

Reading's Motions: From Robertson's Nilling to Derrida's Sovereignties

Okumanın Devinimi: Robertson'un *Nilling*'inden Derrida'nın *Sovereignties*'ine

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Abstract

This essay examines the movement set in motion by reading to formulate the act of reading as an experience that transforms both the identity of the reader and the significations gathered in a text. I first focus on the Canadian poet-essayist Lisa Robertson's *Nilling: prose* (2012) to discuss "where" we go when we read and what happens to readerly identity during the act of reading. I then turn to Derrida's work to study the implications that reading's motions have on the rapport between text and reader. I argue that both Robertson and Derrida highlight the importance of reading in initiating a dialogue/pact between text and reader. They formulate an ethics of reading through an analysis of this pact, which foregrounds the dialogic nature of thinking and being. The pact between reader and text, self and alterity, is mutually binding and keeps them both suspended, postponing any closure of meaning. I furthermore demonstrate that Robertson and Derrida define reading by practicing it. As Robertson defines it, by staging a reading of Hannah Arendt and Pauline Réage, and as Derrida defines it by reading Paul Celan, they become enfolded in a multi-referential reading community. They place emphasis on the vitality of multiple, often illegible, agencies at work in textual encounters, and assert that readerly identity and textual meaning find the source of their creative potential in this illegibility. The essay develops a poetic-philosophical approach to theories of reading, and contributes to the existing scholarship on theories on authorship/readership and textual interpretation.

Key words: Reading, poetry, readerly identity, Robertson, Derrida.

Öz

Bu makalenin amacı, okuma eyleminin ortaya koyduğu devinimi irdelemek ve bununla ilişkili olarak okuma eylemini hem okuyucunun kimliğini hem de metnin anlamını dönüştüren bir tecrübe olarak tanımlamaktır. Öncelikle Kanada'lı şair-denemeci Lisa Robertson'ın *Nilling: prose* (2012) başlıklı eserinden yola çıkarak okuma esnasında "nereye" gittiğimizi ve okuyucunun kimliğine ne olduğunu tartışacağım. Daha sonra Derrida'nın eserlerine yoğunlaşarak okumanın deviniminin metin-okuyucu arasındaki ilişkiyi nasıl etkilediğini analiz edeceğim. Robertson ve Derrida okuma eyleminin okuyucu ve metin arasında bir anlaşma/diyalog başlattığını öne sürerler. Ayrıca düşünme ve varolmanın diyalojik yönünü vurgulayan bu anlaşmayı analiz ederek bir okuma etiği ortaya koyarlar. Metin-okuyucu, öz-başkalık arasındaki bu anlaşmanın iki tarafı da askıda tutan ve anlamın kapanmasını erteleyen, karşılıklı bağlayıcı bir diyalog olduğunu göstereceğim. Buna ek olarak, Robertson ve Derrida'nın okuma eylemini, onu pratik ederek tanımladığını ileri süreceğim. Robertson Hannah Arendt ve Pauline Réage'yi okuyarak, Derrida Paul Celan'ı okuyarak çok referanslı bir okur topluluğunun parçası olurlar, ve bu sayede okumanın nasıl tanımlanabileceğini birer okuyucu olarak gösterirler. Metinsel karşılaşmalarda çoğul ve okunaksız öznelliklerin varlığına dikkat çekerek, okuyucu kimliğinin ve metinsel anlamın yaratıcı potansiyelinin bu okunaksızlıktan ileri geldiğini savunurlar. Bu makale, okuma teorilerine şiirsel-felsefi bir yaklaşım sergileyerek, yazarlık/okurluk ve metinsel analiz çalışmalarına katkı yapmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Okuma, şiir, okur kimliği, Robertson, Derrida.

