Responsibility in Academic Writing: A Dialogue of the Dead

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Abstract
Drawing on the notion of answerability introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin, this article inquires into our moral responsibility as academic writers to others for what and how we write. According to Bakhtin, it is a difficult task to be answerable from one's unique place in being and it is tempting to seek some sort of alibi, be it a theoretical principle, an aesthetic ideal, or a larger whole, and to play the roles therein. To break away from these domains, in search of some sort of ethical authorship, we engage in a Menippean dialogue. Exploring responsibility in such a satirical dialogue creates an awareness of the roles we easily hide behind, draws attention to what these roles might do to our writing, and enables us to try out other roles as we allow ourselves to not be so deadly serious in our writing.

Keywords
responsibility, answerability, collaborative writing, Bakhtin, Menippean satire

Clarity's essential, and detail, no fake mysticism, the facts are bad enough. But we're embarrassed for people who tell too much, and tell it without surprise. How does he know what happened? unless it's one unshaven man along in a boat changing I to he, and how often do you get a man alone in a boat, in all this . . . all this . . .

The Recognitions. William Gaddis

Prologue
When was the last time you felt a deep moral concern about the academic text you were about to write? A time where you could almost sense the pain you might do to others if you did not choose your words carefully enough; if you would not do justice to the people who figured in your work, or those who would read it, or both? A concern for those who in turn may hold you responsible for your textual representations, for your attentiveness in what you choose to write and what you choose to leave out? When was the last time you felt the unease which comes with the sense of being eligible for moral appraisal by others for what you have written or are about to write? A sense of your unique place and moment in being? To feel the need to explain yourself to people you might not even know, to justify why you wrote what you did? And when was the last time you did not heed that concern, or responded to it only when it was too late?

Due to the long and complex processes between encounters in fieldwork and publication, we can easily “forget” issues around author responsibility. Yet sometimes, an event strikes a chord in us, creating an urge to delve into questions around how our writing can be answerable for our fieldwork, analysis procedures and how our text will resonate with a reader to be. The starting point of this article is such an event. Only in hindsight did it become apparent I, Chris, had not written about this event previously. It was as if I had never answered for what occurred that day, after I departed: for what I did and what I did not do. It is only just now, on my final passage toward academic scholarship, that an ongoing conversation about what happened that day is opening up, and I am beginning to answer: not just for what happened then, but more so for where I came to find myself afterward.

We will here engage in a conversation about that event, in which we begin to tease out what responsibility in academic writing might mean. More specifically, we will address how the idea of role-responsibility, which permeates our (scholarly) lives like a false orthodoxy, works against moral responsibility in writing in different ways. In so doing, we follow the work of others who use collaborative writing as an ethical practice of cooperation—“writing as a way of being in the world” (Wyatt, Gale, Gannon, &

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Davies, 2011, p. 106). What we appreciate with collaborative writing is how it enables us to think with others as it is a method that utilizes “cycles of talking, writing, reading and responding, seeking to find collective experience in the accounts of lived experience” (Porter & Rippin, 2014, p. 52). Employing responsibility through a process of collaborative writing offers us a way to engage with the “worldly illusions” of roles we might take on.

**Answerability**

Our starting point for understanding responsibility in academic writing is the early work by the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) on what he calls “answerability.” From a tradition which Simons (1988) has labeled radical humanism—sounding hopelessly out-of-fashion in academia today—Bakhtin begins with the idea that everyone is answerable from within her own unique place and time in being, where each moment is once-occurring and no one can take another’s place. As Simons (1988) argues, Bakhtin’s approach aims to restore the integral connection between the author and her work. We become responsible for what we do when we authorize, undersign, what we do: “It is not the content of an obligation that obligates me, but my signature below it—the fact that at one time I acknowledged or undersigned the given acknowledgment” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 38). What makes this sound naïve is the impression that it takes the idea of an “I” as given, whereas the idea of a given author-subject has already been declared dead a long time over. But one of the radical aspects of Bakhtin’s approach to answerability is that the subject only comes with answerability, not before it, and that each one is right “answerably, not subjectively” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 46). In other words, only in the process of answering, and being answerable, the subject takes form. “Being right” in the moral sense of doing the right thing is not something to be understood in terms of the subjectivity of one’s particular perspective, which amounts to moral relativism, which Bakhtin contests. “Being right,” first and foremost, is an outcome of an ongoing process of understanding how, by answering each other, we concern ourselves with each other, and all.

