

Whom to Write to: Writing's Phantom Audience through Derrida

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Abstract: This essay problematizes the notion of “private writing” through the deconstruction of the diary, drawing on Jacques Derrida’s analysis in Plato’s *Pharmacy*, his commentary on Plato’s *Phaedrus*, where Socrates critiques the contradictions between writing and memory. Derrida excavates the self-contradictoriness of the Greek word *pharmakon*, meaning both “cure” and “poison”, and applies this duality to writing itself. Building on Derrida alongside Ludwig Wittgenstein’s critique of private language and Sigmund Freud’s work on *Totem and Taboo*, this essay investigates the dilemma between privacy and publicness in writing. While could be perceived as an intimate act, writing inevitably fetishizes its non-present audience, thereby always exposing it to the risk of misinterpretation. This tension is further amplified by fear: the fear of self-exposure, misreading, and the unintended publicization of private writing. Yet paradoxically, these fears do not deter writing but rather compel it: fears push individuals to document thoughts precisely out of the anxiety of exposure. Based on the discussion on private writing, this essay examines writing in a more generic sense through the example of the dedication page. The dedication page of a book implies a phenomenological conflict between “intended” and “unintended” readerships, as well as the delayed interaction between author and audience. While an author must fetishize their audience, writing always risks a discrepancy between those whom the author intends to invite and those who ultimately engage with the text. Yet, this gap is not a flaw or failure in writing but the very mechanism of how any interpretation could happen in the first place.

On Private Writing

Is private writing possible? But first, what is private writing? A diary serves as an example: a deeply personal record, a diary is often perceived as being written

to and for oneself alone. It hides the confessions of a high schooler agonizing over an unspoken crush or the venting of frustrations that cannot be voiced aloud so scribbled in shaky handwriting at midnight. One might also envision a diary that is not only hidden but also encoded—locked with a password, tucked away from prying eyes. Yet, for all its protections, it must remain findable and readable. A diary is not a tomb: it does not bury secrets; even if it does, its act of being hidden invites discovery. A tomb may be obscure, but it also compels a search for what lies beneath, and its silence gestures for revisitations. One must make sure of a diary’s existence as a readable medium, but here is also the paradox: the privacy of a diary is always-already at risk of its very openness to being deciphered.

To radicalize the notion of private writing, one should consider the possibility of private language. Insofar as writing is the actualization of language, then considering private language resonates with the very conditions under which writing can be understood. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) poses the question directly: “What about the language which describes my inner experiences and which only I myself can understand?”¹ Not coincidentally, Wittgenstein then turns to the **diary** as a medium to critique this notion of private language. In his thought experiment, Wittgenstein describes an attempt to keep a diary recording the recurrence of a particular sensation.² However, he then immediately challenges this attempt: “*But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation . . . for in this way I commit to memory the connection between the sign and sensation. . . . But in the present case, I have no criterion of correctness.*”³ Here, Wittgenstein suggests that if the act of recording a sensation is entirely private, namely without external verification or a shared system of meaning, there is no standard by which one can determine whether the notation is correct or not. The absence of an external framework prevents the diary entries from being intelligible and reduces them to arbitrary marks. Thus, even the diary, perceived as the most **private** form of writing, must still depend on a **communal space of understanding** to be intelligible. Writing, even when addressed to oneself, is never entirely private as it already presupposes a shared linguistic structure, as meaning cannot exist in isolation. This is what Wittgenstein calls the “**criterion of correctness**”: for language to function, it must be based on a public system where meaning can be recognized and validated.

The issue, then, is not that writing transforms inner sensations into external signs. As Wittgenstein points out, sensations are already signs even before they are written. Writing does not mediate between the non-discursive and the discursive or the private and the public. It inhabits them already. Therefore, for writing to be readable by oneself, it thus must be readable and exposable to others, where precisely the very vulnerability of a diary lies: to write the diary already acknowledges its inherent readability. As Jacques Derrida (2000) writes in *Of Hospitality*, “There is no house without doors or windows.”⁴ For a house to be a house, it must be hospitable and allow the possibility of entrance. For

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Blackwell, 1953), §256, 98.

2 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §258, 98.

3 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §258, 98-99.

4 Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford University

writing to be writing, it must allow for the possibility of being read. Hence, the diary’s discursive openness would not be obstructed by its physical enclosure: it entails a space that is at once closed off and inviting, private but exposed.