Introduction

This essay examines the movement set in motion by reading to formulate the act of reading as an experience that transforms both the identity of the reader and the significations gathered in a text. I first focus on the Canadian poet-essayist Lisa Robertson's *Nilling: prose* (2012) to discuss "where" we go when we read and what happens to readerly identity during the act of reading. I then turn to Jacques Derrida's work to study the implications that reading's motions have on the rapport between text and reader. I argue that both Robertson and Derrida highlight the importance of reading in initiating a dialogue, a pact between text and reader. They

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formulate an ethics of reading through an analysis of this pact, which foregrounds the dialogic nature of thinking and being. The pact between reader and text, self and alterity, is mutually binding and keeps them both suspended, postponing any closure of meaning. I furthermore demonstrate that Robertson and Derrida define reading by practicing it. As Robertson defines it, by staging a reading of Hannah Arendt and Pauline Réage, and as Derrida defines it by reading Paul Celan, they become enfolded in a multi-referential reading community. They place emphasis on the vitality of multiple, often illegible, agencies at work in textual encounters, and assert that readerly identity and textual meaning find the source of their creative potential in this illegibility. The essay develops a poetic-philosophical approach to theories of reading, and contributes to the existing scholarship on theories on authorship/readership and textual interpretation.

Reading, Tracking, Nilling

“... it was Rousseau who said that any girl who reads is already a lost girl” (Robertson, 2012, p. 17).

In a perfectly lit room, in the shade of a tree, on the early morning metro... When we engage in the solitary intimacy of reading, we retreat into an invisible realm regardless of where we are. It is in this solitude that we locate the pleasure of encountering multitudes. As we read, we become enfolded in a reading community, following traces, references, and trajectories opened by invisible crowds occupying the textual space. Having surrendered to the movement set in motion by reading, we find ourselves wandering, tracking, disoriented, and pleasantly surprised.

The goal of this essay is to focus on this movement set in motion by reading in order to formulate reading as an act that transforms both the identity of the reader and the significations gathered under a book's cover. I will first focus on the Canadian poet and essayist Lisa Robertson's *Nilling: prose* (2012), which is a collection of lyric essays, whose subject spans from reading to soundscape to poetics. I will use two of her essays from the collection as a point of departure to discuss where we go when we read. I will then turn to the work of Jacques Derrida, mainly *Sovereignities in Question: the Poetics of Paul Celan*, to study the implications of the unarrested movement of language for the rapport between text and reader. As I read Robertson, who stages a reading of Hannah Arendt, and of Jacques Derrida, who stages a reading of Paul Celan, I will be enfolded in a multi-referential reading community, calling attention to the invisible and “contingent topos [of reading] “fraught by various agencies” (Robertson, 2012, p. 24). The essay develops a poetic-philosophical approach to theories of reading, and aims to contribute to the existing scholarship on readership and textual interpretation.

Lisa Robertson (Toronto, 1961) is an established Canadian poet and essayist who often works in book-length projects that focus on a diverse body of subjects from gender to architecture to questions of form and genre. She has lived for many years in Vancouver, where she was a member of the Kootenay School of Writing, a writer-run center for writing, publishing, and scholarship. Robertson's poetry books include *XEclogue* (1993), *Debbie: An Epic* (1997), *The Weather* (2001), *Rousseau's Boat* (2004), *The Men* (2006), *Lisa Robertson's Magenta Soul Whip* (2009), and *Cinema of the Present* (2014). In addition to *Nilling*, she has published a book of poetic architectural essays titled *Occasional Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (2010). Robertson has held several teaching positions and residencies including the Holloway poet-in-residence at the University of California in Berkeley, and was awarded the PIP Gertrude Stein Awards for Innovative Poetry in English in 2005.

The two essays from *Nilling* that I will focus on are meditations on the act of reading. “Time in the Codex” is a lyric essay written in aphoristic style and the numerical list form. It

begins with an epigram from Gilles Deleuze's *The Fold*, and draws on the notion of the fold as an operation that writing is capable of in producing an "infinite line of inflection" (Deleuze, 2006, p. 39). Robertson reflects on the form of the codex and addresses the relationship between textual materiality, form and illegibility. She thinks of the codex in relation to "the inconspicuousness of its folds [that] permit the interpretive differential" (Robertson, 2012, p. 11) and that obscure legibility. The second essay, "Lastingness: Réage, Lucrèce, Arendt," is a meditation on Robertson's experience of reading three texts – Pauline Réage's *Histoire d'O* (1972), Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, and Hannah Arendt's *The Life of the Mind* (1978) – "in tandem and accidentally" (Robertson, 2012, p. 24). Robertson elaborates on the practice of reading as a kind of wandering and getting lost. As she states in an interview with Andy Fitch, "*Nilling* begins with a history of materiality" (Fitch, 2012, para. 6) and moves towards an analysis of "the profound cognitive pleasure" (Fitch, 2012, para. 10) that Robertson experiences as a reader of philosophy: "I read philosophy as a poet. I pursue this delicious process of getting lost and needing to slow down all my cognitive habits and backtrack – as if learning to read a new language" (Fitch, 2012, para. 10).

