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Journal Title: Oxford Literary Review

Volume: Volume 33, Number 1

Publisher: Edinburgh University Press | 2011-07-01, Pages 103-127

Type of Work: Article | Final Publisher PDF

Publisher DOI: 10.3366/olr2011.0008

Permanent URL: <http://pid.emory.edu/ark:/25593/ckwvp>

Final published version:

<http://www.eupublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/olr.2011.0008>

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Accessed October 24, 2021 11:55 AM EDT

A Moment of Madness: Derrida's Kierkegaard

Geoffrey Bennington

Abstract:

Beginning with his famous 1963 lecture on Foucault, Derrida repeatedly invokes a line from Kierkegaard, often translated from his French as 'the instant of decision is madness,' without ever giving a precise reference or subjecting that sentence to anything like a reading in the Derridean sense. This paper tracks some of the unsuspected complexities that emerge when that sentence is located in Kierkegaard and the Pauline tradition to which Kierkegaard is appealing. It is suggested that the singular functioning of this sentence in Derrida nonetheless, in its very failure to read, shows up something of the madness, folly or stupidity at play in Kierkegaard's thinking, and thus performs in its repetitions something of the unreadability that opens the possibility of reading itself.

À l'instant de cette lecture je vis un autre univers et je devins
au autre homme. (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*)

In early 1963, responding to his reading of Jacques Derrida's Introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*, Michel Foucault wrote in a letter to Derrida, 'sans doute l'acte premier de la philosophie est-il pour nous — et pour longtemps — la *lecture*: la tienne justement se donne avec évidence pour un tel acte. C'est pourquoi elle a cette royale honnêteté'.¹ Just over one month later, Derrida delivered the famous lecture 'Cogito et histoire de la folie', to which Foucault initially responded very positively, before changing his mind and writing the bitter critique that appeared in 1971 as 'Mon corps, ce papier, ce

The Oxford Literary Review 33.1 (2011): 103–127
Edinburgh University Press
DOI: 10.3366/olr.2011.0008
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www.eupjournals.com/olr

feu'. As late as 1983, a year or so before his death, Foucault was still dismissively criticising Derrida's reading of Plato's *Phaedrus* and Seventh Letter.²

My concern in this paper is not to rehearse again the detail of these exchanges, which Derrida pursued further after Foucault's death,³ and which have given rise to a great deal of sometimes rather dogged secondary discussion that would itself merit detailed historical consideration. Rather to suggest that the crux of the Derrida-Foucault exchange always was, and still is, the question of the possibility of reading and its relation to the unreadable. Derrida's general criticism of Foucault (and any Foucault-inspired historicism) would on this view come down to the claim that Foucault cannot in principle account for his own ability to read what he reads, that the 'mad' (unreadable) structure of reading itself is being closed off by the whole discursive apparatus of epistemes and archives, historical a prioris and games of truth. However powerful and impressive Foucault's readings may be, the thought would go, they are based on a blind spot with respect to the question of reading as such, what we might call the unreadable opening of reading itself.

One way to approach this question would go via the first epigraph that Derrida gave to that famous lecture, which in the original French is rendered both more mysterious by leading and trailing ellipses, and more assertive, lapidary, and even monumental by the use of capitalisation: '...L'Instant de la Décision est une Folie... (KIERKEGAARD)'.⁴ My hypothesis will be that this strange reference to Kierkegaard concentrates a number of issues about reading, failure to read, and the unreadable, and that tracing its fate in Derrida can help us think about the moment or event of reading as such.⁵

This Kierkegaard reference is not just given this prominent position in 'Cogito and the History of Madness', but is in fact a regularly recurring one in Derrida. The same 'quotation' (if it is strictly speaking a quotation) reappears more or less textually or is more or less explicitly alluded to many times thereafter in Derrida's work, functioning as a kind of watchword or password or slogan, but *never once* (to my knowledge) given a precise textual reference or anything like a detailed reading. As I do not believe there is any other example of such functioning in Derrida, this 'example' becomes something more and other than a mere example, and achieves a specific kind of singularity,

or could perhaps be said to come to bear Derrida's signature. In other words, a whole reading of Derrida could no doubt be organised around “‘L'instant de la décision est une folie’ (Kierkegaard)” (Derrida). In *Donner le temps*, for example (published in 1991, but based on seminar materials from 1977–8), the same tagline shows up as part of the analysis of the gift: ‘Il n’y aurait don qu’à l’instant où l’instant *paradoxal* (au sens où Kierkegaard dit de l’instant paradoxal de la décision qu’il est la folie) déchire le temps’ (There would be a gift only at the instant when the *paradoxical* instant (in the sense in which Kierkegaard says of the paradoxical instant of decision that it is madness) tears time apart).⁶ Or perhaps more famously in *Force de loi*, glossing the third of three ‘aporias’ — that of an urgency interrupting the horizon of knowledge — that he associates with the just decision, Derrida says this:

Le moment de la *décision*, en tant que tel, ce qui doit être juste, *il faut* que cela reste toujours un moment fini d’urgence et de précipitation; cela ne doit pas être la conséquence ou l’effet de ce savoir théorique ou historique, de cette réflexion ou de cette délibération, dès lors que la décision marque toujours l’interruption de la délibération juridico- ou éthico- ou politico-cognitive qui la précède, et qui *doit* la précéder. L’instant de la décision est une folie, dit Kierkegaard.⁷

(The moment of *decision as such*, what must be just, *must* always remain a finite moment of urgency and precipitation; it must not be the consequence or the effect of (...) theoretical or historical knowledge, of (...) reflection or (...) deliberation, since the decision always marks the interruption of the juridico-, ethico-, or politico-cognitive deliberation that precedes it, that *must* precede it. The instant of a decision is a madness, says Kierkegaard.)