What answerability brings to us, in particular, is an awareness of the ways in which we construct and hide behind roles that enable us to not concern ourselves with all others—such as our roles as authors (authorial responsibility) or as researchers. These roles, Bakhtin argues, enable us to distance ourselves from answerability as a whole, by prescribing both the scope and nature of the responsibilities and obligations, as well as the ways these may be directed toward others. Such roles come inside us, between us, and around us. Crucially, they make us do something specific: to engage with each other from generalized yet fragmented images of each other. They enable us to regard others from within particular roles, instead of as from within the unity of everything and everyone that relates to me from my unique place and time in being, as wholly as possible. By disengaging with the complex fabric of the lives of others, by abstracting others from themselves, we regard the requirement to answer someone as a whole as irrelevant, or even irritating and improper. Role-responsibility thus fragments answerability. Bakhtin (1990) describes three basic ways to conjure up these roles to abstract us from ourselves, in what he calls alibis for being: dwelling in the realm of theory, representing a larger whole, and living our lives aesthetically. We will below explore these three alibis for being, as ways in which we academic writers may abstract ourselves, too. In other words, the problem with these roles, though very useful in the contemporary life of separated domains (cf. Bakhtin, 1990, p. 1), is that we abstract ourselves from our unique place and time in being. In this way, we “are simply no longer present in it as individually and answerably active human beings” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 7). According to Bakhtin, we should be responsible for how these domains become related in our answerability. But instead, we have become divided, specialized. We play particular parts that prescribe our behavior, our thoughts and our moral responses in these specialized domains, such as the hardworking parent in a household, the loyal employee in a company, the critical writer in academia, and so on.

**Turning to Menippean Satire**

In critically exploring answerability, we seek to expose and subvert these alibis in academic writing. To do so, we set out to write in the genre of Menippean satire: a genre which allows for a writing that “seeks to offer an escape from boundaries as well as being illusive, playful, seductive and fluid” (Phillips, Pullen, & Rhodes, 2014, p. 12). Weinbrot (2005) describes the promise of the Menippea more dramatically:

One could set the dead against the recent living, the ancient against the modern, nation against nation, man against woman, cleric against courtier, and always seek to find or exploit a truth hidden in the world of warm flesh and hot blood. (pp. 66-67)

Moreover, as Sullivan and McCarthy (2005) argue, “the advantage of the Menippean design is that it interrogates the participants, encourages them to hear their own characterization, and invites them to respond . . . it emphasizes the potential to be different through dialogue with the other” (p. 633). In other words, a Menippean satire discloses an unrestrained space to play with different ideas, and flesh out felt truths and urgent problems, in the face of convention and self-evidence. In our search for authorial responsibility as answerability, it is exactly this interrogative dialogue that we would like to explore and perform in our writing. What
writing in the genre of Menippean satire does, according to Weinbrot, is to oppose a threatening, false orthodoxy by mocking attitudes that have become normal. It is “a genre for serious people who see serious trouble and want to do something about it” (Weinbrot 2005, p. 63). In Menippean texts, hyperboles and other devices are used to expose these attitudes, and different styles and multiple voices are adapted to unhang the seeming unequivocility of discourse. In our case, we seek to challenge the attitudes toward responsibility that come with the role as academic writer, which we perceive as being embedded in a false orthodoxy of role-relationships. To do as the Romans, we venture to board an ancient vessel. Both Bakhtin and Weinbrot regard Lucian of Samosata (125 AD-180 AD) as central to Menippean satire. In Lucian’s Dialogues of the Dead (published in Fowler & Fowler, 1905), the recently deceased seek to cross the river Styx on Charon’s ferry toward the netherworld. But to enter, they must shed all their worldly pretentions, and here Lucian makes his characters taunt each other, exposing what Bakhtin would call their alibis for being. In our Menippean dialogue below, Chris and Kari find themselves on Charon’s vessel, where fellow passenger Menippus engages them in a dialogue about being answerable in academic writing, seeking to expose and do away with the “extra weight” of these three alibis of hiding behind theory, representing a larger whole, and living aesthetically.