Robertson's point of departure in writing these essays is Hannah Arendt's *The Life of the Mind*, which examines three fundamental faculties of *vita contemplativa*: thinking, willing, and judging. In chapter I of *The Life of the Mind* titled "Thinking," Hannah Arendt asks: "Where are we when we think?" (1978, p. 195). Shifting the emphasis "from ontological query to spatial trajectory" (Robertson, 2012, p. 13), Arendt envisions thinking as "tracking, a kind of place 'beaten by the activity of thought'" (Robertson, 2012, p. 13). She raises "the question of the place or region toward which the movement of absencing oneself is directed" (Arendt, 1978, Thinking, p. 96), and defines that non-place as a "condition of homelessness (Arendt, 1978, Thinking, p. 199).

While thinking I am not where I actually am; I am surrounded not by sense-objects but by images that are invisible to everybody else. It is as though I had withdrawn into some-never-never land, the land of invisibles, of which I would know nothing had I not this faculty of remembering and imaginings. Thinking annihilates temporal as well as spatial distances. (Arendt, 1978, Thinking, p. 85)

Noting that "the main characteristic of mental activities is their *invisibility*," Arendt describes the topos of the one who thinks as a "living in hiding" (Arendt, 1978, Thinking, p. 71) after the Epicurean *lathe biosas*. This invisibility or homelessness of the thinker is the first point that Robertson takes up in her essay.

The second point that interests Robertson is Arendt's discussion of Willing, or the Will. Arendt's discussion of the Will draws on those philosophers from Augustine to Nietzsche who elaborated extensively on this concept. Arendt

distinguishes two different ways of understanding the faculty of will. One is a faculty of choice between given objects or goals... Another is 'our faculty for beginning spontaneously a series in time', as Kant described it, or, in Augustine's version, 'initium ut esset homo creatus est', man's capacity for beginning because he himself is a beginning. (Donoghue, 1979, p. 287)

For Arendt, "put into a world of change and movement... [e]very man, being created in the singular, is a new beginning" (Arendt, 1978, Willing, p. 109). S/he is free to begin again and again.

Making a distinction between thinking and willing, Arendt notes that "thinking draws into its enduring present what either is or at least has been, whereas willing, stretching out into the future, moves in a region where no such certainties exist" (Arendt, 1978, Willing, p. 35). Willing does not merely deal with what is absent from the senses, but also with those things that have never existed at all. In contrast to thinking, which is associated with "the experience of presence, of being present to oneself" (Donoghue, 1979, p. 287), "willing is associated with tension, the dual burden of time and decision" (Donoghue, 1979, p. 287). As Arendt asserts, the

Will is split within itself due to an inner tension. It consists of two co-determining drives: *velle* and *nolle*, willing and nilling (Arendt, 1978, Willing, p. 172). Here Arendt quotes Heidegger's volume I of *Nietzsche*: "To will is essentially to will one's own self, but not a merely given self that is as it is, but the self that wants to become what it is... The will to get away from one's self is actually an act of nilling" (Heidegger, 1961, p. 161). As Arendt continues, "every act of willing... generates a counter-will (*Widerwillen*)... a necessary obstacle in every act of willing" (Arendt, 1978, Willing, p. 177). The willing self thus oscillates between willing and nilling, *velle* and *nolle*: "If I will what I do not desire, I nill my desires; and in the same way I can nill what reason tells me is right. In every act of the will, there is an I-will *and* I-nill involved" (Arendt, 1978, Willing, p. 89).

