogy, if there are too many "rough panes of glass," our attention will be distracted from what can be seen *through them* to the texture and patterns exhibited in the panes themselves. Going back to Kierkegaard's epigraph to *Fear and Trembling*, we are told that the son *understood* his father's message, though the messenger did not. This "perfect," (non-linguistic) understanding may be comforting, but the comfort is taken away almost immediately in the Exordium that follows where Kierkegaard reveals the constant potential for "misreadings" of the father by the son and of the son by the father. God alone, it seems, is a father incapable of "misreading" his son, and yet this does not in any way guarantee that the son will be able to (spiritually) "read" the father. A transparent reading is out of the question, for both father and son, because the faith is not genuine until it is tested and the son is transformed by the test and so has to be known/"read" afresh.

And where, as Luce Irigaray might ask, do the daughter and the mother appear in this transaction, what role are they permitted to play in this reading/writing? They could be construed as that which is written upon, the invisible material that makes both writing and reading possible. Or, if they are merely absent from this exchange, we might well wonder whether they will have their own way of sending, receiving, and understanding messages. Will their role parallel that of Diotima, the wise woman who "speaks" indirectly to

her audience through Socrates, and if so, does the fact that a man is designated to speak for her change the nature of her speech?[9]

3. "Faithful" teachers and committed readers

The challenges faced by Kierkegaard's reader(s) are formidable, but they fade in comparison to the challenges faced by one who wishes to guide students in a reading of Kierkegaard as a "professor." What is one to "profess" here? If the professor is herself a committed reader in the Sartrean sense, and if the writing one is committed to precludes sharing the commitment in a Kierkegaardian sense (for each must undertake this process individually), then how can the "professor" responsibly facilitate the message without determining, in advance, the significance it should have for the reader? That is, the task of the professor would seem to be to communicate her *commitment* to the text in a manner that does not privilege a certain "reading" of the message offered by the text; the professor must allow the reader the opportunity to participate actively in the labor of interpretation. The serious nature of these commitments to teaching, to reading, and to writing, which I do take to be political commitments, should however, discourage uncommitted readings; indeed, if, as Kierkegaard suggests, no less than the reader's own life is at stake in the reading/writing, it is better not to read/write at all than to do so irresponsibly.

For both Kierkegaard and Sartre, commitment and responsibility go hand in hand, and both presuppose the freedom of the reader as well as the freedom of the writer. To be either an uncommitted writer or an uncommitted reader is to fail to exercise one's freedom to commit oneself to a given situation, and therefore to be irresponsible. The reader can express his commitment to the situation created through the writing by vehemently disagreeing with how it is depicted, but to refuse to take a stand at all reflects a lack of commitment that is not an act of freedom but, for both Sartre and Kierkegaard, a failure to assume it in the first place.

For Sartre, the reader is free not to read the book and to leave it untouched, but the moment the book is opened, the reader has a responsibility to the writer to read *faithfully*. Faithful reading is not a reading that is dictated by the intent of the author any more than it is a reading dictated by the intent of the reader. Reading/writing cannot ever be a matter of dictation at all, for this latter, mechanical activity, ignores rather than addresses the freedom of those who submit or are submitted to it. In his essay that responds to the question, "Why Write?", Sartre states:

> since the one who writes recognizes, by the very fact that he takes the trouble to write, the freedom of his readers, and since the one who reads, by the mere fact of his opening the book, recognizes the freedom of the writer, the work of art, from whichever side you approach it, is an act of confidence in the freedom of men. And since readers, like the author, recognize this freedom only to demand that it manifest itself, the work can be defined as an imaginary presentation of the world in so far as it demands human freedom. The result of which is that there is no 'gloomy literature,' since, however dark may be the colours in which one paints the world, one paints it only so that free men may feel their freedom as they face it. (1988: 67)