A Dialogue of the Dead

As you know Kari, a few years into my job as a managerial clerk at a mental health care provider, I (i.e., Chris) started a part-time doctoral study into the workings of one of its teams: a forensic community mental health care practice servicing recovering patients often with a history of aggressive behavior and/or a criminal justice record. From the moment I heard of the existence of this team, what intrigued me conceptually was how this nexus between health care and criminal justice was played out in everyday practice. But in the daily planning meeting that morning, on my very first day of fieldwork, I became daunted by stories of taking verbal abuse and even threats of physical violence, by the light-hearted way the practitioners discussed them. When the meeting came to an end, a nurse, whom I’ll call Cindy, agreed I could accompany her on a visit to a patient’s house. On our way there, I asked her about her experience doing this kind of work, and she told me how exciting and diverse it was. She said it felt right to provide care to vulnerable people who were in real need of it. However, Cindy continued, being deployed to sometimes volatile home circumstances meant that she had to be constantly on guard: not knowing what those circumstances were until the door was shut behind her. As we drew near to the house, I asked Cindy about the patient. I remember she responded by describing him as quite an imposing figure. On approaching his front door, I nervously asked her how I should behave. She smiled and I recall her saying: “it’s no big deal, but he’s is a bit wary of meeting strangers, especially men he’s not familiar with. But it’s going to be fine.” I managed to clear my throat for one final question: “Okay . . . is there anything in particular I should avoid?” To this, her unstirred reply was: “Nah, just act naturally.” But the sense of “acting naturally” had already abandoned me. I became painfully aware of not having acted naturally from the moment I stepped into that team meeting, conscious of my awkwardness and insecurities. And as far as I could tell, me acting naturally in the eyes of this patient amounted to being a stranger with a stubble: the one thing that would set him alight. As I tried to recompose myself, Cindy rang the door. We waited for the door to open . . .

I forget to breathe far too often (Wyatt, Gale, Gannon, & Davies, 2010, p. 740).

Menippus: And now you are here with me and the one they call Kari, floating down the Styx, on our way to the Netherworld. Sad!

Kari: Yes, so it seems. Well, then. Who are you?

Menippus: The name is Menippus. Ah, my pen and my notebook; overboard with them. I had the sense not to bring my laptop. Pass on, Kari; you have been a good associate; you shall have the seat of honor, up by the ferryman, where you can see everyone. Number two; who are you? (cf. Fowler & Fowler, 1905, p. 119)

Chris: My name is Chris. I . . . I was recalling this event on my first day of fieldwork. Where are we? Am I still on my way towards becoming a responsible academic writer?

Menippus: Uh . . . Sure! You could say that. But please, enlighten me as your host on this ferry: which pretentions of being a “responsible” academic writer are you talking of?

Fatal Theoreticism (First Interlude)

As academic writers, our main concern is theory. That is what researchers produce, after all. That is our raison d’être, if you will. Being responsible, first and foremost, is to strengthen the objective validity of our propositions. But no—surely this is a narrow way of understanding what science is, and a “zombie positivist” (Lather, 2016) makes for an easy target. Let us rephrase. Each of us is a responsible academic writer when we abstract our sense of truth from our own experience and, instead, embed it into a theoretical context that brings it forth. This conceptualization should broaden the scope of what we would call scholarly work and include more heterodoxic produce. For we enjoy dwelling in this realm of theory, do we not?
Kari: . . . Right. But Chris, could we stick to the event, if we are to make sense of anything you (we?) have just said?

Chris: Well, I did not take any significant field notes of the event, nor did it feature in my research papers. Because nothing had really happened when we were waiting at the door.

Kari: Are you sure? How can you know that nothing really happened until you write it—until you perform this story (Gale & Wyatt, 2007)?

Chris: Well, I still remember wondering whether Cindy had played me for a fool, to give me a little scare (“surely a managerial clerk knows nothing about practice!”). Or maybe it was only her response to “just act naturally” that kept nagging. What did she mean, really? I should have asked her. But I left the whole incident behind me. I later decided my thesis would be a theoretical piece on responsibility with just an illustrative case study, instead of an ethnography. This led me to focus on non-participatory observations of team meeting discussions.

Menippus: Meetings that were conveniently situated in your own natural habitat: the office.

Kari: Alright, alright. Let us get back to Chris’ take on responsibility. Our texts exist to do something: to make a grounded contribution to a scientific discussion. Our responsibility must then be to our academic readership. Empirical settings exist in our texts as instances to illustrate our arguments to our audience.

Chris: Right, precisely.

Menippus: Well, this turns the world upside down. “Instead of bringing possible knowledge into the context of our actual life from where it is made answerable, we attempt to bring our actual life into communion with a possible, theoretical context” (Bakhtin, 1993, pp. 50-51). Chris, without having lived what the practice was about beforehand, you had already set your mind to studying it from a particular (theoretical) angle, and you never left your pre-conceived world.