In the interview entitled ‘Dialangues’ conducted in 1983, Derrida’s interviewer, Anne Berger, suggests a possible connection between Derrida’s interest in partition or divisibility and what she refers to as ‘ce rapport d’indécision volontaire que tu sembles entretenir avec tes objets de pensée, et peut-être avec la “réalité” en general’ (that relation of voluntary indecision that you seem to maintain with the objects of

your thought, and perhaps with 'reality' in general), provoking Derrida to gloss at some length the logic of undecidability and produce a less textually precise version of what is clearly the same reference:

C'est à partir du moment où on se rend à la nécessité de la divisibilité et de l'indécidable, que la question de la décision peut se poser ; et de savoir ce que décider, affirmer, c'est-à-dire aussi se décider, signifient ; une décision qui serait prise autrement qu'au bord de cet indécidable-là, ce ne serait pas une décision. Donc la décision la plus grave, le Pari, le Sacrifice d'Isaac, les grandes décisions qu'il faut prendre et qu'il faut affirmer se prennent et sont affirmées dans ce rapport à l'indécidable même ; au moment même où elles ne sont pas possibles, elles deviennent possibles. Ce sont les seules décisions possibles : impossibles. Pense ici à Kierkegaard. La seule décision possible, c'est la décision impossible. C'est quand il n'est pas possible de savoir ce qu'il faut faire, quand le savoir n'est pas déterminant et n'a pas à l'être, qu'une décision est possible comme telle. Autrement la décision est une application ; on sait ce qu'il faut faire, c'est clair, il n'y a plus de décision possible ; il y a là un effet, une application, une programmation.⁸

(It is from the moment one surrenders to the necessity of divisibility and the undecidable that the question of decision can be posed: and the question of knowing what deciding, affirming — which is to say, also deciding — mean. A decision that would be taken otherwise than on the border of this undecidable would not be a decision. Thus the gravest decision — the Wager, the Sacrifice of Isaac — the great decisions that must be taken and must be affirmed are taken and affirmed in this relation to the undecidable itself; at the very moment at which they are no longer possible, they become possible. These are the only decisions possible — impossible ones. Think here of Kierkegaard: the only decision possible is the impossible decision. It is when it is not possible to *know* what must be done, when knowledge is not and cannot be determining that a decision is possible as such. Otherwise the decision

is an application, one knows what has to be done, it's clear, there is no more decision possible; what one has here is an effect, an application, a programming.)

Again, in the important lecture first given in English as 'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils', Derrida invokes this same moment from Kierkegaard to describe the temporality of reflection:

Alors le temps de la réflexion est aussi un autre temps, il est hétérogène à ce qu'il réfléchit et donne peut-être le temps de ce qui appelle et s'appelle la pensée. C'est la chance d'un événement dont on ne sait pas si, se présentant *dans* l'Université, il appartient à l'histoire de l'Université. Il peut être aussi bref et paradoxal, il peut déchirer le temps, comme l'instant dont parle Kierkegaard, l'un des penseurs étrangers, voire hostiles à l'Université, qui nous donnent souvent plus à penser, quant à l'essence de l'Université, que les réflexions académiques elles-mêmes.⁹

(Then the time of reflection is also an other time; it is heterogeneous to what it reflects and perhaps gives time for what calls for and what is called thinking. It is the chance for an event about which one does not know whether or not, presenting itself *within* the University, it belongs to the history of the University. It may also be brief and paradoxical, it may tear time apart, like the instant invoked by Kierkegaard, one of those thinkers who are foreign, even hostile to the University, who give us more to think about, with respect to the essence of the University, than academic reflections themselves.)

No explicit invocation of 'folie' here, but that motif is never far to seek, even though Kierkegaard may not always explicitly be named : so in *Sauf le nom* (1993), we find :

Aller où il est possible d'aller, ce ne serait pas un déplacement ou une décision, ce serait le déroulement

irresponsable d'un programme. La seule décision possible passe par la folie de l'indécidable et de l'impossible.¹⁰
 (Going where it is possible to go would not be a displacement or a decision, it would be the irresponsible unfolding of a program. The sole decision possible passes through the madness of the undecidable and the impossible.)

And, as a final preliminary example, an interview from 1991 whose title, 'Une "folie" doit veiller sur la pensée', is derived from a comment late in the interview which again associates the moment (this time the moment of invention) and *folie*, 'Cela doit s'inventer à chaque instant, à chaque phrase, sans assurance, sans garde-fou absolu. Autant dire que la folie, une certaine "folie", doit guetter chaque pas, et au fond veiller sur la pensée, comme le fait aussi la raison' (This has to be invented at every moment, with every sentence, without assurance, without absolute guardrails. Which is as much as to say that madness, a certain 'madness' *must* keep a lookout over every step, and finally watch over thinking, as reason does also).¹¹

'Une certaine folie', rather than LA folie, perhaps, because this often repeated, more or less direct, more or less textual reference to Kierkegaard and madness is a little more complicated than might at first appear. Each of the contexts in which it appears (we will look at a couple more occurrences in due course) would of course need analysis in its own right, but Derrida's repeated reference, by its persistence and precision but lack of direct attribution, gives one the *impression* that it is a memory of his 'early' reading of Kierkegaard,¹² of a *moment of reading*, precisely, something like a snapshot or screen memory of a (traumatic) event¹³ rather than a scholarly reference (everything indeed suggests that Derrida has forgotten where he read it). The sentence in question appears in fact mid-way through Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*, pseudonymously attributed to Johannes Climacus. The sentence Derrida is remembering and almost compulsively quoting without ever explicitly relocating it is indeed translated into French by Paul Petit¹⁴ as 'L'instant de la décision est *folie*'. One's understanding of this sentence or slogan does, however, change a little once it is read in that context and once what is at stake in this translation is more carefully measured. In the now standard English translation of

the *Fragments* by Howard and Edna Hong, the sentence becomes ‘the moment of decision is foolishness’, which has to say the least a slightly different ring to it.¹⁵ The word translated as *folie* by Petit is the Danish *Daarskab* (nowadays written *Dårskab*), which is indeed more readily translated into English as either folly or foolishness than as madness. In the German translation of Kierkegaard we find ‘der Augenblick der Entscheidung ist eine *Torheit*’, rather than, say, *Irrsinn* or *Narrheit* or *Wahnsinn*.¹⁶ But the potential contrast between *Dårskab* and other modalities of madness or craziness are quite active in Kierkegaard’s text from the start, so that, for example, the more extreme forms appear explicitly in the book’s foreword in criticism of the Hegelian Martensen:

Of course it is impossible for anyone to dream of attributing world-historical significance to a pamphlet (...) for this to happen, the guilty person would have to be singularly stupid [Danish *dum*; German *dumm*; French *stupide*] by nature, and, most likely, by yelling day in and day out in antistrophic antiphonies every time someone deluded him into thinking that now a new era, a new epoch, etc. was beginning, he would have so completely bellowed the sparsely bestowed *quantum satis* of common sense out of his head that he would have been transported into a state of bliss, into what could be called the howling madness of the higher lunacy [Danish *den høiere Galenskabs vrøelende Uffindighed*; German *den brüllenden Wahnsinn des höheren Irrsinns*; French *la démence braillante de l’aberration supérieure*], symptomatized by yelling, convulsive yelling, while the sum and substance of the yelling are these words: era, epoch, era and epoch, epoch and era, the system. (PF, 6)

In the context in which the ‘moment of madness’ sentence appears, Kierkegaard’s point is not to proclaim or affirm or celebrate some kind of creative, anguished or otherwise existentially authentic ‘madness’ of the decision, as one might perhaps have been forgiven for thinking on reading Derrida’s various invocations of it, but to bring out its specifically and stubbornly paradoxical nature: as opposed to the

Socratic account of learning (especially in the *Meno*) which famously resolves the paradox of learning (that one cannot seek what one knows because one already knows it, and one cannot seek what one does not know because one does not know what one is seeking) by the concept of anamnesis, in which the *occasion* of learning is indifferent,¹⁷ Kierkegaard proposes what he calls a ‘thought-project’ in which that occasion would become important, indeed *decisive*, because in that moment the eternal would come into existence in the temporal. If, then (as Kierkegaard consistently formulates it according to the logic of the thought-project, the hypothesis), *if* one were to try to answer the Socratic question (how is learning possible?) differently, *then* one would need to register a number of consequences:

Now if the moment is to acquire decisive significance, then the seeker up until that moment must not have possessed the truth, not even in the form of ignorance, for in that case the moment becomes merely the moment of occasion; indeed he must not even be a seeker. (...) Consequently, he has to be defined as being outside the truth (...) or as untruth. He is, then, untruth. (PF, 13)

The argument now goes as follows: if the truth is to be brought about, the conditions for understanding it must also be provided (for *ex anti-Socratic hypothesis* those conditions cannot be already in the learner). No merely human teacher can provide those conditions, which require a *radical* transformation of the learner, which must come from somewhere other (for otherwise those conditions could be in the learner already). Further, as created by a God who must have given him the conditions for the truth (otherwise he would be a mere animal), the learner must have *come to lack* those conditions through his own doing; and this coming-to-lack Kierkegaard calls sin. If the learner could simply regain the conditions of truth under his own steam, as it were, then again the Moment as such would vanish in that it would be merely the contingent occasion for the realisation of that possibility that was already given in advance: the learner as sinner may have freely chosen sin (i.e. unfreedom) in the first instance, but is then bound to continue to do so — having once chosen unfreedom, freedom is bound to the increase of that unfreedom. So any teacher who was able

to provide again the initially God-given conditions of truth along with the truth they make comprehensible would have to be regarded as more than a mere teacher, but as a *savior*, a *deliverer*, a *reconciler*, and in the end a *judge* (PF, 17–18). The moment (which Climacus says must be *unforgettable* because otherwise the learner would simply relapse into loss of truth and its condition from which only the re-defined teacher has allowed him to emerge) — the moment in which this return of truth and its conditions to the learner takes place is, then, the moment of decision:

A moment such as this is unique. To be sure, it is short and temporal, as the moment is; it is passing, as the moment is, past, as the moment is in the next moment, and yet it is decisive, and yet it is filled with the eternal. A moment such as this must have a special name. Let us call it: *the fullness of time*. (PF, 18)

This is still only an intermediate step in the process that will lead us to the ‘absolute paradox’ and the *Dårskab*, *Torheit*, *folie* or foolishness that we are trying to understand in the sentence Derrida is so fond of invoking. This characterisation of the moment is unequivocally referred by Climacus to St. Paul, and more especially to Galatians 4:4, ‘But when the fullness of the time (πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου) was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, ⁵To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.’ We shall return to that Pauline reference shortly.

This much on the side of the teacher. On the side of the ‘learner’ or disciple, the moment of decision occurs as a moment of *conversion* or *rebirth*, as a radical *break* without return, which Climacus suggests is scarcely thinkable at all, and that it is his project or proposal to try to think or at least to approach. (Again, this comes close to *some* form of madness: without it yet being the phrase that we are approaching, a further imaginary interlocutor describes the whole project here as ‘ludicrous’ and ‘foolish’ (PF, 21), where ‘foolish’ translates *tårbelige*, which in German becomes *Törichste* and in French *une sottise*.) Climacus now tightens up the paradoxical nature of this perhaps unthinkable thing he is trying to think: whereas in the Socratic set-up there is essentially a symmetry or reciprocity between teacher

and learner (such that each is the occasion for the other to understand himself), the god (who we have already established replaces the teacher in the non-Socratic hypothesis) is not in any relation of reciprocity with the 'learner', and so must be understood to act, when he acts, out of pure love. Further, the god, being a god (Climacus quotes the famous Aristotelian definition, *ἀχίνετος πάντα χινεῖ* from the *Metaphysics* (1072b)) must necessarily be resolved from all eternity, 'even though, fulfilled in time, it expressly becomes *the moment* (...) The moment emerges precisely in the relation of the eternal resolution to the unequal occasion' (PF, 25).¹⁸

This paradox is what will lead us to the slogan-phrase so often repeated by Derrida. Climacus is quite clear that 'paradox is the passion of thought', and the 'ultimate paradox of thought' is 'to want to discover something that thought cannot think' (PF, 37). This something is the unknown: let us, says Climacus (PF, 39) call it the god. The god escapes knowledge in the sense of any proof of existence:

if (...) the god does not exist, then of course it is impossible to demonstrate it. But if he does exist, then it is foolishness [*Dårskab*, the word we are coming to] to want to demonstrate it, since I, in the very moment the demonstration commences, would presuppose it as not doubtful (...) but as decided, because otherwise I would not begin. (PF, 39)