Significantly, the earlier, careful separation Sartre makes between painting and prose in his previous essay, "What is Writing?" is abandoned in this passage. The writer "paints" the "world" through an "imaginary presentation" that "demands human freedom." The "secret power" of poetry, that Kierkegaard alludes to, manifests itself once more, undercutting prose's faithful attempts to give its own accounting of itself. Here the poet-artist and the prose philosopher seem to come together, in a movement that also unites the reader and the writer in a fateful alliance, fateful because the stakes for both Kierkegaard and Sartre are no less than life or death. For, just as the poet and the philosopher, while not reducible to one another, cannot ultimately be separated from one another insofar as they communicate and share responsibility with one another for the intersubjective existence they are respectively addressing, so too, reader and writer are brought together in a relationship that is characterized as much by its tensions, ruptures, and divisions, as by mutual recognition and respect. Moreover, this mutual recognition and respect, insofar as it is founded on the irreducible freedom of reader and writer, is not threatened by but makes these schisms possible.

4. On authors, readers, and texts

Roland Barthes further complicates our understanding of this fateful alliance between reader and writer in the famous conclusion of his essay, "The Death of the Author" when he declares that

> in order to restore writing to its future, we must reverse the myth: the birth of the reader must be requited by the death of the Author. (1989: 55)

Rather than offer us a picture of freedom encountering freedom, of messages offered and received, Barthes suggests here that the reader as reader takes the place of the Author, that the reader is the one who both gives and receives the message, and, moreover, that this message refers not to an Author who initiates it and/or to a state of affairs that persists outside of language, but to "language itself, i.e., the very thing which ceaselessly calls any origin into question." (1989: 52).

Barthes, in fact, would wholeheartedly reject the very term "message" because it seems to restrict the significance of the text to the conscious intentions of the author. And, on the surface it appears that this is precisely the sense in which Sartre uses the term. And yet, despite his emphasis on the constituting role played by the writer in initiating a discourse with his or her reader, Sartre does not view the writer as a univocal subject who remains self-identical before, during, and after the writing. Nor, for that matter, does Kierkegaard.

What is striking about both Kierkegaard's and Sartre's understandings of reading and writing, is that they require an assumption of responsibility that is not grounded upon a fixed (or known) identity. To take responsibility for one's reading and/or writing does not presuppose in any way that one is an ultimate authority on what one has read or written. Indeed, as we know from their own personal histories, both Sartre and Kierkegaard were rather uncomfortable with the heavy mantle of authorship. Sartre turned down the Nobel Prize for Literature, and Kierkegaard used one pseudonym after another, finally claiming a rather diffident "authorship" of his early writings in an Appendix that appears in the middle of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, an Appendix that bears the rather innocuous and impersonal title "A Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature."

Although Barthes has been heralded for offering us an "erotics of reading," the death of the author in no way implies that the writer is completely absent from the text.[10] Displacing the author in favor of the writer in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes expresses what we might perversely call the "indispensable dispensability" of the writer to the text (and to the reader):

> The writer is always on the blind spot of systems; adrift, he is the joker in the pack, a *mana*, a zero degree, the dummy in the bridge game: necessary to the meaning (the battle), but himself deprived of fixed meaning; his place, his (exchange) *value*, varies according to the movements of history, the tactical blows of the struggle: he is asked all and/or nothing. (1975: 35)

For Barthes, the writer is both essential and inessential. The writer is "necessary to the meaning" of the text without being able to guarantee the meaning of his own existence. In writing, Barthes maintains, "I write myself as a subject at present out of place, arriving too soon or too late (this *too* designating neither regret, fault, nor bad luck, but merely calling for a non-site): anachronic subject, adrift" (1975: 62–63). Not only does writing fail to "secure" the subject, but reading fails to do so as well. Rather than "find himself" through the text, Barthes claims that the subject loses himself in the "tissue" of the text: "lost in this tissue – this texture – the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web" (Barthes 1975: 64). Only the text itself seems to escape this undoing, through a generative process that Barthes likens to the spider's web which "is worked out in a perpetual interweaving" (1975: 64).