Robertson's interest in Arendt's work lies primarily in its expression of the move from the world of appearances toward the world of the invisible, and the tension between willing and nilling. However, Robertson replaces "thinking" with "reading." In her own words, she makes "this unproblematic segue from thinking to reading, because... the two activities are completely implicated, folded into one another. I am only certain that I think insofar as I read" (Robertson, 2012, p. 23). Robertson consequently asks where we go when we read, and investigates the movement set in motion by reading. She envisions the practice of reading, as well as the practice of thinking, as a kind of vagabondage across textual space and in multiple directions. Turning to "the invisibility of this readerly site" (Robertson, 2012, p. 22), she initiates a compelling discussion about the spatio-temporal relationship opened between text and reader.

For Robertson, the rapport between text and reader consists of a pact: "Reading, I enter a relational contract with whatever material, accepting its fluency and swerve" (Robertson, 2012, p. 15). The contract one enters with the text resembles a friendship, a "mutual facing [where] discontinuous drives and folds have no teleology" (Robertson, 2012, p. 24). The friendship initiated between reader and text demands that the reader remain both an active and a passive agent. Robertson re-contextualizes Arendt's discussion of *velle* and *nolle*, willing and nilling as two simultaneous movements we participate in when we read. On the one hand, we, the readers, are the ones in command. When we get hold of a text, the text passively sits in our hands and yields to our intentions: we can misread it, manipulate its content, or make it physically illegible. The book as such depends on the reader and is realized only in the mind of the reader where textual meaning resonates. As Rebecca Solnit puts it in *Faraway Nearby*,

The object we call a book is not the real book, but its potential, like a musical score or seed. It exists fully only in the act of being read; and its real home is inside the head of the reader, where the symphony resounds, the seed germinates. A book is a heart that only beats in the chest of another. (2014, p. 61)

On the other hand, in reading, we also surrender willingly to a textual alterity that has the potential to transform our selfhood. Reading is a practice of profound intimacy and openness, where the reader allows another's language to take root in her. It is a secretive encounter with the unfamiliar, the uncanny. As Kuisma Korhonen notes in "Communities: Nancy, Blanchot, Derrida," "We read because... we acknowledge (perhaps unconsciously) the imperative of the Other:"

In reading, we are both active and passive: we use texts for our own desires and purposes, but we also, in a way, encounter texts, almost as we encounter other human beings, taking the risk that the encounter may change us in a way that we cannot totally know or control beforehand. (Korhonen, 2006, sec. 4, para. 3)

This encounter between the singularity of the reader and of textual alterity can be disorienting and incalculable. The reader, by surrendering to the text, accepts the gift of the other, that is the gift of arbitrary trajectories of reading that intervene into the reader's intended course.

In her essays, Robertson takes into consideration both the passive and the active role of the reader. She elaborates on two complementary and contradictory drives: the relation between

the will – the desire for “lastingness” (Robertson, 2012, p. 26) as well as the desire to move on to the next sentence – and passivity – “a posed receiving... [and] release of purposiveness” (Robertson, 2012, p. 26). Where “neither coded control nor indetermination prevail” (Robertson, 2012, p. 25), Robertson identifies her own reading experience as a kind of “rupture” or “detour.” Oscillating between two tendencies, she perceives the act of reading as a kind of wandering without purpose. Her own reading method in “Lastingness: Réage, Lucrèce, Arendt” resembles tracking: she picks up a text, follows a term for a while, lets it drop as another textual trace overpowers it, then follows that one only to have it return her to the former point now rediscovered in a slightly changed context. She conceptualizes reading as a willed interruption that allows the other’s language to displace the reading agent “submit[ting] to arbitrary directives” (Robertson, 2012, p. 58).

To explicate the tension between willing and nilling, Robertson exemplifies her own reading experience of Pauline Réage’s *Histoire D’O*, which is a novel about a young woman taken by her lover to a château, where she agrees to submit herself to the desires of a cult of men. “O” gradually gives up the symbols of her quotidian identity such as identity papers and clothing, and instead starts wearing the ritualistic costumes offered to her. Prior to each sexual ritual, which become increasingly violent, O agrees to comply with the rules of the game she submits to. The text’s disturbing quality derives from “O’s participation in her own erotic identity as a nilling” (Robertson, 2012, p. 30). Furthermore, “Naming plays out the diminishment of the heroine – she herself is figured as naught – *O*” (Robertson, 2012, p. 31). What makes this text relevant to Robertson’s discussion is the readerly discomfort it creates and the demands it makes of a normative reader: “If I identify with O, I seal myself textually within the pact of self-annihilation... And I do identify, in part because I can’t resist her sentences” (Robertson, 2012, p. 31-32). Compelled by the force of Réage’s refined language to read on, Robertson experiences both a willingness to turn the next page and falls prey to self-annihilation through identification with the protagonist.