The Compulsion to Write

Now, the problem of private writing does not become clearer with closer examination; if anything, it only becomes more enigmatic: why do we feel compelled to write things down at all, especially when it concerns a will to privacy? In *Phaedrus*, Socrates critiques writing as a *pharmakon*—a substance that, like a drug, can act as both poison and cure—because it fosters forgetfulness; people come to rely on external symbols rather than cultivating internal memory and wisdom. Socrates himself refused to write, but Plato didn’t:

But when they came to letters, this, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific both for the memory and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.⁵

In this passage from *Phaedrus*, which Derrida tackles in *Plato’s Pharmacy*, Socrates recounts the Egyptian myth to Phaedrus as a warning that writing is a **poison** since it externalizes thought and makes knowledge vulnerable to loss and distortion. But it is also because Socrates’ thoughts were written down—preserved by Plato—that his wisdom has endured for nowaday readers. In this sense, Plato himself acts as a *pharmakon* for Socrates: both a cure and a risk. Namely, by committing Socrates’ words to writing, Plato guards his wisdom from being lost to time, yet he also distances them from the immediacy of dialogue.

However, the concern of writing a diary here is not the same as retaining knowledge. Without getting into a debate about what a “proper” diary is, private writing, as framed in this paper, functions as a confession of secrets. Then, why must a secret be performed in the first place? Why not keep it locked away in one’s mind, like the remembered location of the diary or the password protecting it (perhaps itself noted in another hidden diary)? The Ancient Greeks did not fear writing itself; they feared forgetting: writing is the scapegoat of forgetting. They fear people “will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves,” and that they would become “hearers of many things” yet

Press, 2000), 61.

5 Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Dover Publications, 1999), 274e–275a.

“learn nothing.”

But in the case of secret or private writing, the compulsion to write does not stem from the fear of forgetting but from the fear of writing itself. Writing should be held accountable here. So to speak, it is precisely the fear, the fear of writing’s potential to be accessed by others—a fear entangled with the desire to write—the very possibility that a “private” secret might be revealed is what propels one to write it down in the first place. But secrecy resists simple forgetfulness; it needs a conflicting engagement. To keep a secret is to enact it, and writing becomes the medium through which secrecy is both preserved and made precarious. The act of inscribing secrecy externalizes what should remain internal, making it legible not only to memory but also to the possibility of its own betrayal. Writing becomes not a medium for memory but a stage for performing secrecy.

Freud’s Taboo and Derrida’s Secret

Private writing, particularly its secret and confessional form, finds its resonance with taboos, which operate through self-imposed prohibitions that lack justification but are nonetheless compelling. Sigmund Freud (1913) writes: “The taboo restrictions are different from religious or moral prohibitions. They are not traced to a commandment of a god but really they themselves impose their own prohibitions. . . . Though incomprehensible to us they are taken as a matter of course by those who are under their dominance.”⁶ Like taboos, secrets impose their own law: they must be kept, yet they demand recognition as secrets. Private writing functions as an act of both transgression and submission. It both defies the implicit prohibition against revealing a secret and, in doing so, affirms the secret’s hold over the writer. Writing transforms secrecy into something tangible, making it vulnerable to exposure, but this very risk reinforces the secret’s power. The paradox of secrecy, then, reflects that of taboo: the more one resists or attempts to break it, the more its force is confirmed. That is, the effort to protect it makes it feel more significant. This means that private writing does not merely record a secret, it makes a secret possible and empowers it through the urge to confess colliding with the fear of revelation, much like the way a taboo derives its authority from the very anxiety it produces.

Yet, by the same logic with which we deny the attainableness of absolute private writing, we find that pure publicity, or true openness, is similarly unattainable. Absolute public writing, like unconditional hospitality, is impossible. As Derrida describes in *Of Hospitality*, this impossibility of unconditional hospitality is an “insoluble antinomy, a non-dialectizable antinomy.”⁷ He frames it as unsolvable between the “law of unlimited hospitality”—the ideal of welcoming the other without limit—and the “laws” that impose conditions and boundaries on this welcome. These “laws (in the plural),” he explains, are “those rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional.”⁸ The very gesture of inviting someone into a house is predicated on the fact that the house is private property.

Just as hospitality is conditioned by the limits of ownership, writing is conditioned by its medium, language, circulation, and so on. Even a work as ubiquitous as the Bible

6 Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (Routledge, 1913), 12.

7 Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 77.