Paradoxically, just as the spider's web secures its victims in order to "undo" them, the text also secures writer and reader, allowing them to come into existence not as substantive subjects, but as those who give meaning and purpose to the web's existence (as its victims) who are necessarily destroyed in the process. Desire plays a key role in this entrapment. There is the desire of the reader for the writer, the desire of the writer for the reader, and desire of the text for both.[11] "The text," Barthes maintains, "is a fetish object, and *this fetish desires me*." Barthes reconciles his affirmation of the writer in *The Pleasure of the Text* with the death of the author in his earlier essay through this interplay of desire. While the author is dead "as institution," Barthes suggests that he is erotically resurrected through the desire of the reader, a desire that emerges in and through the text: "in the text, in a way, I *desire* the author: I need his figure . . . as he needs mine (1975: 27).

5. Writing without readers or writers

While Barthes emphasizes the reader at the expense of the author in "The Death of the Author," his emphasis on the undoing of both in *The Pleasure of the Text*, paves the way for Derrida's suggestion in "Signature Event Context" that *both* reader and writer are absent in the text. To return to the image of the "fateful alliance" between reader and writer that I invoked a short time ago, Derrida argues that, in an important sense, the reader and the writer, or, to use his terminology, scribe and subscriber, are fundamentally in the same situation. "All writing," he tells us,

> in order to be what it is, must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee in general. And this absence

> is not a continuous modification of presence; it is a break in presence, "death," or the possibility of the "death" of the addressee, inscribed in the structure of the mark . . . (1982: 315–316)

And, he goes on to add:

> What holds for the addressee holds also, for the same reasons, for the sender or the producer. To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive, that my future disappearance in principle will not prevent from functioning and from yielding, and yielding itself to, reading and rewriting. . . . I must be able simply to say my disappearance, my nonpresence in general, for example the non-presence of my meaning, of my intention-to-signify, of my wanting-to-communicate-this, from the emission or production of the mark. (1982: 316)

To recognize writing as production, for Derrida, is to recognize writing as an "iterative structure cut off from all absolute responsibility, from *consciousness* as the authority of the last analysis"; it is to acknowledge that writing is "orphaned, and separated at birth from the assistance of its father" (1982: 316). As a child without a father (a son, perhaps?), writing is cast adrift, lacking the authority of the paternal name to ground its citationality. Here Derrida rejects absolute responsibility for writing because, for him, it is indelibly associated with "consciousness as the authority of the last analysis." And yet, Derrida's own emphasis on acknowledging the constitutive role played by that which is excluded, forces us to look more carefully at this dual rejection of "absolute responsibility" and "consciousness as absolute authority" to see whether or not there is a "remainder" of responsibility and/or consciousness that survives in the writing itself.

Specifically, my question is whether a sense of responsibility can be salvaged in this analysis of writing; if not, I fear that the child (writing) will not only be orphaned (having lost both its parents – the all-too-visible Father/Author and the invisible mother), but that, to speak in a psychoanalytic register, the child will have succeeded in castrating/sacrificing himself.[12] For in what sense can the writing be responsible for itself unless writing itself becomes Writing and is granted a form of agency that has hitherto been associated most closely with that transcendental, self-caused being, God? Such a move (one which seems to have been endorsed not by Derrida, but by some of his "messengers"), does not solve the issue of responsibility but cuts an inquiry into responsibility off from the outset, since God, by definition, is not responsible to anyone, and it is not clear how one can be responsible without being responsible to others.

In a critical vein, Foucault follows the implications of Barthes' and Derrida's emphases on writing in the absence of the writer (and for Derrida, in the absence of the reader as well). He notes in his essay, "What is an Author?" that:

> Giving writing a primal status seems to be a way of retranslating, in transcendental terms, both the theological affirmation of its sacred character and the critical affirmation of its creative character. (1984: 104)

According to Foucault, to focus on the writing in the absence of the writer and the reader is not to get away from absolute authorities, but rather, to elevate writing itself to an a priori status thereby removing it from its own discursive context. It is interesting that Derrida himself invokes the a priori structure of iteration (and, more specifically, forms of iteration) in the following passage:

> [G]iven this structure of iteration, the intention which animates utterance will never be completely present in itself and its content. The iteration which *structures it a priori* introduces an essential dehiscence and demarcation. (1982: 326, my emphasis)