Kari: Ah, my dear Bakhtin! “Any kind of practical orientation of my life within the theoretical world is impossible: it is impossible to live in it, impossible to perform answerable deeds. In that world, I am unnecessary; I am essentially and fundamentally non-existent in it. The theoretical world is obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being and from the moral sense of that fact—as if I did not exist” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 9). Could it be that you did not experience anything happening in front of the door because you were too busy attempting not to live the moment? Is this what we scientists do, are we all in the same boat?

Menippus: Oh, please. Come to think of it, this non-participatory observation of team meetings sounds a lot like an attempt not to be present-at-hand in the first place . . . Chris, we heard your tale loud and clear, and we have been courteous enough to provide you with some basic pointers. A bit of fear and ignorance can bring forth much, can’t it? Well, good on you: one less alibi to succumb to. And good for us: less cargo on our ferry.

Chris: But wait, it is not like I came to this attitude by myself, only because “the theory made me do it.” I wanted to be a part of the scientific community; that is what doctoral students should strive for, right? To write in such a way that it represents that community and what it stands for.

Kari: Aha, being a representative of a larger whole. It appears we have arrived at our second alibi. Such eloquence.

The Possessed (Second Interlude)

We come to exit the realm of theory and find ourselves thrust in the social world of academia. We go to conferences for the like-minded, and join the crowds of fans-cum-authors, seeking to make a contribution that surprises and yet does not at all. And sure, we all want to be part of something larger, don’t we? But, according to Bakhtin, there are several problems with this idea of representing a larger whole: The sense of your answerability is severed from your own unique participation in it and remains unconnected from that domain; regarding others as part of larger whole lightens, “de-realizes,” your answerability toward each of them; and “a larger whole” invites one to think of it as consisting of universals and averages, instead of concretely individual moments (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 53). It is to these problems we turn to here.

Chris: Well, the problem is that I never really felt like I belonged to a larger whole to begin with, but always seemed to remain somewhat of an awkward outsider, be it in management, team practice, or the scientific community. It would have eased my mind to be an insider: to live the rituals and think the thoughts that come with that whole. To be a humble servant, you might say, and write like I am supposed to.

Menippus: And your humility sounds so very authentic.

Kari: According to Bakhtin, it takes not humility but pride to lose oneself in the rituals of life. In fact, participating in person and being answerable in person takes humility. And “even if you are a representative of a larger whole, you are a representative first and foremost personally” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 53). When you understand your academic life as voicing the
social mores, “your writing becomes ritualized, and you turn into an imposter” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 52). So maybe you are a little humble, after all, Chris, when you awkwardly dwell at the margins, demonstrating a little awareness of the lingering threat of becoming an imposter writer. Well, who reads nowadays, anyway?

Menippus: Speaking of the social, what about Cindy? And what about the patient, did he even have a name? He is like this absent other who is completely finalized to the point of a grotesque caricature in this account. He is only described through the words of others, and he might as well have been lying dead behind the front door.

Kari: Ah, right. There is that.

Chris: Uh . . . yes well, I do not actually know how the patient is doing now. But the story of Cindy is not over, at least. So . . . I do have a partial response. Years after that first day, I looked Cindy up and found she was still working for the same organization as I did—in fact, in a building right opposite from my own workplace. I decided to e-mail her and ask if she remembered me, and whether she would be willing to talk about what had happened then. She replied the same day. Here, I happen to have a verbatim transcript.

Menippus: How convenient.

>>> [Cindy] 26-03-2015 10:20 >>>

Hi Chris,

It’s a long time ago and I can still remember that situation and you;-) A visit to Westside [. . . ] Had he been standing on the balcony, refusing to open the door?

It’s nice to hear that you’re still doing research here. It would be nice to meet and talk about the text for your paper.

Best,

[Cindy]²

Chris: And we did meet and talk, soon after that exchange. I met her at her new workplace, an acute psychiatric unit. We found a place to talk, and after a little while I had her read the story I had written down about this non-event.

Menippus: So, you did write about it!

Chris: But only after we came to discuss this idea for a collaborative paper.

Kari: As scholars, we might seem legitimate only within that niche culture that we have brought forth ourselves. But the sense of a theory is only validated by how it is included in how I answer to others for what I write. Only then, “research becomes inquiry and conversation, that is, dialogue” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 114).

Menippus: Would you like us to believe this is why Chris reconnected with Cindy?

