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LIVE OR TELL

TWO OF THE MORE notoriously elusive authors writing in the first half of the nineteenth century—a century noteworthy on the European continent for producing more than its fair share of elusive authors—are the German idealist Georg Hegel and his posthumous tormentor, the Christian existentialist Søren Kierkegaard. Their elusiveness is such that to read either of them is much like taking a Rorschach test: what we find tells us as much about ourselves as it does about Kierkegaard or Hegel themselves. But to think through the relationship between the two is a yet more challenging task, perhaps like seeking to align the ink-blotted lenses of a Rorschachian kaleidoscope. Some commentators have found no alignment of the lenses to produce anything resembling a meaningful picture, and have concluded, as Niels Thulstrup puts it in his study of *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel*, that, “Hegel and Kierkegaard have in the main nothing in common.”<sup>1</sup> With equal forthrightness, Richard Kroner suggests in his essay on “Kierkegaard's Understanding of Hegel” that “Hegel and Kierkegaard are separated from each other by an abyss which no agreement can ever succeed in bridging.”<sup>2</sup>

Such a reading of the Kierkegaard-Hegel relation is in fact made tempting by Kierkegaard's own construction of the relation as one of radical difference. Hegel is the archetypal Other, the perpetual foil whose philosophic values and whole way of thinking and writing Kierkegaard devotes his own authorship to perfectly inverting. If Kierkegaard's Hegel is the philosopher of the “objective spirit” and the champion of reason, more interested in the logical relations between concepts than in the actual reality of existing individuals, Kierkegaard presents himself as the adherent of subjectivity, of faith, of existence.

In what follows, I wish to explore one of the most recurring of

Kierkegaard's representations of his difference from Hegel, the contrast between action and thinking about action, existing and contemplating existence, living and philosophizing about living. "In the objective [Hegelian] sense," Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus writes, "thought is understood as being pure thought, . . . [and] this objective thought has no relation to the existing subject; and while [it is difficult to know] how the existing subject slips into this . . . pure abstraction, . . . it is certain that the existing subjectivity tends more and more to evaporate."<sup>3</sup>

As the contrast gets developed, we will come to focus on Kierkegaard's phrasing of the difference in terms of the role of language. Kierkegaard portrays himself as speaking (writing) in order to act: "to be an author is to act."<sup>4</sup> Hegel, on the other hand, is presented as writing so as to merely speak about acting; hence Hegel is a "mere scribbler" and his philosophy occurs "only on paper" (*CUP*, p. 176, 375f). In many ways, Kierkegaard understands his contest with Hegel in terms of the ultimatum of the tormented diarist of Jean-Paul Sartre's novella *Nausea*, Roquentin: "you have to choose: live or tell."<sup>5</sup> Roquentin is doubly cursed, first by a need to write so as to escape his sense of the nausea of existence by distancing himself from the cloying taste of reality, but second, by a recognition that his writing removes him from the possibility of truly existing. His ultimatum, "live or tell," is the constant reminder he carries with him of his inability to reconcile his fear of existence and his self-disgust at his escapism.

The contrast between action and thinking leads to a question about the ethics of authorship: how is one to use words, to write, in such a way as to act—and to elicit action from one's reader? I will suggest that a readjustment of Kierkegaard's alignment of the kaleidoscope lenses which display the image of his relation to Hegel allows for a more rewarding dialogue between the two. In this altered image, there is as much telling as living in Kierkegaard as in Hegel (indeed, as we will see, in some respects more so), and as much a choice for living in Hegel as in Kierkegaard. Perhaps most importantly, this reorientation invites us to see the either/or construction of "living or telling" (existing or merely speaking about the "logical categories" of existence) as a false dilemma. As Roquentin (perhaps!) discovers as *Nausea* reaches its enigmatic denouement, it is worth committing oneself to the idea that there is a way of writing in which one gains existence.