The tension between willing and nilling is reflected in Robertson’s constant need “to stop and build a moral defense against her own identificatory immersion in the textual imaginary” (Robertson, 2012, p. 33). As she observes, Réage “is radically opening identity as a non-teleological, inconspicuous work of abnegation, of nilling *as* agency” (Robertson, 2012, p. 33). Identity comes across as a “marked disappearance” (Robertson, 2012, p. 33) not only for the protagonist, but also for the reader whose identity is dispersed toward the incalculable. As Robertson admits, “Before the text, suspending the various habits and imperatives of identity, becoming seems to flicker, perceptible for an instant... I am seduced by my own meagre capacity to cease to be, to merely absorb or refract” (Robertson, 2012, p. 27). Staging her simultaneous role as an active reader who arrives at the text with certain intentions and as a passive reader who is constantly positioned in relation to textual alterity, Robertson concludes: “The text is all divergence... The progress is more sideways than forward” (Robertson, 2012, pp. 25-26). Because of the incalculable movement set in motion by reading, the reader exchanges “the propriety of an assigned identity for these charitably promiscuous folds” (Robertson, 2012, p. 17). Reading moves us “into the open of language” (Robertson, 2012, p. 73), where the reader’s self-consciousness is temporarily suspended by the “vertigo of another’s language” (Robertson, 2012, p. 26).

This readerly movement, however, is not entirely free-floating. The reader’s thoughts not only move about and deflect freely, but are also “conditioned by historical pressures and protocols, the failures, delights and movements of materials and social and economic relationships” (Robertson, 2012, p. 14). What Robertson emphasizes is that the identity of the reader is de/constructed by the movement of both the conditioning environments and intentions, and the desiring mind inhabited by alterity. It is the tension in-between that she foregrounds. In

the inconspicuous site of reading, Robertson makes claim to “a transformational agency that runs counter to the teleology of readerly intention, as it negates the limits of identity” (Robertson, 2012, p. 39). The spectral presence of the reader amounts to reading experience that has no definite destination or point of arrival, but gives access to “an infinite and inconspicuous surface complexity which is not my own” (Robertson, 2012, p. 13). Echoing Arendt’s conception of willing as a capacity for beginning, Robertson states that “The tectonics of the book frame chance and its twisting trajectories, not an origin. A reader is a beginner” (Robertson, 2012, p. 14).

Textual Alterity and Interpretive Excess

The first part of the essay focused on the rapport between reader and text in order to demonstrate how the reader is transformed by the reading experience and how the readerly intention is interrupted by the arbitrary trajectories opened by the text. My goal in this second part is to examine how not only the reader, but also the text undergoes a transformation each time it drifts into the hand of a new reader. I will also argue that, like readerly intention, authorial intention also fails to delimit textual meaning. As Robertson asserts, “Although the book is a screen for certain intentions – institutional, authorial and readerly – intention can’t be contained or enforced” (Robertson, 2012, p. 17).

In *Nilling*, Robertson plays a dual role: she is both the writer and the reader. She thus considers her relationship to the text, by paying close attention to both authorial and readerly intention. In an interview with Carmelo Militano, she makes the following observation with regard to her position as a writer:

Any reading, any interpretation adds its particular life or grain to the movement. There’s a shimmer, a surge, a twist, as words, images, sounds, greet one another and transform. My own experience [as writer] is not prior to this motion. I want the poem to be a creator of experience rather than a record” (2012, para. 8).

For Robertson, the text functions as a creator of experience and an illegible map that leaves an active trace for the reader, who also becomes the writer of the text s/he reads. Once the written work sets a certain movement in motion, which cannot be arrested by a singular interpretation, then even the author’s experience or intention cannot be seen as being prior to this motion. No longer considering the author to be the sole authority, Robertson draws our attention to the “generative aesthetics” (Robertson, 2012, p. 16) of the written word. She notes that the fold – as the margin of excess, an excess of potential interpretability – can be differently inflected through time. “At any time, a book may receive its reader differently... The opacity, the inconspicuousness of its folds permit the interpretive differential” (Robertson, 2012, p. 11).