On the surface this is a rather strange claim, since the very notion of iteration seems to be at odds with its providing an a priori structure to writing and to the intentions that may or may not underlie it. And yet, there is indeed a logic to Derrida's argument that makes it clear why he assumes the risks involved in invoking and appropriating the rationalist notion of an a priori. To claim that iteration structures intentions (and utterances) in an a priori fashion is to argue that there is no extra- or non-discursive context we can appeal to to "explain" the writing itself, that is, to determine its significance. Rather than privilege any one form of iteration, Derrida is arguing that iteration (or, to use the more active tense, iterability) itself supplants the metaphysics of presence that glorifies the a priori. Since writing is itself always already citation, iteration is indeed the a priori structure of writing. And yet, to pursue Foucault's critique, doesn't the elevation of iteration into an a priori structuring end up giving writing the "transcendental," even onto-theological status that Derrida is attempting to deconstruct?

Toward the end of "Signature Event Context," Derrida states rather too succinctly that "[w]riting is read, and 'in the last analysis' does not give rise to a hermeneutic deciphering, to the decoding of a meaning or truth" (1982: 329). To ponder the significance of the fragment of the parable at the beginning of *Fear and Trembling* is not, I think, an attempt to "decode" its meaning, for what it offers us is, among other things, a meditation on what it means for

messages to be coded. Indeed, the coding of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writing is not "decoded" by our discovery of the "real Author" of the text. Nor is the fragment of the parable "decoded" by being supplied with its missing context. And yet, despite the explicit citationality and iterability that is so well marked in *Fear and Trembling*, an iterability that defies more "direct" attempts to grasp the phenomenon of faith first-hand, despite the lack of clarity regarding the author's own intentions regarding the text, and despite the lack of clarity in the reader's own intentions which the text sets out again and again to frustrate, there is nonetheless a strong sense of responsibility that emerges from the work, a responsibility that is shared, in the Sartrian sense, between reader and writer, one which demands that faithful/fateful response of one to the other.

6. Responsibility without subjects

In his book *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics*, Thomas Keenan claims that coming to terms with responsibility

> requires breaking with the horizon of subjectivity – decision, choice, agency – to a constitutive alterity that precedes it and that it cannot comprehend. We can call this "else-where" language – rhetoric, text, literature, or fable – not to distinguish it from some would-be empirical reality or history but to underline that others and their traces are always working within us already, in a space and time that cannot be reduced to that of consciousness or self-presence. (1997: 66)

Keenan implies in this passage that there is no such thing as "my" responsibility because "my" signifies a responsibility that begins and ends with an individual consciousness or agency. On his account, subjectivity is unsustainable as such; it is simultaneously established and undermined through language, which is itself "a constitutive alterity that precedes it and that it cannot comprehend."[13] Rhetoric, text, literature, or fable are indistinguishable from one another as well as from any empirical reality that may seek to establish itself outside of the traces of language; the distinction between poetry and prose which is so important to Sartre, Keenan renders untenable. The prose writer is no more in control of a message than the poet lacks a message. And if we can no longer understand writing in terms of messages sent or unsent, or reading in terms of messages received or unreceived, indeed, if we can no longer separate writers from readers or either from writing itself, everything is up for grabs.

Paradoxically, responsibility is all that remains for Keenan precisely because language, subjectivity, and reality are all indifferent to our attempts to justify (ourselves through) them. Neither language, subjectivity, nor reality can serve as a transcendental ground for the others, and there is no "outside" that can found all three. In a surprisingly Sartrean passage, Keenan explains why responsibility persists in the face of this radical contingency. Both reading and politics, he argues,

> have their necessity in the withdrawal of security. These fields, because they expose us to events that cannot be calculated, programmed, "settled by experts or machines," demand responses (in another vocabulary, decisions) that cannot be referred to anywhere else, to something we know or mean. Our freedom is defined by this responsibility, not that of a subject who knows what it does. . . . If what we did could be authorized by something we knew (nature, truth), doing it would have nothing of the political or of reading about it. . . . Indeed, the possible impossibility of reading makes politics – freedom and responsibility – ineluctable. (1997: 95)

Responsibility and freedom themselves seem to *precede* the subject on this account; they demand the interpellation of the subject who assumes them. Although the "ineluctability" of freedom and responsibility is presented from within a Derridean framework, this particular passage echoes Sartre's own explanations of how the radical contingency of the situation compels us to take responsibility for it. For Sartre, however, freedom and responsibility can never precede the subjects who assume them. They are meaningless until they are exercised. On the other hand, this does not mean that the subject precedes freedom and responsibility either. All three emerge in one and the same "upsurge" of human existence in the world.