While Hegel falls far short of the almost obsessive project of meta-authorial reflection that Kierkegaard engages in, there are indications to

be found in Hegel's style of authorship that he too writes not in order to lure others to become like Hamlet, of whom Hegel writes that he "persists in the inactivity of a beautiful inner soul which cannot make itself actual or engage in the relationships of his present world,"<sup>6</sup> but on the contrary in order to bring the reader to a transformation of the self by which existence is made more than "a mere matter of words."<sup>7</sup>

## I

Hegel haunts Kierkegaard's authorship like a phantom, at once comical, like Aristophanes' philosopher who hovers in cloud-like and misty imperturbability above reality, and as a figure of danger, a specter haunting the age. The conceit of the Hegelian philosophy, according to Kierkegaard's narrative, is that it discovers the long sought after elixir of objective truth. Objective truth is a magical truth which transcends the chaos of merely subjective perspectives and the endless multiplicity (what Hegel dismisses as the "bad infinite") of individual human circumstance. Difference—uniqueness, particularity, subjectivity—is thus overcome, *aufgehoben*, by sameness—universality, totality, objectivity. The alchemy Hegel uses to achieve this standpoint is a method of abstraction from the "merely" particular, and hence false, aspect of individual existence, so that a space is opened from which existence may be observed *sub specie aeternitatis*, without the distracting inconvenience of subjective standpoints (*CUP*, pp. 270–74).

All this is a bold and ingenious project, Kierkegaard admits tongue in cheek, and Hegel carries it off with brilliance.<sup>8</sup> Yet he strikes a devil's bargain: he seeks to purchase objective truth and Absolute Knowledge at the expense of existence. For actual human beings are not "fantastic creatures who move in the pure being of abstract thought," but are nailed to their own particularity and consigned to subjectivity. Hegel "proudly deserts existence, leaving the rest of us to face the worst." There is thus a sort of extraterrestrialism to the Hegelian system, which promises an "emancipat[ion] from telluric conditions, a privilege reserved for winged creatures, and perhaps also shared by the inhabitants of the moon—and there perhaps the System will first find its true readers" (*CUP*, pp. 268, 267, 113).

However amusing the picture of Hegel soaring in outer space, giddily unencumbered by the gravitational force of the earth, there are serious ethical consequences to his lunar philosophy. Hegel's promise of absolute knowledge is irresistibly seductive in an age already weary of

itself and longing for anything that might make the burden of existence easier to bear (*CUP*, p. 216, 228f). It assures us that we need not go to the trouble of actually living in such a way as to bring truth about, but must only think (and tell) in the appropriately abstract way. For Kierkegaard, though, truth is not in fact a property of thought at all, nor of language, since for finite human beings objective truth always founders in the gap of separation between consciousness and its world, between words and lived experience (*CUP*, 169ff). As Vigilius Haufniensis, the author of the *Concept of Dread*, puts it, “truth exists for the individual only as produced in action” (123). Whatever our personal understanding of reality may be in a given situation—and understanding is always personal and situational for Kierkegaard—for this understanding to become a truth we must live it, not merely think it or tell it: “If a man does not become what he understands, then he does not understand it either” (*JP*, 4: 4540).

The contrast between thinking and living, or understanding and doing, is equally a contrast between words and action. Kierkegaard sees Hegelianism as inextricably bound up with words, with speaking about what for Kierkegaard must be lived. In his autobiographical novel *Les Mots* (Words), Sartre speaks of how “I began my life as I shall no doubt end it: amidst books.” He relates how he “found the human heart . . . insipid and hollow, except in books,” and how he would take his books to the roof of his grandfather’s apartment, “the roof of the world, the sixth floor, . . . [where] the Universe would rise in tiers at my feet and all things would humbly beg for a name; to name the thing was both to create and take it.” Words became “the quintessence of things,” so that “in Platonic fashion, I went from knowledge to its subject. I found more reality in the idea than in the thing . . . [and] it was in books that I encountered the universe.” Finally, language became the substitute for existence, and life was a matter of words: “I wanted to live in the ether among the aerial simulacra of things.”<sup>9</sup>