This interpretive incompleteness essential to writing attributes a generative power to language, which has throughout history been seen as a threat. Remember that in *Phaedrus*, Socrates accuses writing of being childish play. “Socrates criticizes writing at length... as the wrong way to seriously pursue knowledge, and ends with the observation that the only reasons to write would be as play or relaxation after the strenuous and serious work of dialectical pursuit of knowledge” (Press, 2007, p. 120). For Socrates, writing’s majestic silence poses a threat precisely because, if it falls into the wrong hands, it will drift in all kinds of directions. As Socrates says to Phaedrus,

In a way, Phaedrus, writing has a strange character... Every speech, once it’s in writing, is bandied about everywhere equally among those who understand and those who’ve no business having it. It doesn’t know to whom it ought to speak and to whom not. When it’s ill-treated and unfairly abused, it needs its father to help it, since it isn’t able to help or defend itself by itself. (Plato, 1993, p. 133)

Seeing writing as an orphan who needs the father figure to protect it from being misread, Plato touches upon the inherent repeatability of the written word.

In his readings of Plato in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida returns to this playfulness of writing touched upon by Socrates. Derrida replaces Socrates' notion of "play in the world" (1974, p. 50) with play as "a game within language" (1974, p. 50). In writing, as Derrida puts it, "One could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the deconstruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence" (1974, p. 50). For Derrida, writing's ability to drift away derives primarily from its iterability, which carries in its very inscription the trace of the absence of its author, whose "future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder [the mark produced by writing] in its functioning" (Derrida, 1988, p. 8) and from offering itself to be re-interpreted by others. Writing thus simultaneously inherits and disinherits the author and resists authorial intention. Writing, in this respect, has a playful quality, but not the kind of playfulness intended by Socrates. Derrida demonstrates that the alienating power of writing that Socrates deplores – the "free-play" of the sign within a system of signification – calls into question any stable meaning that could serve as the foundation for metaphysics. As he notes, "what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence" (1974, p. 159).

To foreground the relationship between writing and play, Derrida utilizes the concept of the "general text" (*le texte général*), which exceeds the traditional determination of text as totality. As Gasché notes, if *text* always implies an empirical closure of the unity of a corpus and the totality of its meanings, general text, "characterized by structures of referral without a referent" (1986, p. 281), is where this unity collapses. It functions as "a fabric of traces [...] a network of textual referrals (*renvois textuels*) [...] endlessly referring to something other than itself, yet never to an extratext that would bring its referring function to a clear stop" (Gasché, 1986, p. 289). Carrying within itself the law of its displacement, general text lends itself to future re-contextualizations. Derrida refers to this force of re-contextualization as the generative and grafting power of language, which turns writing into a practice "more potent than its so-called agents" (Smith, 1995, p. 136).

Like Robertson, Derrida emphasizes that owing to its iterability, writing consists of a constellation of traces that can be construed differently each time it drifts into the hand of a new reader. The act of reading thus forms a connective tissue between text and reader, and gives rise to an encounter that displaces both the identity of the reader and the significations gathered in a text. As Korhonen writes, "We read each other, me and the text, in a chiasmatic but unsymmetrical exchange of positions, viewpoints, and identities:"

in every textual encounter, the other in the text is in some way transformed from a sheer object or machine to something that carries marks of subjectivity; the text becomes a *prosopopoeia*, a personification of the other. In a textual encounter, the reader feels that she is no longer only reading a text, but, in a curious and paradoxical way, the text is also reading him or her. (Korhonen, 2006, sec. 4, para. 3)

Textual encounters condition an exchange between text and reader that never comes to a completion. Perhaps poetry testifies best to this ongoing exchange for, as the poet Paul Celan noted in his Bremen address,

A poem, being an instance of language, hence essentially a dialogue, may be a letter in bottle thrown out into the sea with the – surely not strong – hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere... In this way, too, poems are *en route*: they are headed toward. Toward what? Toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps... (MacKendrick, 2001, p. 55)

It is in this movement *en route* and without a final destination that we locate "an ethics and politics of reading" (Derrida, 2005, p. 166).