To return to the tale of Tarquinius Superbus, what I find striking in this story is that the Emperor, his son, and the messenger all bear a certain (and differing) responsibility for the message that is neither fully conscious nor mutually exclusive – phenomena associated with traditional conceptions of absolute responsibility that both Derrida and Keenan are (rightly, I think) rejecting. In the case of the messenger, his responsibility for the message cannot be grounded in the authority of his consciousness since he himself has no understanding of the message. Retrospectively, we might argue that his conscious intention is to carry the message faithfully from its sender to its receiver but this intention has little if any bearing on the significance of the message itself. Given the indirect nature of the message, we might be tempted to say that the "true" significance of the message is determined

through the intentions of its sender, the Emperor, thereby falling into the "trap" of privileging the author at the expense of the writing and the reader, a move that Barthes, Derrida, Keenan, and I myself are all trying to avoid. Such an interpretation, moreover, clearly fails to do justice to the crucial role played by its receiver, the one who transforms the message into concrete action.

Despite Keenan's persuasive suggestion that "[r]eading, like politics, if it is still possible, must be unavoidable, allowing no opting out and requiring no commitment (in the sense of cognitive decidability and intention)," questions of responsibility and commitment (and perhaps, these ultimately, are the "devils" Kierkegaard leaves us to contend with) remain. Is *no one* responsible for the killing of the ministers who were themselves plotting to kill the son? Although the issue of responsibility poses some rather difficult questions and may indeed ultimately be undecidable in an absolute sense, Kierkegaard suggests that it is anything but a matter of indifference; for both Kierkegaard and Sartre responsibility cannot exist without agents that are responsible.

In Kierkegaard's depiction of the knight of faith, we do indeed get a picture of absolute responsibility, but here it is an absolute responsibility that is born of conflicting (ethical and religious) passions, rather than conscious intentions. For Sartre, who is much more Cartesian than Kierkegaard, intentions are paramount, but there is no (A)uthority who underlies them. Moreover, intentions in and of themselves are meaningless from a Sartrian perspective, unless they issue in actions whose very nature is to outstrip any and all intentions. Intentions, he makes clear, issue from no-thing; they are themselves non-substantive and derive their meaning from the situation to which they are directed.

Although Kierkegaard proclaims that "truth is subjectivity," subjectivity on his account is also continuously in flux, continuously being remade and intensified through a renewed commitment to it. Without the commitment, there is no subjectivity as such. Yet, as we have seen, despite both Kierkegaard's and Sartre's rejection of a substantive self, both thinkers strongly affirm our responsibility for ourselves and for our situation. And, as far as reader and writer are concerned, both Kierkegaard and Sartre stress (Kierkegaard more indirectly than Sartre) a responsibility for the text that is *shared* between reader and writer, a co-responsibility which demands the faithful/fateful response of one to the other.

This responsibility shared between reader and writer is enacted, moreover, *in and through* the writing. Whereas Foucault contributes to the disembodiment of the (dead) author through the invocation of the "author-function," both Kierkegaard and Sartre view writing as an embodied call to action, one that implicates writer and reader in a shared dialogue that, in its limitless iterability, enhances rather than diminishes their responsibility for themselves,

for one another, and for the writing. To take responsibility for one's writing and/or one's reading, is to commit oneself to "read and write between the lines," that is, to resist simplistic interpretations that dogmatically ascribe fixed significances to the words that appear on the printed page. And yet, it is not the case that "anything goes"; to read/write responsibility indeed requires a faithfulness to the text that discourages arbitrary or self-interested interpretations. Rather than elevate the author above the writing and the reader (traditional criticism), or the reader above the writing and the writer (Barthes), or even the writing above the writer and reader (Derrida), the notion of shared responsibility that I am proposing and which, I am claiming, is implicit in both Sartre's and Kierkegaard's work, seeks to bind writing, writer, and reader into a complex, creative, and often conflicting, aesthetic production, one which is produced (and provoked) afresh with each new reading/writing.