In proceeding with an attempted demonstration, I will always fail to bridge the gap between ideality (God as a concept, which I can develop or explicate only having presupposed its ideal being) and existence, which I can never in any case conclude by reasoning. *While* I am reasoning in the effort to prove the existence of God, that existence is not proven (because I am still demonstrating it); when I *finish* my demonstration, the existence does not flow continuously from my reasoning but, says Climacus, 'the existence is there' (PF, 43), in a *leap*. This situation, which Climacus illustrates as that of a 'wise' man who keeps putting off the demonstration because it is impossible, and which a note describes as 'a superb theme for a crazy comedy' [*vanvittige Comik; wahnwitzige Komik; sujet de comique délirant*] (PF, 43), comes about because in demonstrating, or attempting to demonstrate, the

understanding encounters a limit or a *frontier* [*Grændsen, Grenze, frontière*], and just that is the experience of the unknown.¹⁹ The frontier involves an encounter with the absolutely different, but an encounter that is not really even an encounter, ‘because the understanding cannot even think the absolutely different’, in that it can have no distinguishing mark to identify it *as* the absolutely different.²⁰ If the god is conceived of as anything more or other than the frontier itself, then ‘the one idea about the different is confused with the many ideas about the different’ (PF, 45), and we are in dispersion, scatter, for which Climacus provides the loaded Greek term διασπορά, and glosses in *poikilon*-like terms as an attractive and seductive fantasy.²¹ This would be the ‘capricious arbitrariness’ that ‘madly [*vanvittigen; wahnsinnig*] lurks’ at the bottom of devoutness or more literally the fear of God (in French, it is ‘l’insensé, le lunatique arbitraire’), and gives rise to the luxuriant, fantastical fabrications of paganism. And this shows up as at the frontier, or as the impasse of understanding that Climacus is tightening up into the ‘absolute paradox’:

The understanding cannot come to know this by itself (since, as we have seen, it is a contradiction); if it is going to come to know this, it must come to know this from the god, and if it does come to know this, it cannot understand this and consequently cannot come to know this, for how could it understand the absolutely different? (...) If the god is absolutely different from a human being, then a human being is absolutely different from the god — but how is the understanding to grasp this? At this point we seem to stand at a paradox. (PF, 46)

The experience of the paradox is the experience of an *offense* or an *affront*: the understanding is offended by the paradox against which it has struggled, ‘offense *comes into existence* with the paradox; if it *comes into existence*, here again we have the moment, around which indeed everything revolves. (...) All offense is in its essence a misunderstanding of *the moment*, since it is indeed offense at the paradox, and the paradox in turn is the moment’ (PF, 51).

We are almost at the phrase that Derrida so often cites or invokes. Before coming directly to it, it is worth pointing out a footnote just a

little earlier that attempts to clarify the nature of offense as suffering (the footnote is called by a paragraph that suggests that the distinction between suffering offense and active offense is a fragile one), and in so doing invokes the Greek concept of σκάνδαλον, which will be with us again very shortly:

Language usage also shows that all offense is a suffering. We say 'to be offended', which primarily signifies only the state, but we synonymously say: to *take* offense (the identity of the suffering [*Lidende*] and the acting). In Greek it is σκανδαλιζέσθαι. This word comes from σκάνδαλον (offense, affront) and thus means to take affront. Here the direction is clear; it is not the offense that affronts but the offense that takes affront, therefore passively [*passivt*], even though so actively that it itself takes affront. The understanding, therefore, has not itself originate the offense, for the paradoxical affront that the isolated understanding develops discovers neither the paradox nor the offense. (PF, 50n)²²

So here we are with the understanding offended or affronted by the paradox of the moment. This is essentially the moment as seen from the Socratic position with which we began, and which has to consider the moment as the mere inessential and vanishing occasion in the dialectical account of teaching and learning as essentially anamnesia. From this point of view, the moment 'does not exist, has not been, and will not come' (PF, 52). The learner is already the truth and simply has to remember that truth: so *from this Socratic point of view*, the moment looks like a 'jest' [*Spøg; Scherz; frime*], a joke, and so *the moment of decision is (mere) foolishness*. 'The moment of decision is foolishness.' 'L'instant de la décision est une folie' is thus not, as one might have been forgiven for thinking on reading Derrida's apparently enthusiastic endorsements or countersignings of it, Kierkegaard's, nor even Climacus's, direct characterisation of the moment, but their characterisation of the *Socratic* view of it, i.e. the view that the whole point of the *Fragments* is to contest, at least hypothetically, according to the thought-project. *If* we want to think non-Socratically about the possibility of learning, then we have to foreground the moment and

embrace the paradox, and this we do not *prima facie* seem to do by simply *adopting* the Socratic position that characterises the moment as mere jest or foolishness. The moment of decision is *ridiculous*, it's a *joke*, says the Socratic position, dismissively. So among the in fact rather differentiated and refined vocabulary of madness, lunacy, craziness, and folly that we have encountered in these opening pages of the *Philosophical Fragments*, it seems that this instance cannot simply be grasped as readily or straightforwardly as we might have thought with the word 'folie',²³ still less with the term 'madness', and that the complex organisation of the text does not at all invite the reader to adopt it as the *truth*, still less to make of it a slogan to be repeated as Kierkegaard's true insight into what he calls 'the moment of decision', the *Øieblik* or *Augenblick*. At first approach, then, it seems as though Derrida, probably on the basis of an impressionable youthful reading only partially remembered, has quite mistaken the sense and intention of Kierkegaard/Climacus's point, and inadvertently sided with those who take offense at the paradox or think it a scandal: 'the expression of offense is that the moment is foolishness, the paradox is foolishness' (PF, 52).