The image Sartre presents of his youth is precisely the lens of the kaleidoscope through which Kierkegaard views Hegelian philosophy. Hegel’s extraterrestrialism, his flight through the zero-gravity atmosphere of abstraction, is made possible through the displacement of the weight of existence by the ethereality of pure thought and the lightness of words. Reality is exchanged for its simulacrum, propositions about reality, which weigh no more than the gossamer sheets of paper they are written on. “Nowadays existence is even produced on paper,” Kierkegaard’s Johannes Climacus laments, and the Hegelian philosophy is nothing but a well-

oiled “paragraph machine” (*CUP*, pp. 376, 224). The great deception of the Hegelian philosophy, Kierkegaard writes in a journal entry, is that “the powers of the human world have been fantastically extracted and a book world has been produced” (*JP*, 1: 649). In another journal entry, Kierkegaard fantasizes about a strip search of Hegel:

The police thoroughly frisk suspicious persons. If the mobs of speakers, teachers, professors etc. were to be thoroughly frisked in the same way, it would no doubt become a complicated criminal affair. To give them a thorough frisking—yes, to strip them of the clothing, the changes of clothing, and the disguises of language, to frisk them by ordering them to be silent, saying: “Shut up, and let us see what your life expresses, for once let this [your life] be the speaker who says who you are.” (*JP*, 3: 2334)

Kierkegaard’s authorship is just such a police frisk of Hegel, a disrobing of his disguise of words and an exposure of the guilt of his philosophy, that once all the grand talk of “existence” and “truth” and “Knowledge” is unclothed, the reader is left with no sense of how to actually exist, for the truths of the System are unlivable fantasies.

## II

It is now time to explore a quite different response to the Rorschach test of the two inkblots of Hegel and Kierkegaard and to turn the kaleidoscope to view an image which problematizes the simple dichotomy we have seen so far of “live or tell.” Odd though it may seem, the first step towards a counter-image of Hegel is to admit that there is an undeniable sense in which Kierkegaard’s portrayal of him as sacrificing the particular individual is entirely correct. The very first shape of self-consciousness Hegel considers in his *Phenomenology* is precisely that of the particular individual, the inwardly absorbed “I am I” (pp. 104–5). Here indeed, “truth is subjectivity,” in the sense that the self has despaired of finding truth outside itself, or more precisely, in any correspondence between its sensations, perceptions, or understanding of the world and the external world itself. Its response is to withdraw into itself, and to seek truth in its own subjectivity: “the existence of the world becomes for self-consciousness its own truth” (*PS*, p. 140). Hegel seeks to demonstrate, however, that this stance is forever doomed to collapse: the self can never be its own foundation, can never supply a content for itself without the mediation of an other. The inwardly turned self, we might

say, is turned inside-out, and Hegel names the agency of this transformation *desire*. “Self-consciousness *is* desire,” which is a sign of our own lack and need for an other (*PS*, p. 109).

So the solitary, unique, particular self is indeed abandoned by Hegel, or rather is forced to abandon itself, since it is destabilized by its desire. And this abandonment is a recurring movement throughout the *Phenomenology*. Hence, to cite just one example, the stance of the stoic, who retreats from the world in which he feels forsaken and not-at-home, and seeks a wholly inward peace and freedom—“I am not in an other but remain simply and solely in communion with myself” (p. 120)—points beyond itself precisely because its self-communion, a thought-thinking-itself, is impotent. “What count[s] for [the stoic is] merely the form of thought as such” (p. 321), but freedom in “thought alone” is a “truth lacking the fullness of life” (p. 122).

Here we see that the dichotomy Kierkegaard uses to reveal his basic difference from Hegel is radically complicated, indeed inverted: live or tell, act or merely think about action. For Hegel, thought without action, without “the fullness of life,” is utterly ineffective, an inchoate language, and results from a sort of desperate nostalgia for self-sufficiency—a nostalgia which, it seems worth noting, calls to mind Kierkegaard’s devotion to “the passion of inwardness” (*CUP*, pp. 177–82). Prior to action, thought is a mere intention, a private meaning, an interior lacking any exterior, and is what Hegel sometimes calls the self’s “innocence.” But the ontology of innocence is not a human ontology, for we must act in order to become human: “innocence, therefore, is merely non-action, like the mere being of a stone, not even that of a child.” Action is our guilt: “by the deed, . . . [the self] becomes guilt.” Note well: Hegel does not say, the self becomes *guilty*, but that it becomes *guilt*. As creatures who act, we *are* guilt in our very being, responsible and culpable for bringing the merely inner and private nature of our thought into the world, where what we do inevitably comes into conflict with the intentions and values of others (*PS*, p. 282).