And yet, one may argue, how does this notion of co-responsibility fit with Kierkegaard's emphasis on the absolute responsibility of the knight of faith, a responsibility that can only be enacted by a radical dissociation of the knight of faith from every one and everything that is beloved and familiar? To defend the very idea of co-responsibility as implicit in Kierkegaard's work requires an account of how this co-responsibility can be upheld in the face of the knight of faith's isolation from the universal community that constitutes the ethical realm.

7. Reconciling absolute responsibility with co-responsibility: revaluing readers, writers and texts

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida addresses the paradoxes that attend the Kierkegaardian notions of absolute duty and absolute responsibility as they unfold in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah. As Derrida notes, for Kierkegaard,

> [t]he absolutes of duty and of responsibility presume that one denounce, refute, and transcend, at the same time, all duty, all responsibility, and every human law. . . . One must behave not only in an ethical or responsible manner, but in a nonethical, nonresponsible manner, and one must do that *in the name of* duty, of an infinite duty, *in the name of* absolute duty. (1995: 66–67)

In this more recent work, Derrida does not reject but actually affirms the paradox of absolute responsibility and maintains that the responsibility Abraham has to God, a responsibility that is paradoxical because in fulfilling his responsibility to God, he neglects his responsibility to everyone and everything

else, is not atypical but actually is "the most common thing." For, Derrida argues,

> [a]s soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others. (1995: 68)

By taking up the responsibility of reading this text as an absolute responsibility, you are making the sacrifice of not fulfilling your responsibility to other texts, other people, other activities. By writing this essay, I am making the sacrifice of not writing another essay, of not helping others who may be illiterate and therefore unable to engage with this text at all. According to Derrida, "[w]hether I want to or not, I can never justify the fact that I prefer or sacrifice any one (any other) to the other" (1995: 70). In this sense, Derrida suggests, we are like Abraham. At every moment of our lives we silently make unjustified sacrifices, in the name of responsibility, to an other or others and expect others to do the same for us.

Although Kierkegaard would almost certainly disagree with Derrida's reading of the paradox of the knight of faith as being comparable to the paradox of every man and woman, Derrida's reminder that sacrifices necessarily accompany absolute responsibility has implications for the notion of co-responsibility I am arguing for as well. To be co-responsible for a situation also involves sacrifices. Most significantly, it involves sacrificing my own "author-function" in relation to that situation; that is, I must recognize that I am not the sole author of "my" situation. To the extent that I share the author-function with other participants in that situation, rigid distinctions between reader and writer can no longer be maintained.

Sharp distinctions between reader and writer also break down in the act of writing itself. To write with understanding of what one is writing requires that one be a reader as well as a writer. After completing this sentence, I re-read it to make sure it accurately expresses what I want it to convey to myself as a reader and to other readers. Indeed, to go back and forth between these two roles is essential to any good piece of writing. Not only do we re-read our own work as we are writing, we also are able to read responses to our work by other writers and, in doing so, find our initial roles reversed.[14]

This reversal is quite different from the reversal of the look that exemplifies the Sartrean account of being-for-others. Whereas in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre adopts a Hegelian understanding of being-for-others as the pitting of one subjectivity over against another (for Hegel this plays out through

the master/slave dialectic), in the essays on writing collected in *What is Literature?*, as noted earlier, Sartre leaves open the possibility of an authentic intersubjective relationship via reading and writing that is not grounded in an antagonistic subject/object framework. What facilitates this more positive encounter between subjectivities in these latter essays may in fact be the pivotal role played by the text itself. More specifically, Sartre emphasizes that both reader and writer engage one another's freedom through their respective encounters with the text. In the model of the look that serves as the paradigmatic example for our being-for-others in *Being and Nothingness*, by contrast, glances are exchanged like blows, each de-throning the other from her/his exalted position as subject of the gaze. And yet, despite this seemingly inevitable conflict with the other, Sartre maintains that each one of us is responsible for the other as well as for oneself. I am responsible for the other precisely insofar as I am a being-for-others, not merely a being-for-itself; yet clearly in being responsible for others I can in no way take their responsibility for themselves (and for me) away from them.