Before seeing whether this initial diagnosis is justified, let us pause for a moment and remember Climacus's use of the Greek σκάνδαλον in the slightly earlier footnote to characterise the offence. Not implausibly, the slogan-sentence we have been working towards is given a footnote by Howard and Edna Hong, which reads simply: 'See I Corinthians 1:23.'²⁴ That famous verse reads: 'But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness [ἑμεῖς δὲ κηρύσσομεν Χριστὸν ἐσταυρωμένον, Ἰουδαίος μὲν σκάνδαλον ἕνεστιν δὲ μωρίαν]'.²⁵ So although Kierkegaard is opposing his hypothetical thinking of the moment essentially to the Greeks (in the shape of Socrates), for whom the preaching of Christ crucified is indeed foolishness (of which we shall be seeing a good deal more in St. Paul in a moment), the immediately preceding footnote glossing the offence as σκάνδαλον, translated in the King James Bible as 'stumblingblock', invites the thought that there is in fact a double reference to this verse in the *Fragments*, and that, not surprisingly perhaps, a Judaic position on the moment is no more promising than the Greek.²⁶ All of this becomes clearer if we look at a little more context for the quote from I Corinthians, from a

self-distancing of Paul's preaching from any mere 'wisdom of words' [σοφία λόγου], i.e. the words of Greek philosophy or sophistry, to the repetition of that motif in 2:1 and the reminder of the source of the title of one of Kierkegaard's best-known works:

For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. ¹⁸For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness [ὁ λόγος γὰρ ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ τοῖς μὲν ἀπολλυμένοις μωρία ἐστίν]; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. ²⁰Where *is* the wise? where *is* the scribe? where *is* the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world [οὐχὶ ἐμώρανεν ὁ θεὸς τὴν σοφίαν τοῦ κόσμου?] ²¹For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe [εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς διὰ τῆς μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος σῶσαι τοὺς πιστούοντας]. ²²For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: ²³But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; ²⁴But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. ²⁵Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men [ὅτι τὸ μωρὸν τοῦ θεοῦ σοφώτερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐστίν]; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. ²⁶For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*: ²⁷But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise [ἀλλὰ τὰ μωρὰ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξέλεξατο ὁ θεός]; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; ²⁸And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, *yea*, and things which are not, to bring to nought

things that are: ²⁹That no flesh should glory in his presence.

³⁰But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: ³¹That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

2:¹And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. ²For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. ³And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.

The repeated motif of foolishness is critical to the passage, and already in Paul the object of some quite complex rhetorical irony and even free indirect discourse: the preaching of the cross (which is not to use the 'wisdom of words', i.e. a rhetorical or ratiocinative use of language) *seems* foolish to those who perish; and those who perish are indeed the 'wise' whose 'wisdom' is of the same order as the wisdom of words, i.e. the wisdom of the world, but who thereby are rendered themselves genuinely foolish ('hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world'), in an inversion that continues: because the 'wisdom' of the world did not know God, God chose the 'foolishness' of preaching (i.e. a preaching that *looked* foolish from the point of view of the 'wisdom' that *really is* foolishness).²⁷ This overturning of the value of foolishness essentially affects the relation with the Greeks ('the Greeks seek after wisdom', which is the definition of philosophy itself),²⁸ although a similar inversion as to the 'signs' required by the Jews (the scribe, the γραμματέύς) is also implied: those who see that the 'foolishness' of preaching is not in fact foolishness (not so much because they understand as because they are 'called') but its opposite, wisdom (and power, which presumably answers the Jews here rather than the Greeks), are those who will be saved when the time that is at hand is fulfilled.

The major axis for the rhetoric of the passage, dominating that of high/low and weak/powerful, is indeed that of wisdom/foolishness, σοφία/μωρία. Confirming what we were saying earlier about translation in this semantic zone, μωρία, the only occurrences of which in the Greek New Testament are in fact to be found here

in I Corinthians, is systematically translated, as we have seen, by 'foolishness' in English, by 'Torheit' in German (Luther included), but, in the Romance languages, by 'folie' in French (be it by Martin, Bovet Bonnet, Crampon or Segond), by 'locura' in Spanish, and by 'pazzia' in Italian. And in Danish by *Dårskab*, the same word Climacus uses in the phrase we have been turning around. To the Greeks, the preaching of the cross is just foolishness, a joke.²⁹ To the extent that Climacus is indeed implicitly referring to this passage from St. Paul, then both the English translation as 'foolishness', and the French as 'folie' seem fully justified and justifiable on philological grounds. Insofar as one might be inclined to be suspicious of Derrida's apparently uncritical appropriation of this passage or slogan, then, that suspicion would have to be centered not on his simple use of the word *folie*, but in his apparently direct and — quite uncharacteristically for one usually so highly attentive to all the details of text and context, to the status and rhetorical complexity of the texts he reads, and attentive just because of a kind of citational escape-velocity with respect to context that he also diagnoses and that in fact makes reading possible³⁰ — entirely unproblematised attribution to Kierkegaard of a thought that is not only pseudonymous (the *Philosophical Fragments* are signed by Johannes Climacus³¹), radically *hypothetical* (within the framework of a 'Thought-Project' which is entirely in the form of an 'if... then' structure) but within that pseudonymous and hypothetical structure is presenting the thought that the moment of decision is *Dårskab not even* as the thought of that pseudonymous author, but representing it as the position taken by an imaginary Socratic interlocutor who is somewhat in the position of the 'Greek' as that position is established by St. Paul in I Corinthians. The moment of decision, on this view, would be, properly understood, not in fact a moment of *Dårskab* at all, but a moment of a higher wisdom that transcends the pseudo-wisdom (the wisdom of the world, the σοφία of rhetor, sophist, or dialectician alike), to which it only *appears* as μωρία, foolishness, because that worldly wisdom is not σοφία at all but itself the real or true foolishness.