So Kierkegaard is correct: the very nature of action for Hegel entails the loss of the pure inwardness of the self—a negation of particularity—by bringing the self into relation with others, and hence into the space of a public domain of meaning. But to call this an “abstraction” away from “the self” is to beg the question. For Hegel, the self is not in its essence a particularity, and it is precisely the inwardly absorbed particular self, the “I am I,” which is abstract, because hollow, without the substance of experience which emerges only through the encounter with others.

The desire for the other which unsettles the solipsistically enclosed “I” moves Hegelian philosophy into its exploration of a social construction of the self, where meaning ceases to be private but is rather contested and negotiated in the interaction between selves.

Kierkegaard’s maxim that “truth is subjectivity” appears to decline all such negotiation. Indeed, “with respect to every reality external to myself,” Johannes Climacus informs his reader (who is, ironically, presumably a reality external to himself), “I can get hold of it only through [imagining] it. In order to get hold of it really, I should have to make myself into the other . . . and make the foreign reality my own, which is impossible” (*CUP*, p. 285).

In his own recognition of the difficulty of reaching the “foreign reality” of the other, Kierkegaard tends to let go of the other as an essential component of self-identity. The sacrifice of his relation to his fiancé Regina Olsen is only the most glaring biographical sign of this performance of renunciation, but it is inscribed thoroughly in the exposition of his ethics, whose principles include these:

- There is only one kind of ethical contemplation, namely, self-contemplation. Ethics closes immediately about the individual.
- The ethical is concerned with particular human beings, and with each and every one of them by himself.
- One human being cannot judge another ethically, because he cannot understand him except as a possibility.
- Each individual is isolated and compelled to exist for himself.
- It is unethical even to ask at all about another person’s ethical inwardness.
- To be concerned ethically about another’s reality is . . . a misunderstanding.
- The ethical reality of the individual is the only reality. (*CUP*, pp. 284, 286, 287, 291)

True, Kierkegaard still retains a place for the other, but as Emmanuel Levinas suggests, he seeks to short-circuit his need for the human other by displacing it onto a desire for the absolute other, God.<sup>10</sup> “I perfectly understand myself in being a lonely man,” Kierkegaard confides in his journal, “without relation to anything, . . . with only one consolation, God who is love.”<sup>11</sup> The journals are filled with the ideal of “dying to



the world, in order to be able to love God" (*JP*, 1: 538, 1006). From a Hegelian perspective, it is not at all surprising that Kierkegaard lists as reasons for his own "great need" of faith—in addition to his sufferings and his sins—"my terrible introversion" (*JSK*, 1056). The implications of such a terrible introversion for the project of authorship seems rather troubling, if we accept Hegel's logic that the introvert is "finished and done with anyone who does not agree" with his own subjective truth: we "only have to explain that [we] [have] nothing more to say to anyone who does not find and feel the same in himself" (*PS*, p. 43).

But surely something is awry with this logic, for it hardly seems plausible so easily to dismiss Kierkegaard's prodigious authorship as having "nothing to say" to anyone who does not already agree. Moreover, Kierkegaard's authorship is not *l'art pour l'art* meant for the sake of dazzling or amusing his readers—even if Kierkegaard suspected that this was precisely the effect it had on many of his fellow citizens of Copenhagen who, if they read his works at all, never got much beyond a feeling of titillation at the sheer eccentricity of his pseudonymous authors. Rather, it is meant to be exactly what Hegel seems to think is excluded by the position of subjectivity, an authorship dedicated to "the art of helping others,"<sup>12</sup> a maieutic authorship.