Chris: Wait, it gets better. As Cindy was reading she said: “It’s funny that you wrote your thoughts like that. . . . [smiles] Yeah, that was some patient, for sure . . . [reads] Oh how nice, I’m a ‘Cindy’! [Laughs] . . . ‘But it’s going to be fine’ [laughing] . . . Yeah, what is that, ‘just act naturally’? . . . It’s pretty funny, actually.”

Menippus: So she laughed when she read your words. How did that feel? Did it make you feel that you belong?

Chris: Yes, I guess it did, a bit. So, I asked her what had been on my mind all the time: “One of the things I didn’t really grasp is whether you were having fun with me, testing me, by telling me that ‘it’s going to be fine’ and asking me to ‘just act naturally.’”

Kari: And here it comes . . .

All That Is Beautiful and Sublime (Third Interlude)

Aesthetic writing is what we love to do, be it beautiful, clear, truthful, neutral, (dis)passionate, and so on. We could have endless debates on what it properly should entail, and, in fact, we do. But the aesthetic, for Bakhtin, and for us here, is something more than a reflection on these attributes. According to Haynes,

The uniqueness of Bakhtin’s approach to aesthetics is that is based not on traditional aesthetic values such as truth, goodness, or beauty, but on the phenomenology of self-other relations, relations that are embodied—in actual bodies—in time and space. (Haynes, 2013, p. 18)

Haynes observes how Bakhtin, in “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”, describes aesthetic activity as a composition of three moments: projecting the self, returning to one’s singular place, and consummating (making whole) the other. Now, all three moments are relevant to our discussion. The moment of consummating the other is relevant, in that the writer has a responsibility to give shape and unity to her characters: “The author knows and sees more not only in the direction in which the hero is looking and seeing, but also in a different direction, in a direction which is in principle inaccessible to the hero himself” (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 13). But in the following, our concern goes out to the author who refuses to return to her own unique place and endeavors to empathize wholly with otherness (such as with another). Then, the author loses herself in aestheticizing her answerability, and her world becomes a set of roles and plays. In doing so, she aspires to live her (academic) life as
if it were a story with herself as the protagonist, and forgets she is answerable for the role she plays—as the one playing outside that role—and not as “the one represented, i.e. the hero” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 18).³

Chris: . . . To my surprise, Cindy said: “No, no I wasn’t. You know, what’s difficult about these patients is that they have such a history. I didn’t want to go through that whole history with you because it might give you preconceptions that would lead to fear or prejudice and make you engage with him differently. And of course, if you don’t have a practitioner’s background, it’s important for you to go with an experienced professional who can read the subtle cues and think on the spot: ‘the patient is becoming uneasy, let’s take a step back.’ That’s just how the interaction together should unfold, although it isn’t always that obvious, of course. I thought: it’s your first day on the road. If I described everything beforehand, you’d already have a judgment about the patient, and I was also curious to see—I wanted you to just experience it, what we were about, what we usually do. But he wasn’t there. That was a conscious decision, to first see the patient and to ask you afterwards about your experience. But there was no debriefing since the patient was absent. I wasn’t aware of this [points toward Chris’ text] at the time . . . That may also be how I do things: I like to have people just experience, you know? Maybe I have a certain playfulness: just let it happen and see how it affects you, and then afterwards we share experiences and compare them with the electronic patient record . . . I had the confidence that I would be able to read the patient because I knew him—and that’s a risk in itself. So yeah, it is trust, the fact is that you really had to trust me.”

Menippus: So, what do you know? Cindy turns out to be the teacher of what you still cannot grasp? Do you think you have got it, when you have talked to her “about it”? What I hear her saying is that she wanted you to stay open.

Kari: Meanwhile you were struggling, Chris, occupied with your roles as a managerial clerk and as a researcher, not being open but playing these roles, “like a mask, the flesh of another—of someone deceased” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 19). An important question remains: how can we write in a way that is “true” to this openness? I am talking not only about the openness between you and your research participants in this particular encounter, but also about how that comes through in your accounts. How open you are willing to be to the otherness within “yourself”; how our “writing is affected not only by the contact between us as ‘individuals,’ and not only through reflection on our ‘selves,’ but also by the way in which our selves are in relation to ‘other’” (Gale & Wyatt, 2007, p. 788).

Chris: So, if we begin to see that the problem of the aesthetic is not merely that we tend to think and behave in role-relationships, but more so that we detach our answerability towards another, then, maybe, there is a little light at the end of the tunnel?