But perhaps this complexity of double pseudonymy (not Kierkegaard directly, but the Socratic figure via Climacus) and chiasmatic reversal (not in fact foolishness but higher wisdom) *itself* bespeaks a kind of 'madness' that is being condensed in the slogan version that Derrida habitually gives of the phrase. 'L'instant de la

décision est une folie' might then be read as (no doubt unconsciously, still under the 'impression' of that early reading of Kierkegaard) picking up in a further reflexive move the 'madness' of this whole set-up as we have laboriously reconstructed it through the opening pages of the *Philosophical Fragments* with their deployment of different valences of the mad, the crazy and the foolish, and their internal allusion to I Corinthians's complex inversion of at least some of those values. Not only would the moment of decision *itself* be foolish when viewed from a Socratic perspective, but the whole 'moment of decision' discussion as set up by Climacus/Kierkegaard would bespeak a kind of craziness when seen from that same perspective. Here the thought would be that not only is Kierkegaard proposing a non-Socratic *theory* of the moment, but is also doing so in a distinctly non-Socratic way or manner, such that the reader *qua* reader becomes entangled in paradox, confusion and apparent absurdity and cannot entirely philosophise it away. Kierkegaard's text is in a certain sense unreadable. In such a hypothesis, one might either try to untangle, as philosophically as possible, that confusion (which is, as the references to madness in the Foreword suggest, not *mere* confusion, not *simply* the ravings of a lunatic (that being the fate, rather, of the Hegelian in Climacus's anecdote, which itself repeats the structure of the chiasmatic reversal of I Corinthians, such that the height of a certain rationalism becomes the height of foolishness and indeed this time true madness), somewhat along the lines of what we have been doing here, or else one might imagine taking seriously the structure of the irruptive moment as thematised *in* the text and apply it to one's reading or reception *of* the text. A 'momentary' rather than strictly expository reading of this text about the structure of the moment might then, in not exactly a deliberate or calculated gesture, extract a phrase and endow it with the force or virtue of the moment of decision itself: at that point, the *event* as much as the *content* of the slogan 'L'instant de la décision est une folie' might function *as* a moment in precisely the strong sense the text of the *Philosophical Fragments* is promoting. What is apparently the *worst* reading, or simply an absence of reading (taking that sentence literally as a direct proposition immediately attributable to Søren Kierkegaard, reading it as a *thesis about the moment* that says that the moment is madness and then quoting it repeatedly as a truth) might then, in a further paradoxical twist, manage to *perform* or *do* the moment, in its

strict unreadability, more accurately or faithfully than the explicative and rationalising reading that I have been performing here. That demonstrably 'bad' reading would then not really be a reading at all, as is further evidenced by the fact that Derrida's most sustained published discussion of Kierkegaard, in *The Gift of Death*, which *is* a reading, still includes the erratic block of this 'unread' and, as always, unreferenced quotation of the 'slogan' we are tracking: commenting there on a passage from *Fear and Trembling*, Derrida draws attention to the word *instant* (in the French translation: 'moment' in the English), and adds, 'J'ai souligné le mot *instant*: "l'instant de la décision est la folie", dit ailleurs Kierkegaard.³² But in not even being a reading, Derrida's apparent mere repetition or even incantation of this slogan would have captured something of the event-nature of the moment in its Pauline-Kierkegaardian sense (as opposed to its Socratic characterisation as mere occasion), as an event with the quality of a break, a trauma, a conversion, a radical 'impression' or imprint, a turning-point or rupture in the history of the young Jacques Derrida, itself a moment of *folie* then subject to regular rememorative or perhaps compulsive repetition throughout his work, in memory of that unforgettable yet somewhat forgotten event. 'L'instant de la décision est une folie' *est une folie*.

This understanding of what the repeated event of 'L'instant de la décision est une folie' is doing in Derrida can then also be the object, in its repetitions, of some displacement and re-reading which are part of its structure. For example, in one of its apparent iterations in Derrida, which does not explicitly mention Kierkegaard, it is glossed in a way that is much more 'correct' in that now it is explicitly registered that the moment of decision only *appears* to be *Dårskab* from a philosophical (for Climacus, a Socratic) or rationalistic perspective: in *Politiques de l'amitié*, contemporaneous with *Force de Loi*, we find this, claiming that the concept of the subject cannot at all help one understand the decision:

Faudrait-il se montrer hospitalier pour l'impossible même, à savoir ce que le *bon sens de toute philosophie* ne peut qu'exclure comme la folie ou le non-sens, à savoir une *décision passive*, une décision originellement affectée ? Un hôte aussi indésirable ne peut s'avancer dans l'espace

clos ou le chez-soi du sens commun qu'en remettant en mémoire, en quelque sorte, pour s'en autoriser, une vieille invitation oubliée. Il rappellerait ainsi le type ou la silhouette du concept classique de la décision : celle-ci doit interrompre, elle marque un commencement absolu. Elle signifie donc l'autre en moi qui décide et déchire. La décision passive, condition de l'événement, c'est toujours en moi, structurellement, une autre décision, une décision déchirante comme décision de l'autre.³³

(Would one have to show hospitality to the impossible itself — that is, to what the *good sense of all philosophy* can only exclude as madness or nonsense: a *passive decision*, an originally affected decision? Such an undesirable guest can intrude into the closed space or the home ground of common sense only by recalling, as it were, so as to derive authority from it, an old forgotten invitation. It would thus recall the type or the silhouette of the classical concept of decision: a decision must interrupt, it marks an absolute beginning. Hence it signifies the other in me who decides and rends. The passive decision, condition of the event, is always in me, structurally, an other decision, a rending decision as decision of the other.)

From (or perhaps *into*) the point of view of good, sound common sense and philosophy, the decision irrupts and interrupts like madness or nonsense, entailing something unthinkable like a passive decision, a decision not taken by me but by the other in me, the event of alterity itself, a reading in which it is not exactly I who reads, something unreadable to me as supposed subject of reading.

If *Dårskab* as foolishness, as jest or joke or absurdity, thus at least *communicates* — in one direction, as it were — with madness as non-sense or craziness, *Wahnsinn*, it also communicates, in the other, with a certain *stupidity*. The event leaves me dumbstruck, unable to speak (like the Abraham depicted in *Fear and Trembling*³⁴), stupefied, stupid. For the Greeks, the moment is $\mu\omicron\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$, says Paul, using a term

whose cognate *moron* would, many centuries later, in 1910 to be precise, be adopted as a clinical term by the American Association for the Study of the Feeble-minded.³⁵ Like the understanding at the frontier described by Climacus, there is, faced with the moment of decision, a *moronic* moment, a moment of stupidity as well as of crazy or fantastical elucubration. And in the last explicit iteration of this Kierkegaardian reference in Derrida's work,³⁶ madness is indeed now explicitly associated with stupidity, with *bêtise*:

What Avital Ronell sees clearly and what matters to us here, is that if 'stupidity' (and I must keep the English word) is neither a concept nor a nonconcept but, as she says, a quasi-concept (and this concept of the 'quasi', of the 'as if', carries the whole charge of the equivocation), this hangs on the fact that it has no status, by which we have to understand both no stability and no legitimacy accredited once and for all: and this nonstatus depends on an undecidability, an indeterminacy, of course, but not any old indeterminacy or any old indecision. It makes your head spin. The point is that it is a matter of an indecision or an indeterminacy between a determinacy and an indeterminacy. So that to link up more visibly and clearly with the problematic of sovereignty that actually has not left us, I would be tempted to say that any decision (and sovereignty is a power of absolute decision) is both mad (every decision is madness, says Kierkegaard) and *bête*, or stupid, that it involves a risk of, or a leaning toward, *bêtise*.³⁷

Madness and stupidity, the risk of reading.