### III

If Kierkegaard's Hegel tells without living—by producing a "book world" in which existence becomes a sheer fantasy—then Hegel's philosophy would seem to consign Kierkegaard to the situation of one who lives without telling—one who exists in his private sanctuary of subjectivity, without having anything to say to others, who are unreachable in their own sanctuaries. Kierkegaard's Hegel is like the Sartre of *Les Mots*, who had fallen "head first into a fabulous universe and of wandering about in it . . . without hope of getting back [home] to the Rue le Goff" (p. 56). The reader of Kierkegaard's Hegel, too, has no hope of getting back to the Rue le Goff, since Hegel has created for his reader only a fantasy world. Ironically, though, one may find places in Kierkegaard himself where he laments his own tendency towards fantasy. In a journal entry striking for its closeness to the passage just cited from *Les Mots*, Kierkegaard confesses that,

For many years my melancholy has had the effect of preventing me from saying 'Thou' to myself, from being on intimate terms with myself in the

deepest sense. Between my melancholy and my intimate ‘Thou’ there lay a whole world of fantasy. This world it is that I have partly exhausted in my pseudonyms. Just like a person who hasn’t a happy home spends as much time away from it as possible and would prefer to be rid of it, so my melancholy has kept me away from my own self while I, making discoveries and poetical experiences, traveled through a world of fantasy. (JSK, 641)

The melancholy Kierkegaard admits to here, like the fear Sartre expresses about his fall into a fabulous universe where he wanders about without hope of returning home, is tied up with his ambivalence about words, his being caught up in the tension between living and telling. In a haunting passage from Sartre’s *Nausea*, Roquentin tells of his experience in a park, observing the roots of a chestnut tree, a “black, knotty mass, entirely beastly.” He comes to understand the source of his nausea, that “it is no longer an illness or a passing fit: it is I,” since he intuits in a “horrible ecstasy” that his own existence is as unjustifiable and superfluous as that of the chestnut tree: “to exist is simply *to be there*; . . . I *was* the root of the chestnut tree, . . . born without reason, prolong[ed] out of weakness and [destined] to die by chance” (pp. 126–33). The key point, for our purposes, is not Roquentin’s horrible vision itself, but the diary entry which records it. As Roquentin writes down his vision, he notices that “the word ‘absurdity’ is coming to life under my pen,” but recalls that “a little while ago, in the garden, I couldn’t find it [the word], but neither was I looking for it, I didn’t need it: I thought without words, *on* things, *with* things . . . Absurdity: another word; I struggle against words; down there I touched the thing.” And yet, after standing against the gate of the garden seeking but failing to understand what he had encountered, “I left; I went back to the hotel and I wrote” (pp. 129, 135).

Kierkegaard too struggles against words. He wishes to exist beyond the telling of stories about existence, to “remain silent and act.” And yet he writes. Indeed writing, for all the danger of its seduction into fantasy, became for both Sartre and Kierkegaard what it was for Roquentin, an attempted cure: “I lived only in order to write,” Sartre told de Beauvoir,<sup>13</sup> and for his part, Kierkegaard confesses in his journal that “only when I write do I feel well.”<sup>14</sup>

## IV

In his study of Jean Genet, Sartre speaks of how language destroys the reality of things in order to reproduce them.<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard's own philosophy of language expresses a similar idea: "immediacy is reality and speech is ideality . . . How does the Word annul reality? By talking about it."<sup>16</sup> And yet both Sartre and Kierkegaard know that language cannot be avoided. Thus while *Nausea* is in part a scathing critique of the naïve faith in the power of words to cure us, at the same time it is a critique of Roquentin's attempt in the garden, as we saw, to "think without words." As for Kierkegaard, on the very same page of *Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus Dubitandus Est* where he speaks of language annulling reality, he asks, "cannot consciousness then remain in immediacy? This is a foolish question, for if it could, . . . man would be an animal, or in other words, he would be dumb" (p. 148). Meaning emerges only through language. Thus in the garden, Roquentin notices that "the words had vanished, and with them the significance of things" (*Nausea*, p. 127).