A textual encounter opens a dialogue between text and reader, a state of mutual indebtedness that exhausts any possibility of closure. Because "language... does not let itself be possessed" (Derrida, 2005, p. 101) by either the reader or the writer, reading foregrounds the reciprocity of a debt that can never be paid off, a pact that is never sealed or consumed. Whereas

Robertson focuses on the notion of the pact, Derrida refers us to “a secret contract... indebtedness, alliance” (Derrida, 1985, p. 9). Whether we call it pact or indebtedness,² the dialogic encounter in question introduces a sense of continuity and movement to the act of reading.

In *The Economy of the Unsaid*, the Canadian poet and essayist Anne Carson also investigates the notion of indebtedness by discussing the poetic economy of the ancient Greek poet Simonides and of Paul Celan. Carson examines the gift culture in Ancient Greece which she defines as a mutually binding contract. Gift exchange was based on three interrelated obligations: to give, to receive, to repay (1999, p. 12). The gift economy is, above all, a debt economy and a system of “‘alternating disequilibrium’ where the aim is never to have debts ‘paid off’ but to preserve a situation of personal indebtedness” (Morris, 1986, p. 2). Within a gift economy, the reciprocal character of the connection is implied in its reversible terminology: in Greek the word *xenos* can mean either guest or host, *xenia* either gifts given or gifts received. For Carson the notions of indebtedness and reciprocity have much to say about our linguistic culture. Like objects, language constitutes a connective tissue between giver and receiver, addressor and addressee, text and reader. The importance of preserving a mutual state of indebtedness, as exemplified in the Ancient Greek culture of gift economy, can thus be taken as a model for re-thinking the relation between self and alterity in the context of the act of reading.

Perhaps the best site to turn to in order to locate reading’s motions is poetry, because poetry reveals “the subject who makes in language that which has never yet been made and which becomes the path from one voice to another” (Meschonnic, 1995, p. 86; Robertson, *Nilling*, p. 85). In *Sovereignities in Question*, where he analyzes Celan’s poetry (bearing in mind his conversations with H. G. Gadamer on the poetico-hermeneutic question), Derrida notes that any encounter between two consciousnesses, including the one between reader-writer or reader-text, is a missed encounter. “It succeeded so well at being missed that it left an active and provocative trace, a promising trace, with more of a future ahead than if it had been a harmonious and consensual dialogue” (Derrida, 2005, p. 137). Derrida then sets up an encounter with Celan’s poetry, noting that one should not destroy the poem by exclusively seeking either readerly or authorial intention. The poem is “an abandoned trace, suddenly independent of the intentional and conscious meaning of the signatory” (Derrida, 2005, p. 146).

It wanders, but in a secretly regulated fashion, from one referent to another – destined to outlive, in an “infinite process,” the decipherments of any reader to come. If, like any trace, the poem is thus destinedly abandoned, cut off from its origin and from its end, this double interruption makes of the poem not just the unfortunate orphan Plato speaks of in the *Phaedrus* when he discusses writing. This abandonment – which appears to deprive the poem of a father, to separate and emancipate it from a father who would expose calculation to the incalculability of interrupted filiation – this immediate unreadability is also the resource that permits the poem to bless (perhaps, only perhaps), to give, to give to think, to give cause to think... to give rise to reading. (Derrida, 2005, p. 147)

Thus gently reading Celan in a way that “the poem still speaks” (Derrida, 2005, p. 167), Derrida notes that “One *should* speak while leaving to the other the chance to speak... It is a question of rhythm, of time: not to speak too much, thereby imposing silence on the other, and not to remain too silent” (2005, p. 167).