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cannot reach every corner of the Earth. As Derrida hints, the notions of private writing and public writing are not opposites but rather two forms of exclusivity. Any form of writing must deal with the inherent dynamics of secrecy. Derrida (2001) writes, “There’s no question, difference is not presented, or nature loves to hide. But such hiding is not the only secret. The professional secret, confessional secret, military secret, political secret, the secret police, the secret in novels, etc., all the semantics of the secret are possibilities that are more determinate than the general possibility to which you refer.”⁹ When one writes a secret to oneself, this act is not categorically different from sharing it with others, i.e., it still participates in the broader “semantics of the secret” that Derrida describes. Writing, whether private or public, must engage with secrecy as both an organizing principle and a destabilizing force.

This duality is further explained in Derrida’s comparison of the secret to a gift. A gift, Derrida (2002) writes, is “not present, the gift of something that remains inaccessible, unpresentable, and, as a consequence, secret.”¹⁰ Like the secret, a gift ceases to exist as such when it is fully recognized or acknowledged. It lies in its inaccessibility, its deferred revelation. Both secrecy and gift organize by structuring what is known and unknown, yet they destabilize by always carrying along the possibility of revelation.

“What does it mean to share a secret?” Derrida asks. “It isn’t a matter of knowing what the other knows, for Abraham doesn’t know anything. It isn’t a matter of sharing his faith. . . . To share a secret is not to know or to reveal the secret, it is to share we know not what: nothing that can be determined.”¹¹ This framing shifts the understanding of secrecy from a possession of specific content to an act of sharing that resists determination. In Derrida’s view, sharing a secret is not about transmitting knowledge or faith that is endangered by forgetfulness; it is about embracing the indeterminacy of what remains unspoken yet shapes the bond between those who engage with it. In other words, it is not what we know connecting us but the unknown or unspoken.

This indeterminacy of secrecy does not simply denote absence or negation. As pointed out earlier, to declare something “a secret” (maybe with an exclamation point, “a secret!”) is to draw attention to its status as hidden. Derrida’s reflections on the secret as an inaccessible gift are precisely to illustrate this: “The gift of something that remains inaccessible, unpresentable, and, as a consequence, secret. . . . A gift destined for recognition would immediately annul itself. The gift is the secret itself if the secret itself can be told.”¹² Secrecy, then, must *appear as hidden* to function as a secret at all. Thus, secrecy cannot be reduced to either full disclosure or total silence. It is not simply a negation, as Derrida’s critique continues: “There is a secret of denial and a denial of the secret. The secret, as such, as secret, separates and already institutes negativity; it is a negation that denies itself. It de-negates itself. . . . The enigma . . . is the sharing of the

9 Jacques Derrida, *I Have a Taste for the Secret*, ed. Michel Jacob, trans. Giacomo Donis (Polity Press, 2001), 75.

10 Jacques Derrida, “Secrets of European Responsibility,” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (Routledge, 2002), 29–30.

11 Derrida, *I Have a Taste for the Secret*, 79–80.

12 Derrida, “Secrets of European Responsibility,” 29–30.

secret. . . . Not only the sharing of the secret with the other . . . but also shared within itself . . . as it begins to be lost, to divulge itself, hence to dissimulate itself, as secret, in showing itself: dissimulating its dissimulation.”¹³ This means that secrecy is not just an epistemological problem, what is known or unknown, but a disruption of the categories that structure knowability or perhaps knowledge itself. It does not just negate but undoes itself in its own articulation, thereby resisting final determination. In this way, secrecy is part of Derrida’s broader critique of presence: it unsettles the oppositions and boundaries between knowing and not-knowing, speech and silence, or affirmation and negation.

Performative Writing

The written word, like or as the secret, “dissimulates its dissimulation,” both keeping and giving away. But to whom? A secret to whom? A gift to whom? A writing to whom? Writing is never self-contained. Even when writing *appears as private*, it *appears the private* by engaging an implicit other and shapes its content in anticipation of a reader. In this way, writing is always performative: its meaning is not simply conveyed through content but is possible through the way it negotiates its phantom audience. Thus, unlike speech, which typically presumes a present and immediate interlocutor, writing operates in a different temporal and relational dimension. Deprived of an immediate recipient, the writer must compensate for this absence by constructing an audience—or rather, **audiences**—that are simultaneously fetishized and deferred.

Derrida’s *différance* suggests that meaning emerges not through fixed presence but through deferral and difference; that deferral operates not only between the play of signifiers but also between the moment of inscription and the moment of reception. The gap between author and reader, between intention and reception, prevents the immediate determination of meaning. The fetishized audience alleviates but also accretes this instability because it allows the writer to orient their words toward an imagined interlocutor even when the actual reader remains unknown or deferred. This audience is the *pharmakon* to the writer, both helpful and unstable. It provides coherence to the writing process that is ultimately unattainable, as every real reader will interpret the text differently from the idealized recipient the author had in mind. The absence of a direct audience, then, does not sever writing from relationality; instead, this temporal deferral of interaction makes the construction of the phantom audience indispensable.