Thus with Sartre, too, we seem to have something that looks very much like absolute responsibility existing alongside an implicit notion of co-responsibility. As a being-for-others I am co-responsible with those others for the situation we mutually constitute; as a being-for-itself, I bear an absolute responsibility for my thoughts, attitudes, and actions within that situation even though these latter are undoubtedly influenced by my being-with and for-others.

Kierkegaard, like Sartre, has often been criticized for Cartesian solipsism regarding his understanding of subjectivity. Both Kierkegaard and Derrida emphasize the fact that Abraham shares a secret (with God) that requires silence before Isaac, Sarah, and their servants. Thus, in order to fulfill his absolute responsibility to God, to himself, and even, it would seem, to Isaac, Sarah and future generations, Abraham must refuse to allow them to participate in his ordeal. In what sense, then, can we view Abraham's family and the generations that follow (generations that include ourselves as readers of the story of Abraham), as co-responsible for Abraham's situation without in any way diminishing the awesome sense of absolute responsibility that Kierkegaard claims Abraham can and must endure?

Isaac's own role in Abraham's sacrifice is often neglected and Sarah is barely acknowledged to play a role at all. The test of faith, even in Kierkegaard's depiction, is always a test for Abraham alone. Only in the four imaginary scenarios that appear within the *Exordium* of *Fear and Trembling*, do mother and child play an active role. Here, Kierkegaard grants that any faltering on Abraham's part in word or deed, will have an effect on Isaac's own faith, and analogously, he implies, the means used by the mother to wean

the child will have an effect on future relations between them. In these poetic explorations of what might have been, Kierkegaard affirms the intersubjective bonds that make individuals responsible for one another before God. To have an absolute responsibility to God does not mean that one bears no responsibility for others or for the situation that one shares with them. Indeed, the power of the story of Abraham, as Kierkegaard well knows, consists in its ability to implicate others in the knight of faith's ordeal; the reader is implicated in (and therefore co-responsible for) Abraham's test of faith precisely to the extent that s/he assumes responsibility for her/his own existence, an existence that necessarily implicates others. As Kierkegaard's readers, Derrida observes, we share Abraham's secret. "But" he asks:

> what does it mean to share a secret? It isn't a matter of knowing what the other knows, for Abraham doesn't know anything. It isn't a matter of sharing his faith, for the latter must remain an initiative of absolute singularity. . . . We share with Abraham what cannot be shared, a secret we know nothing about, neither him nor us. To share a secret is not to know or to reveal the secret, it is to share we know not what: nothing that can be determined. (1995: 79–80)

For Derrida, the secret that is transmitted is grounded in *nothing*. This nothing he associates with the "gift of death" which is the gift of otherness itself. Rather than turn to the concrete relations that are established in and through the communication of a secret for which we come to be collectively responsible insofar as we must take up the labor of interpreting it for ourselves, Derrida emphasizes the lack or absence at the heart of the secret, an absence that he associates with an otherness that does not issue (merely) from the other, but from the individual her/himself.

Kierkegaard, by contrast, does not ultimately dwell on Abraham's alterity; he both marvels at and celebrates Abraham's joyous return to his family. Kierkegaard's Abraham is not left alone before God upon Mount Moriah (where he was never alone to begin with since Isaac was always present) but renews and reaffirms his relations with others, once again taking up a life in community that, although seemingly repudiated, was never left behind. Just so, I would argue, to be absolutely responsible for one's reading/writing of a text does not preclude but actually strengthens one's co-responsibility for the situation created through that reading/writing. Undoubtedly, tensions will arise between one's absolute responsibility to oneself and to others, and one's co-responsibility with these self-same others for the situation that has been mutually constituted. Nonetheless, despite the sacrifices and secrets that may be involved, messages do get communicated and received. Sometimes

they are miscommunicated or even intercepted. Sometimes there are no messages at all. In establishing as well as in contesting the meaningfulness of these communications we simultaneously establish and contest the meaning of our own (inter)subjectivity, a process that continues to alter our reading, our writing, and ourselves.