Derrida specifically focuses on Celan’s poem titled “Vast, Glowing Vault” (“Grosse, Glühende Wölbung”) and its final two lines: “The world is gone, I must carry you” (“Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen”). The poem sets up a dialogue between *ich* and *du* as “signatories or counter-signatories” (Derrida, 2005, p. 158), but it is not decided who the “I” and “you” are. In his essay on Celan titled “Who Am I and Who Are You?” Gadamer also examines the difficulty of translating Celan’s complex pronouns and remarks that despite not knowing

definitely who “I” and “you” are, we do know that “the poem speaks about something that happens to both. I and you are both transformed, self-transforming” (1997, p. 89). As he observes,

In his Meridian speech, Celan correctly emphasized the character of a poem as I-forgetting [*Ichvergessenheit*]. Then whose word is it? The poet’s? The poem’s? ... What “yours,” and, by implication, “you,” mean is certainly not set from the very beginning. Orientation in the terrain of language does not have to be provided. (Gadamer, 1997, p. 118)

Rather than presenting entirely readable subjectivities, Celan’s poetry foregrounds the interplay between an unknown “I” and an unknown “you,” as well as between “textual I” and “readerly you,” re-directing the movement of meaning toward an indefinite route. What Gadamer foregrounds is the fact that the two testify to each other’s existence, and “all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language” (Derrida, 2005, p. 66). At the end of his essay, Gadamer notes “‘You’ are what it testifies to (‘Your’ witness) – the intimate, unknown You which, for the I that here is the I of the poet as well as the reader, is its You, ‘wholly, wholly real’” (1997, p. 126). Gadamer’s awkward use of grammar in this sentence is a deliberate choice. “[T]he pronouns which follow the dash are set down in a chiasmic structure that... break[s] down the rigid barrier between poet and reader... [and] turns on a movement which cannot be fixed in rigid determinations of who I and You are, a movement which follows the very evolution of I and You in poetic, social, historical, and spiritual terms” (Heinemann and Krajewski, 1997, p. 56).

It is no wonder that Derrida turns to Celan’s poetry when discussing reading’s delicate motions for Celan’s work foregrounds illegible subjectivities and the inherent instability of textual meaning. His poetry “gathers us into a movement toward ‘you’, but you, by the time we reach you, are just folding yourself away into a place we cannot go” (Carson, 1999, p. 9). As Derrida comments, “*dich* can designate *me* or designate the poet-signatory, to whom this discourse is also addressed in return” (2005, p. 161). While leaving *ich* and *du* ambiguous, the poem nevertheless makes an evident demand for a responsible dialogue with textual alterity, where “I must carry the other” at the same time that “the other must carry me” (Derrida, 2005, p. 161). The poem speaks of itself, but it also “entrust[s] itself to the care of the other” (Derrida, 2005, p. 159), that is the reader or the receiver. The poem calls for a reading experience where both the reader’s subjectivity and the interpretive limit of the text remain indeterminate and phantasmatic, like an “open wound” (Derrida, 2005, p. 166) that does not heal. It is because of this interrupted and continuous nature of dialogue with textual alterity that Robertson defines “reading as cryptology” (Robertson, 2012, p. 34).

Conclusion

Both Derrida and Robertson define the act of reading by practicing it. As Robertson stages a reading of Hannah Arendt and Pauline Réage, and as Derrida stages a reading of Paul Celan, they become enfolded in a multi-referential reading community and place emphasis on the vitality of multiple, often illegible, agencies at work in textual encounters. They demonstrate that readerly identity and textual meaning find the source of their creative potential in this illegibility. Both Robertson and Derrida regard the movement set in motion by reading as a force that orients us toward the future, the unpredictable. Resisting teleological readings and instrumentality, they formulate an ethics of reading that stresses the generative potential of language as well as the responsible dialogue between reader and textual alterity.

When Derrida and Robertson write about reading, dialogue, and the need to carry the other, they also have particular non-textual friendships in mind. Whereas Derrida’s *Sovereignities in Question* is composed after his friend and fellow philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer’s death, Robertson’s *Nilling* coincides with her friend and fellow poet Stacy Doris’

death. The questions of survival and mourning are present in both writers' reflections on friendship, otherness, and textual alterity. In this respect, both Robertson and Derrida foreground the link between thinking and thanking – a link that Paul Celan first called attention to in his Bremen speech: “To Think and to Thank are in our language words of one and the same origin. Whoever follows their sense comes to the semantic field of ‘to remember’, ‘to be mindful’, ‘memory,’ ‘devotion’” (Celan, 1986, p. 33; Carson, 1999, p. 41). They remind us of a time, to borrow Celan's words, when we thought of thinking and thanking (*denken und danken*) as one, both morally and philologically, and of thinking, reading, and writing as inseparable from indebtedness.

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