Consider, again, the act of writing a diary, which is *prima facie* private and directed at oneself. Even here, the fetishized audience is present, whether it takes the form of the writer’s future self or an abstract confidant. The diary’s performativity lies in addressing an audience that is simultaneously intimate and abstract, present and absent. The fetishized audience of the diary enables expression and threatens exposure. The fear of being read, of misinterpretation, of betrayal, haunts the inscription of a diary. But this fear compels writing: the anxiety of being read is inseparable from the desire to be understood. Similarly, in “public” writing, such as essays or books, the author writes with a particular readership in mind, tailoring their arguments and language to this imagined group. However, as the text enters the world, iteration takes over, and the relationship

13 Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” in *Languages of the Unsayable*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford University Press, 1996), 95

between the text and its readers becomes unpredictable. The fetishized audience is replaced by actual readers who bring their own interpretations.

Secret Being Told: The Dedication Page

This displacement is a conflict, one that becomes subtly visible when a reader encounters a book’s dedication page and sees a name that is not their own. A phenomenological conflict resides in the ambiguous role of the dedication page. At first glance, it appears straightforward: the dedication is addressed to a specific individual, like a personal postcard. But this simplicity is deceptive. By publishing the book, the author extends the dedication beyond its intended recipient, inviting a broader audience to witness what seems like an intimate gesture. The reader, encountering this dedication, finds themselves in an ambiguous position—**not the intended recipient, yet drawn into the act as though it were meant for them**. The tension, then, is that the dedication, *prima facie* a private acknowledgment for a non-present subject, becomes a public performance. It pretends to be intimate, yet it is deliberately exposed to others. For the author, this public exposure transforms the gesture such that it is no longer just a thank-you to Husserl but to manipulate the gaze of unintended readers. The dedication page is thus neither purely private nor purely public; it is caught between.

As previously argued, writing is propelled by its **readability**, an author writes a secret precisely because it *can* be read but also fears its exposure for the same reason. The dedication page condenses it: it is both an intimate gesture and a public act. More broadly, writing requires a **fetishized, non-present audience**—a projection of “the other” who will eventually read the text. The dedication page exemplifies this necessity: it is a performance of intimacy directed at a specific other, but it is also a performance for the public—a tension that lies at the heart of all writing.

Consider Heidegger’s dedication in *Being and Time*: “To Edmund Husserl, in friendship and admiration.” As a reader encountering this dedication, I find myself in a paradoxical position: I am participating in a discourse that seems to have been crafted for someone else. Heidegger, as the host of this intellectual party, appears to extend his invitation solely to Husserl. Yet, by publishing the book, he simultaneously opens the doors to a wider, unintended audience. The intimacy implied by the dedication contrasts with the public aspect of the text. **If the book were truly intended only for Husserl, why publish it at all?** The dedication exposes the unresolved question of “whom” in writing, where the text’s intended recipient is perpetually unsettled between specificity and generality, the imagined and the actual, and the known and the unknown.

This “**whom**” invites Derrida’s critique of intention to return. Derrida argues that **writing, through its iterative nature, dissolves the original intention of the author**. A text’s meaning does not rest in its author’s intent but in its **capacity to be re-contextualized across time and space**. Thus, while the **insignificance of intention** may free the text from the author’s authority, **it cannot dissolve the *différance* between the phantom audience and the real audience**. Meaning does not preexist this conflict; it emerges *through* it. ***Différance* is this conflict, the gap between the author’s imagined audience and the audience who ultimately encounters the text**. It is through this conflict that meaning becomes possible.

This essay, too, must fetishize its audience, but in doing so, it distances itself from both the audience I imagine and the one that actually reads it. Writing projects a reader; this reader is always a step removed from reality. When the text is read, a conflict emerges through the discrepancy between the name on the dedication page and the name that the reader bears; even if they match, the gap persists. This conflict, this discrepancy, is where meaning becomes possible. Meaning is neither fixed in the author's intent nor fully contained within the reader's reception, and it jumps between the continuous withdrawal of meaning from a fixed presence that writing both relies on and resists. As such, this essay itself **embodies** the enigmatic conflict it seeks to explore. Derrida says, "*Writing did not 'enter' philosophy, it was already there,*" and so, too, was the **phantom audience**.¹⁴ Whom then? The question falls to the writer and the reader of philosophy.

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14 Derrida, *I Have a Taste for the Secret*, 8