Notes

1. In a sense, to refer to this text as "Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," as I have done, is to beg one of the primary questions raised in this paper. I refer to the text in this way in order to offer a preliminary context which will itself be problematized in the discussion that follows.
2. It is not only this particular epigraph which requires that the reader move beyond the text; the very notion of the epigraph, as such, suggests that the relevance of the text that follows extends beyond the confines of the text itself.
3. Alternative interpretations of this parable are readily available. In the interpretation handed down to me, the father and son represent the forces of good who succeed in vanquishing the forces of evil, represented by the ministers. In other versions, the father and son are depicted less honorably and succeed in preventing a coup that was initiated to get rid of a corrupt ruling family. On both readings, however, the messenger does not understand the message he is conveying, which is the crucial point for Kierkegaard.
4. Not only the midwife but also the mother seems to vanish in the focus on the newly born child. Her glory historically has resided in her maternity, that is, in the outcome of her production. Paradoxically, the paternal authority who plays only a small (and not so laborious) role in the production of the child, and who consequently maintains a more indirect relation to his "offspring" is the one who has been more successful in establishing his independence from and power over both mother and child.
5. I don't believe Sartre tried very hard to discourage such a reading. Why is it, we might ask in a Freudian vein, that these sons never seem content in their role as heir, but must establish their authority once and for all as king of the throne? It is striking, in following this line of thought, that neither Kierkegaard nor Sartre ever were actually fathers of "real" sons or daughters. The absence of their own "flesh and blood" seems to make their symbolic role as fathers all the greater since it can't be diminished in any way by the misbehavior or disloyalty of their offspring.
6. For Sartre this moral commitment is political through and through; for Kierkegaard, the moral commitment binds one to the ethical sphere of existence and is religious in nature.
7. See "Sartre on Language and Politics" presented at the October 1994 meeting of the *Society for Phenomenology and Existentialism* in Seattle, Washington.
8. Whereas in the phenomenon of the look described in *Being and Nothingness*, both the one looking and the one looked-at tend to be temporally and spatially contiguous, the model of reading and writing presented in *What is Literature?* presupposes a time lapse between the act of writing and the act of reading as well as a spatial dislocation between the writer and reader. Sartre never discusses this important difference between looking/being looked-at and reading/writing but an exploration of this difference is crucial to an understanding of how freedom and responsibility play out in these respective situations.
9. If the mother and daughter are denied, in this phallocentric economy, the possibility of performing their own reading and writing, then the (gendered) status of this particular

reading/writing is inevitably called into question as well. This latter is a point Irigaray does not take up in "Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato, *Symposium*, 'Diotima's Speech,' " but its rich implications are pursued throughout her work.

10. See Richard Howard's "A Note on the Text" from Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*, page viii.
11. We should also include the desire of what Barthes calls the "mother tongue" to generate an extension of its own body (via the text) as an integral component of this process. (See Barthes 1975: 37).
12. The contrast between the sacrifice of the father (and mother) to "save" the son (the writing) and Kierkegaard's discussion of the sacrifice of Isaac to "save" Abraham (specifically to affirm his faith in God) is striking, and deserves further discussion. Invoking the privilege of the author, I'll defer it for another place and time.
13. Although Keenan emphasizes how language undermines subjectivity in this text, this quotation itself substantializes the subjective horizon in the form of an "it" that linguistically, at least, appears to be coherent and self-identical, thereby illustrating Kierkegaard's paradoxical claim that one drives out the devils only by utilizing the power of the devil itself.
14. Few of us are fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to have our work formally reviewed, much less published in the first place. If we extrapolate my comments about reading and writing to non-written exchanges, to oral communications or even non-linguistic, gestural interactions, we can see similar reversals occurring. George Herbert Mead referred to this latter type of dialogue as a "conversation of gestures," an expression that conveys perfectly the reciprocity that I am claiming is essential for co-responsibility.

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