Menippus: “I like your spirit. —However, we arrived at the port. Away with you all, to the judgment seat; it is straight ahead. The ferryman must go back for a fresh load.

[Kari]: Let’s go; what are you all waiting for? We have got to face the judge, sooner or later; and by all accounts his sentences are no joke; wheels, rocks, vultures are mentioned. Every detail of our lives will now come to light!” (Fowler & Fowler, 1905, p. 124)

Epilogue

Is it apparent enough that I feel ambivalence toward our text . . . Can I take responsibility for what we are saying I have said . . . I wouldn’t have used these words, who wrote this . . .

Who are we writing for, who is our audience . . . This feels clumsy . . . I don’t know . . . I’m sad that I was unable to do more . . .

The authors

So, when was the last time you felt a deep moral concern for what and how you write? We meant our text as an invitation for such a thought, and as a gesture to a radical humanist writing: “a continuous living process of questioning, discussing, creating, generating and regenerating meaning . . . in a continuous movement forward to a future of ever-broadening and deepening horizons, [which] is the radical and fundamental essence of Bakhtin’s thought” (Simons, 1988, p. 22). Our continuous movement revolved around being answerable in writing, to explore a way of writing against alibis. Such forms can be risky; a “risk to the writer, and risk to those with whom she shares her writing” (Porter & Rippin, 2014, p. 61). Some writers (such as St. Pierre, 2014) advocate avoiding the risk of (false) consensus inherent in collaborative writing. Others may feel overwhelmed by it, having to accept that “it—they, the haecceities of our writing—is/are bigger than me, more than me (whatever ‘me’ is)” (Wyatt et al., 2010, p. 732). We have struggled with our own answerabilities in writing, and the process has not left us unscathed. But our collaborative and reflexive process made Chris also reconnect with Cindy, in what was, in hindsight, an attempt at answerability. And even if that attempt was half-hearted, without it we would never have known Cindy’s account that was already in that open place where we meant to arrive.
We also wanted to introduce you to the genre of the Menippean satire, as a vessel for those who seek to challenge the orthodoxies of our practices and communities. As Weinbrot (2005) insists, satirists make us read the unthinkable and “remind us that nightmares occur while we are awake, and that sleep is not an acceptable alternative to moral responsibility” (p. 302). Weinbrot argues that Lucian “worked on a personal level - the fault is in ourselves, and we must reform ourselves ... before we leave this world” (p. 84), where other satires target the orthodoxy more directly, in “fear or reality of . . . chaos” (p. 85). We suggest engaging in both, because it is exactly the undue distinction between separated responsibilities that we have tried to expose and subvert. Then, we answer integrally in academic writing, from our unique and nonrepeatable place: “a taking-into-account of its sense validity as well as of its factual performance in all its concrete historicity and individuality” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 28). This is an unfinalizable and unfinished task, where texts may not be experienced in the way we intend. Where texts should not, where they cannot be experienced (only) in the ways we may intend. But where they do invite us to a playground for our minds: to an open and fearless writing, which may help us come to terms with the otherness within and around us. Where the quality of the text is judged upon how answerable it allows us to be to each other. To get a feel for the need to explain ourselves to people we might not even know, and justify why we wrote what we did. To remind ourselves to heed that concern, and to respond before it is all too late. And to stay wary, too, for another threatening heterodoxy to become the new norm, one where authorities claim the role as persons for themselves, and proclaim to speak from the heart, to people who have long since lost a sense of being answered, with the promise of being “all too human.” It is going to be huge. You’ll love it. It’s true.

And why don’t you write? Write!

Laugh of the Medusa. Hélène Cixous

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Notes

1. The beginning and the end of our dialogue are paraphrased from Lucian’s Dialogues of the Dead. Two of the names of the characters in dialogue (Chris and Kari) are incidental, and by no means, surely, represent the ideas of Chris Smissaert and Kari Jalonen, the writers of the article. No more does the third character, Menippus, represent the ideas of the historical Menippus, the namesake of Menippean satire. One could almost suspect that these writers have intentionally differentiated these voices so that they may answer back to each other, each more hypothetical than the other. But that might mean giving them too much credit.

2. The e-mail message and the quotations below are translations from exchanges between the first author and an informant.

3. And is this not exactly what satire does, as well? It provides a way to bypass being answerable, to obfuscate what we mean and what we stand for. And who is the real “hero” in this story, anyway, where its form seems to obscure the content we claim we want to convey?

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