Hegel's whole philosophy can be understood as a philosophy of language—and in this sense Kierkegaard is right that Hegel is a philosopher of words. Language is the performative act by which the self comes to exist or "be there" (*Da-sein*) in the world: "in speech, self-consciousness, qua independent separate individuality, comes as such into existence, so that it exists for others. Otherwise the "I," this pure "I," is non-existent, is not *there*" (*PS*, p. 308). Hegel, like Kierkegaard, understands language as involving a certain "annulment of reality," as we saw Kierkegaard put it in *Johannes Climacus*, or a "destruction of reality," as Sartre put it to de Beauvoir. In particular, language entails the negation of the private reality of the speaker. For, as Hegel says, language is "at once the externalization and the vanishing of this particular "I," and this "I" "dies away" as it is reborn into the communal space of being-with-others (*PS*, 308f).

While Kierkegaard never disputes Hegel's view of language as being-for-others, he laments just what Hegel celebrates. If for Hegel the "divine nature of language" (*PS*, p. 66) is precisely its redemption of the purely subjective "I" by its emergence into community, it is just this loss of privacy which troubles Kierkegaard, not only because of his well-known distaste for "the public," but more fundamentally, because for him truth *is* subjectivity. Kierkegaard's task as an author, then, will be to experiment with a style of writing which undertakes a precarious balancing act. His authorship must, on the one hand, initiate a relationship to the other, the reader, and yet simultaneously maintain the privacy

and subjectivity of both the author and reader. This style, is, of course, Kierkegaard's practice of "indirect communication," his alternative to the obtrusively "direct communication" of Hegel, which blares out its Absolute Truths for all to marvel at as though through a megaphone or "speaking-trumpet" (*JP*, 1: 650).

I have no intention of delving into the mechanics or stage work of Kierkegaard's methods of indirect communication—his use of irony, the strategies of "double reflection" and "reduplication," the role of the pseudonyms—but only of briefly sketching out some key features of the ethical framework within which he practices this style of communication. As the name implies, in "indirect communication" the author never speaks directly of her meanings, but conceals them behind the masks she wears to conceal her true intents. "All indirect communication is different from direct communication in that indirect communication first of all involves a deception." Indeed, "to deceive belongs essentially to [my method of] communication," Kierkegaard writes in his journal, "and the art consists in . . . remaining faithful . . . to the deception [throughout]" (*JP*, 1: 649, 653). The author conceals himself in such a way that the more we look for him, the more he vanishes behind yet another layer of disguises. Locating the author is thus "as baffling as trying to depict an elf wearing a hat that makes him invisible," as Kierkegaard says in another context in *The Concept of Irony*.<sup>17</sup> The entire pseudonymous authorship is produced as an "enigmatic mystery," filled with "double entente," "ambiguity," "riddle," and "duplicity" (*PV*, pp. 5, 8, 10).

Thus far, Kierkegaard's indirect communication fits the quite cynical picture Sartre draws of the language of seduction in *Being and Nothingness* very neatly. For Sartre, the tragic character of language, that it aims at love (unity with the other) and yet inevitably ends in conflict (the struggle against the danger of the other's freedom to "steal" the meaning of what I say), lures the speaking self into the project of seduction as a desperate attempt to achieve some simulacra of love. Seduction is a kind of play-acting in which I mask my subjectivity, presenting myself as object for the other's freedom, seeking to "fascinate" and to "captivate" the other and thereby "capture" what I need from her, her freedom (since only a free other can affirm me). "In seduction, language does not aim at giving to be known," but at "concealing" my subjectivity from the other. The aim is thus to entice the other's freedom by pretending to forfeit one's own, while actually retaining it behind the disguise of my seduction.<sup>18</sup>

And let there be no mistake, Kierkegaard's authorial style is aimed

at seduction, at what he calls the “beguilement” of the reader<sup>19</sup>—the “prospective captive” (*PV*, p. 25)—into the text through the methods of deception and self-concealment.<sup>20</sup> Yet Kierkegaard’s use of seduction is grounded in an ethics of authorship which seeks to establish a radically different relation to the reader from the ultimately self-serving motivations of Sartre’s seducer. Kierkegaard is no Johannes the Seducer, whose diary of his seduction of the sixteen-year-old Cordelia in *Either/Or* perfectly fits the glove of Sartre’s account. Johannes “weaves [Cordelia] into [his] plan,” shaping her into his own image of “woman” as the “handiwork” of male desire.<sup>21</sup> Like Sartre’s seducer, key to Johannes’ strategy is to present himself as though he were the object of Cordelia’s free desire: “[I must] so arrange it that [the] girl’s only desire is to give herself freely, . . . when she almost begs to make this free submission, then for the first time is true enjoyment, but this always requires . . . influence” (*E/Or* 1: 337).