Notes

¹ 'No doubt the primary act of philosophy is for us — and for some time to come — *reading*: yours clearly presents itself as such an act. Which is why it has that royal honesty.' Michel Foucault, letter to Jacques Derrida, 27 January 1963, quoted in Benoît Peeters, *Derrida* (Paris, Flammarion, 2010), p. 164. Just over a month later, Derrida gave the lecture '*Cogito* et histoire de la folie'. See Foucault's subsequent letters quoted in Peeters, pp. 167 and 168 for his initially very positive reaction to the lecture.

- ² See Michel Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres (Cours au Collège de France 1982–3)* (Paris, Seuil/ Gallimard, 2008), 234 and 302.
- ³ See 'Etre juste avec Freud', in *Résistances: de la psychanalyse* (Paris, Galilée, 1996), 93–146. I pursue the late Foucault's analysis of *parrhesia*, and his awkward attempt to disengage it from rhetoric, in the longer essay of which this is an extract.
- ⁴ In Alan Bass's translation ('The Instant of Decision is Madness' (Kierkegaard)), the sentence loses its ellipses and Kierkegaard all but his initial capitalisation, but the quotation itself is still capitalised as though it were a title. See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978), 31.
- ⁵ See a very rich, idiosyncratic and fascinating discussion of much that is to follow in John Llewelyn, *Margins of Religion: Between Kierkegaard and Derrida* (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2009), especially Chapter 1, entitled 'On the Borderline of Madness', 8–30. Llewelyn quotes the original formulation of this sentence in Kierkegaard, but does not point to the unreferenced repetition of this tag line across Derrida's work, though he does open on a quotation of Derrida saying 'But it is Kierkegaard to whom I have been the most faithful'. (From Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris *A taste for the secret*, tr., Giacomo Donis (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001), 40; in that book it is Maurizio Ferraris who quotes back to Derrida the 'instant of decision is madness' line that will be preoccupying us (Ibid., 24). Llewelyn moves more mercurially, and with more alacrity than I, across the different valencies of 'madness' at play here.
- ⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Donner — le temps I: La fausse monnaie* (Paris, Galilée, 1991), 21; translated by Peggy Kamuf as *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992), 9.
- ⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi: le 'fondement mystique' de l'autorité* (Paris, Galilée, 1994), 58; translated by Mary Quaintance as 'Force of Law: the "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', in Gil Anidjar, ed., *Acts of Religion* (New York and London, Routledge, 2002), 255.
- ⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Dialangues', in Elisabeth Weber, ed., *Points de suspension: Entretien* (Paris, Galilée, 1992), 157; translated by Peggy Kamuf as 'Dialanguages' in *Points: Interviews 1974–1994* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995), 147–8.
- ⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Les pupilles de l'Université: Le principe de raison et l'idée de l'Université', in *Du droit à la philosophie* (Paris, Galilée, 1990), 497; translated by Catherine Porter and Edward P. Morris as 'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils', in *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004), 154; translation slightly modified.

- ¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Sauf le nom* (Paris, Galilée, 1993), 63; translated by John P. Leavey Jr. in Thomas Dutoit, ed., *On the name* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 59.
- ¹¹ 'A "madness" must watch over thinking', *Points de suspension*, 374 (363).
- ¹² See Bennington and Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, 2nd edition (Paris, Seuil, 2009), 272, where the entire entry for the years 1948–9 reads 'L'orientation vers la philosophie se précise. Lecture "impressionnée" de Kierkegaard et de Heidegger'; translated by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993), 'The movement towards philosophy takes shape. "Awed" reading of Kierkegaard and Heidegger' (p. 328). Being 'impressionné' in French is more than merely being 'impressed' and has a sense of being awestruck and perhaps overwhelmed, near the *thaumazein* with which philosophy is said to begin.
- ¹³ 'Un événement est toujours traumatique, sa singularité interrompt un ordre et déchire, comme toute décision digne de ce nom, un tissu normal de la temporalité ou de l'histoire' (An event is always traumatic, its singularity interrupts an order and rips apart, like every decision worthy of the name, a normal tissue of temporality or history). Jacques Derrida, 'Le ruban de machine à écrire: *Limited Ink II*', in *Papier Machine: le ruban de machine à écrire et autres réponses* (Paris, Galilée, 2001), 114; translated by Peggy Kamuf as 'Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2)', in *Without Alibi* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002), 136.
- ¹⁴ *Les miettes philosophiques*, tr. Paul Petit [1947] (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1967), 96. Petit had earlier translated the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and the *Miettes* translation appeared posthumously, after Petit, active in the French Resistance, was executed by the Germans in 1944.
- ¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1985), 52 (hereinafter PF). The original Danish text reads 'Afgjørelsens Øieblik er en Daarskab.' The earlier translation by David Swenson has 'folly' for *Daarskab*, as also quoted by Llewelyn, p. 11.
- ¹⁶ *Philosophische Brosamen und Unwissenschaftliche Nachschrift*, translated by B. and S. Diderichsen (Munich, DTV, 2005), 64.
- ¹⁷ PF, 11, and especially 13: 'The temporal point of departure is a nothing, because in the same moment I discover that I have known the truth from eternity without knowing it, in the same instant that moment is hidden in the eternal, assimilated into it in such a way that I, so to speak, still cannot find it even if I were to look for it, because there it is no Here and no There, but only a *ubique et nusquam* [everywhere and nowhere].'