Kierkegaard’s seductive authorship, on the contrary, is meant to use the influence of deception so as to awaken the reader’s independence. Kierkegaard learned from Socrates that to awaken the other through proclamation, declaration, or lecturing—the pedanticism of direct communication—is both tactically futile and, more importantly, ethically problematic. The ethical power of Socrates’ maieutic method is that the other, the interlocutor, becomes the *subject* of the dialogue, and Socrates the learner. In a journal entry where Kierkegaard speaks of the ethics of indirect communication, he writes that the author “must always [recall] that he himself is not a master teacher but an apprentice . . . because ethically the task [of indirect communication] is precisely this, that every man comes to stand alone” (*JP*, 1: 649). “The art” of indirect communication, Anti-Climacus says, “consists in reducing oneself, the communicator, to nobody, . . . an absentee.”<sup>22</sup>

All that is left behind of Socrates, or the Kierkegaardian author, is a question mark. The interlocutor or reader is left to seek answers on her own. While the reader may be lured into the text by the author’s attempt at producing fascination, the disappearance of the author is the ethical act of indirect communication by which the reader comes face to face with her own freedom and responsibility for constructing a meaning of her own—and ultimately, for living it. Indirect communication is Kierkegaard’s way of telling which points to the necessity of living.

Both Hegel and Kierkegaard would agree with Sartre’s claim in *Being and Nothingness* that language is a “flight outside myself” (*fuite hors de moi*) (*BN*, p. 373), but for Kierkegaard this is precisely what makes the

ethics of gift-giving possible, and what underlies his conception of his authorship as a “service” (*PV*, 8, 16). Moreover, Sartre is right that in language “I can only guess at the meaning of what I express” since “the other is always there as the one who gives to language its meaning” (*BN*, pp. 373–74). This is why Kierkegaard is so committed to the idea that he himself is “only a reader” of his own works, having “no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader.” He is careful not to fall into the conceit that “an author [is] . . . the best interpreter of his own words, as if it could help a reader [to know] that an author had intended this or that” (*CUP*, pp. 551, 225).

But the author’s revocation of authority over her texts not only supports the reader’s liberty; it also protects the freedom of the author. The ironic foundation of indirect communication, that what is meant is not said, safeguards the author from what Sartre calls the “danger” of the other and the fate of the speaker to have his meanings “stolen” (*BN*, pp. 373–74). As Josiah Thompson puts it, “the ironist is the man absent from his words.”<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard explains it this way: “The ironic figure of speech conceals itself,” in that the meaning is hidden; thus “if what is said is not my meaning, . . . then *I am free . . . in relation to others*” (*CI*, p. 265, emphasis added). Notice that the ethics of Kierkegaard’s authorship is thus based on a practice of seduction which resolves what for Sartre is the “impossible ideal” of love—that a self be simultaneously for-itself and for-another (*BN*, p. 365)—*not* by fulfilling any actual “unity” with the other. For Kierkegaard as much as for Sartre, I am always separated from the other by “an insurmountable nothingness” (*BN*, p. 376). Rather, what we might call the structural requirement of love, the relation between two free subjectivities, is provided for by Kierkegaard’s indirect communication through, on the one hand, an act of authorial abandonment by which the reader comes to stand on her own, and on the other, a preservation of the free subjectivity of the author. The reader’s freedom is a private freedom, and so too is the author’s: as Kierkegaard writes in *The Two Ages*, “an author certainly must have his private personality as everyone else has,” which is his “inner sanctum,” guarded by a practice of self-concealment that serves as a “barrier that prevents all access.”<sup>24</sup>

As for Hegel’s authorship, Hegel does not face the same question that Kierkegaard must, namely how his authorship is possible at all given his commitment to the radical aloneness of every individual subject. Since Hegel’s ontology sees the self as an inherently intersubjective being, the relation between author and reader is in principle simply one instance

of this intersubjectivity. No, the question for Hegel is about the ethics of his authorship, given Kierkegaard's characterization of his style as the direct declaration of objective truths. By this view, Hegel's philosophy is inherently authoritarian, and leaves the reader at the author's mercy. Yet however notoriously imposing and intimidating Hegel's style of writing no doubt is, it is a style whose effectiveness depends not, as Kierkegaard would have it, on the sheer authority of Hegel's godlike wisdom, but on the contrary precisely upon the decentering of that authority.<sup>25</sup>

In the first place, Hegel's style of communication is grounded in a philosophy of language in which "language is more truthful" than mere intention. That is, the self's intentions become effectively meaningful only when expressed and appropriated by others (*PS*, pp. 60, 66, 296). This implies that it is impossible for the author to hold a privileged position of authority. Indeed, quite the contrary, the site of meaning is shifted onto the reader's response. And second, Hegel views language as *performative*: "the power of speech" is that it "performs what has to be performed" (*PS*, p. 308).<sup>26</sup> Hegel's texts *do* rather than proclaim. The series of forms of consciousness that are the *dramatis personae* of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, for example—the master and the slave, the stoic and the skeptic, the unhappy consciousness, and all the others—are not subjects Hegel lectures about, or even, strictly speaking, tells us about at all: they are themselves the active subjects of the text; they perform or enact themselves; *they* speak. The reader, for her part, cannot rely on Hegel, who is merely a spectator; she must enter into the world of the master, the slave, and the others who enact the text, and experience them from within. What it actually means for the "master," who reduces the other to a mere object of his desire, to be subject to an inevitable reversal such that the master becomes the slave of his desire, cannot be found in the sentences Hegel writes about the master-slave dialectic. This meaning must be experienced or performed by the reader: consciousness must "suffer this violence at its own hands" (*PS*, p. 51). Hegel's telling, like Kierkegaard's, is a telling which locates the meaning of the text in the way the reader lives what she reads.

## V

In some ways, Hegel and Kierkegaard are quite unlikely subjects for an essay exploring Roquentin's injunction to "live or tell." Kierkegaard essentially lived as a hermit, going out onto the streets of Copenhagen only to sit on a bench in Deer Park and smoke a cigar, letting his fellow

citizens observe his meticulously designed disguise as an eccentric and silly man who would then return to his rooms and live his true life as a brilliant writer everyone ignored. He was, as we have seen, tormented by the thought that he had become so lost in the “world of fantasy” of his pseudonyms that he was no longer able to say ‘Thou’ to himself. While Hegel certainly lived a more obviously public life than Kierkegaard, he too suffered periodically from a malaise he called, in a letter to the philosopher Karl Windischmann, his “nocturnal” side in which he suffered from an “inability to come out of myself.”<sup>27</sup> In a review of several biographies of Hegel in the *London Review of Books* which he titles “Baffled Traveller,” Jonathan Rée remarks on Hegel’s “compulsion to wander off in his imagination and take refuge elsewhere. His sense of self was diffuse and distracted, and he would identify with almost anything except his own immediate situation, . . . seeing things from points of view other than his own”<sup>28</sup>—a portrayal uncannily close to Kierkegaard’s self-description as one who voyaged through a world of fantasy.

But the interest of Hegel and Kierkegaard is not whether they themselves became so absorbed in their telling that they forgot, at times, to live—like Thales, who was always tripping over the bucket his wife placed in front of him in frustration at his excursions into philosophic reverie—but the significance of their authorships for their readers. Notwithstanding Hegel’s excruciatingly technical style, and Kierkegaard’s subjective isolationism, both develop methods of writing which, in their different ways, experiment with modes of telling where meaning emerges only to the extent that the reader recreates and lives it.

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