- ¹⁸ In the longer essay of which this is a part, I discuss Heidegger's complaint that in presenting his moment in this way, Kierkegaard is still working with a metaphysical view of time, and (with some help from Derrida's reading of Husserl's *Augenblick* in *La voix et le phénomène*) try to show that Heidegger's own *Augenblick* of *Entschlossenheit* is closer to Kierkegaard's than Heidegger might want to admit.
- ¹⁹ Llewelyn, op. cit., gives a detailed reading of this figure in the context of the famous issue between Kant and Hegel. See too my *Frontières kantiennes*, and more especially my 'De la fiction transcendantale', in Michel Lisse, ed., *Passions de la littérature: pour Jacques Derrida* (Paris, Galilée, 1996), 141–60, translated as 'On Transcendental Fiction', *Discourse* 29:1 (2007 [2008]), 169–88.
- ²⁰ Precisely this thought of the 'absolutely different' would depart from Hegel, who thinks that absolute difference must collapse back into identity because difference is already becoming opposition, contradiction and sublation (so that it is possible to think the absolute), and bear comparison with what Heidegger means by 'the nothing'.
- ²¹ *Poikilon* is the dominant term used by Plato to describe the superficially colourful and multifarious charms of democracy in the *Republic* (557c), and is also the root of the term *poikilochromon* chosen by the translators of the septuagint for the many-colouredness of Joseph's coat (Genesis 37:3).
- ²² In Petit's French translation, the word *Forargelsen*, translated in English as 'offence', is straightforwardly translated as *scandale*.
- ²³ It is true that compared to the Germanic languages, French (along with the other romance languages) suffers from a relative paucity of candidate words in this domain: where German, for example, has at the very least *Narrheit*, *Irsinn*, *Torheit* and *Wahnsinn* at its disposal, and English has a relatively clear distinction between madness and folly or foolishness, French seems to have fewer non-slang terms available. Foucault's book *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* can be reasonably be translated into English as *History of Madness*, but if someone wrote in English a *History of Foolishness* it is not clear how that would translate into French: Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* [*Moriae encomium*, *Laus stultitiae*] becomes simply *Eloge de la folie* in French translation. For a germane discussion of the vocabulary of stupidity or *bêtise*, from which we are not far and to which we shall be moving closer in a moment, see Derrida's seminar *La bête et le souverain I*, session 6.
- ²⁴ A page or so later in Climacus's text, an imaginary objection on the grounds of plagiarism identifies Tertullian, Hamann, Shakespeare and Luther as sources for a number for formulations that immediately follow the one we are interested in, but does not mention St. Paul.

- ²⁵ Quoted more or less verbatim elsewhere by Kierkegaard: see *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1992), 598: 'This much is certain — if a little child (literally understood) is to provide the definition of what Christianity is, then there is no terror; it is not that fact that was an offense to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks'.
- ²⁶ There is an oblique and sardonic reference to the Jews a little earlier in the *Philosophical Fragments*: 'There was a people who had a good understanding of the divine; this people believed that to see the god was death' (PF, 30).
- ²⁷ Verse 19, that says 'For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent' seems to be alluding to Isaiah 29:14, where God says 'I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise *men* shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent *men* shall be hid.'
- ²⁸ See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul, la fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris, PUF, 1997), p. 62, who rather flattens out the complexity of the rhetorical gestures of this passage. I criticise Badiou's reading of Paul (and indeed of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Derrida too) in the longer essay of which this is a part.
- ²⁹ Whence the fact that the philosophers find Paul so amusing, according to Acts 17:18 and 17:32, as perhaps slightly over-read by Badiou in *Saint Paul*, p. 62.
- ³⁰ The locus classicus of that demonstration is the essay 'Signature, événement, contexte', in *Marges — de la philosophie* (Paris, Minuit, 1972).
- ³¹ Johannes Climacus is in fact *more than* simply a pseudonym, not simply because of Kierkegaard's explicit and complex reflections on his own practice of pseudonymy, but also because he is not only presented as a fictional author, but is also the object of a text (admittedly unfinished and unpublished by Kierkegaard) in which he is the main *character*: *Johannes Climacus or, De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, subtitled 'a narrative', which tells the story of the young Climacus's attempt to understand the relation of doubt to philosophy, and which we might have expected to be of interest to Derrida, not only because of its engagement with Cartesian doubt, the major focus of the lecture on Foucault from which we began, but also because one of its guiding issues is the difficulty philosophy has in thinking 'a beginning that [is] simultaneously historical and eternal' (PF, 134–5): this is, formally speaking, exactly the question of Derrida's early thesis on Husserl, and of his Introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*.
- ³² Jacques Derrida, *Donner la mort* (Paris, Galilée, 1993), 94; translated by David Wills as *The Gift of Death* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996), 65: 'I have

emphasized the word *instant* — “the instant of decision is madness”, Kierkegaard says elsewhere.⁷

- ³³ Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié* (Paris, Galilée, 1994), 87; translated by George Collins as *The Politics of Friendship* (London, Verso Books, 1997), 68 (translation slightly modified).
- ³⁴ ‘Abraham remains silent — but he *cannot* speak. (...) Speak he cannot, he speaks no human language. (...) Abraham *cannot* speak.’ (Søren Kierkegaard *Fear and Trembling*, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983), 113–15.) See Derrida’s commentary in *Donner la mort*, 104–5 (73–4).
- ³⁵ See too Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2002), 59.
- ³⁶ I imagine there might be more examples to be found in the as-yet unpublished seminars: see for example in the session of 9 November 1994, opening the seminar *Secret Témoignage*: ‘c’est ça la décision testimoniale — décision impossible ; quand quelque part, on dit que l’instant de la décision est une folie, il peut aussi penser à cela.’ In the fifth session of the 1991–2 seminar ‘Répondre du secret’ (5 January 1992), Derrida quotes at length from the *Philosophical Fragments* on the question of witnessing Christ, and refers this to the ‘paradoxe de l’instant’, without however quoting (in the written text of the seminar at least) the sentence we have been following here.
- ³⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign I*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 173.